

SPEAKING TO THE MALE WORLD: CASTE AND PERFORMANCE OF WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

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Abstract : The nearly 170 years old modern proscenium theatre in Marathi Language is considered to be an important cultural identity of the progressive Marathi middle class. Its text-intensive nature renders importance to the playwright who shapes theatrical social knowledge through plays in a major way. Historically, writing of plays acquired importance in the colonial period because the theatre had become an important site to construct colonial public discourse particularly with respect to nationalist aspirations of the middle class and the nineteenth century reform movement for women. Though the generally observed social invisibility of women is true of the colonial Marathi theatre as well, it happens to be more a case of non-recognition of women playwrights than a reality. It is a primary observation that the Marathi women playwrights have been writing independent social, humorous, historical or mythological plays for approximately the last 110 years even when their plays did not always stand a chance of performance. Considering continuity of their writing as their collective “performance” and as an act of intervention in the theatrical discourse in defiance of objectification and reduction in masculine reflection, I would like to explore the intentions and methods of their writing through two contemporary examples of playwrights namely, Hirabai Pednekar (1885- 1951) and Girijabai Kelkar (1886-1980). I submit that if the meaning of being a woman playwright in colonial modern Marathi theatre is to be an agency of social thinking and change, then the feminine agency does not receive its due credit because of social prejudices against categories of caste and gender.

Keywords: theatrical discourse, Marathi theatre, women playwright, colonial period, caste system

Inspired by English and Parsi theatre cultures in colonial Bombay (now Mumbai), Vishnudas Bhave (1819-1901), the entrepreneurial artist from Sangali, began presenting

Marathi language proscenium theatre performances around the middle of the nineteenth century in Mumbai. This historical moment is usually regarded as the inaugurating moment of modern Marathi proscenium theatre, though the theatre took its own time to learn the nuances of art of proscenium theatre presentations. Initial theatre productions like *Raja Gopichand* (*Gopichand: The King*, 1853) were not full-fledged proscenium plays in several aspects. At the most, they could be described meaningfully as composite entities that roped in elements borrowed from native traditions of dramatic performance like *Dashavatar*, *Lalit* and *Keertan*.¹ From a proscenium point of view, these productions lacked written dramatic scripts among other things. In this context, theatre critic Keshav Narayan Kale (1976) observes that theatre performance precedes play writing in the history of Marathi theatre. The theatre received well-made drama as basic text for performance when native university students, who were mostly Brahmin (upper) caste men, emerged as playwrights in the second half of the nineteenth century. Their attention to Marathi theatre was prompted by their non-approval of contemporary unsophisticated Marathi theatre productions. With study of the university prescribed classic drama in English and Sanskrit languages added to by educational opportunities to create student productions that were enthusiastically received by English professors and other prestigious people in the society, they came to shun the works of their illiterate predecessors in the theatre.²

Benefitted by urban conditions and colonial print culture, the reflection of these university educated playwrights on subjects like native history, reforms for women and nationalist aspirations found a way as subject matter in plays like *ThoraleMadhavraoPeshve* (*The Elder Madhavrao Peshwa*, 1857) and *Manorama* (*Manorama*, 1871). In terms of practice of the theatre, they began to be invited as rehearsal masters by theatre companies - since there used to be no director- and were also frequently commissioned to write plays. The primacy that dramatic text started enjoying in the design of theatre performance in colonial period has continued till date and with passage of time, the theatre has come to be known as the playwright's theatre.³ The agency of the playwright as creative social thinker received further emphasis in the post-colonial period, with state recognition and support to Marathi theatre as a prominent cultural identity of Marathi society.

What does such an establishment of the agency of playwrights historically achieve for Marathi theatre? The trajectory of a theatre production would now begin from writing a play. Gradual customisation of drama script happened to initiate many new conventions which were otherwise absent and non-required for indigenous performance traditions. These conventions were of diction, acting, and even of spectatorship, in the sense of expecting unconventional and different behaviour and response from audiences unlike

those received by a more traditional kind of dramatic performance. The new conventions defined theatrical things in new ways, for example, quality acting came to be identified for a long time with an actor's capacity to deliver written dialogues word by word correctly and in an impressive manner and voice. These developments eventually happened to render the theatre a separate and sophisticated identity, which was different from that of the native folk performance traditions. But more importantly, a written script quickened the theatre's inclusion into the orbit of contemporary print culture. In material sense, this phenomenon was manifest in printing books of plays and earned the playwrights an amusing epithet- 'bookish'-in the colonial period. In the discursive sense, the inclusion was accomplished when written drama and things related to its theatrical performance began to be analysed for content and treatment along with other informative writings about art and structure of drama in another print medium namely newspapers (*Kesari, Tarun Bharat*), magazines and journals (*VividhDyanVistaar, Manoranjan*).

This kind of the theatre's incorporation into the fold of colonial print culture was doubly significant: it underlined the role of colonial modernity in indirectly determining eligibility for and intentions of doing theatre since theatre increasingly became an activity of the educated middle class people; and secondly, it moulded the character of the theatre - owing to the agency of Brahmin men - in favour of masculinity and upper caste. In comparison with other caste men and women, Brahmin men benefitted the most from their colonial privilege of accessing the print culture and also from the discursive space contained in it. They thus succeeded in obtaining socially representative status which was simultaneously challenged by the non-Brahminical, anti-hegemonic movement led by Jotirao Phule in the nineteenth century.⁴

Print culture had brought in a major shift in the native colonial cultural order and contained a shift of onus from the oral transmission to the "one where modes associated with print were taken to be the norm" (Naregal, 2001, 7). In theatrical context, this shift was visible in formation of a strong tradition of playwriting. Plays articulating nationalist aspirations in allegorical manner, e.g. *Keechakvadh* (Killing of Keechak, 1907) or debating pro or anti-reform views e.g. *Sangeet Sharada* [Sharada (musical), 1899] proved popular and could successfully influence public opinion about contemporary social issues. Because the theatre was patronised as a means of communication by social and political leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) and because many of his assistants in nationalist politics were either playwrights or stakeholders in the theatre, the body of Marathi colonial theatrical content may be regarded as constituting validated public statements of considerable importance.

Apart from the masculine ownership of the theatre, content of theatre plays is also responsible for the appearance of Marathi theatre as a male cultural domain because it repeatedly depicts feminine gender in terms of a submissive, domestic and idealised patriarchal woman of the Brahmin caste. Playwright Ram Ganesh Gadakari's (1885-1919) protagonist Sindhu in *EkachPyala* (Just One Glass, 1917) serves as an epitomic example of the *pativrata stree* (devoted and loyal wife) in not being critical of her brilliant but addict and adamant husband who accidentally kills their child in a fit of anger. She thinks criticism of the husband as a sin even if she has to bear excessive pain and grief and ultimately lose her life. I would argue that in elevating the Brahmin domestic woman to a representative Indian woman, Marathi theatre reinforced nationalist construction of feminine gender and established itself as the main ground for operations of Brahmin cultural hegemony. Its aversion to women's interests is also visible in its professional practice wherein, among other things, it deprived the low caste, professional entertainer women of ownership of theatre companies in the early days and prevented *kulin* (genteel) women from acting for a long time (Adarkar, 1991).

Though colonial conditions of women provided much of the theatrical subject matter for the masculine pen as in the representative plays like *Taruni Shikshan Natika* (Play about Education of Girls, 1886), *Swair Swakesha* (The Unrestrained Widow, 1871), *Gharabaher* (Out of the Home, 1934) and *Kulvadh* (Bride of the Clan, 1942), it is ironic that there was generally no space for the feminine agency as playwrights, actors, company owners or later in the post colonial period, as directors in the theatre. This is not to say that women were not at all related to theatre, on the contrary, it means that there were systemic obstacles for women that prevented their articulation of an independent perspective as actors or playwrights on the well-defined, gendered nineteenth century co-living of sexes and potentiality of contemporary women's lives. The institution of colonial Marathi theatre required skills of social networking and physical presence at the venue as factors facilitating visibility and opportunity. The well-known playwright Shreepad Krishna Kolhatkar (1871- 1934, hereafter referred to as Kolhatkar) wrote in the beginning of the twentieth century that among other factors, physical presence at the theatre venue as a prerequisite for being not only a playwright but a successful playwright happened to be impossible in case of women (1912, 5). Physical presence at the theatre required an unobstructed and constant access to public spaces, availability of enough time and freedom from domestic responsibilities— factors that are still rare to come in ways of women's lives. In contrast to women, men playwrights were historically well connected with colonial theatre companies serving as rehearsal masters and staying at the companies' residences

for long durations which women could not imagine doing themselves. In the larger context of Marathi women's writing, Meera Kosambi submits that posed by the problem of physical presence, women "launched a parallel discourse through their fiction and non-fiction" (2012, 67) in the colonial period. On similar lines, writing of theatre plays by women can be collectively considered to be a symbolic, feminine gesture of accessing the male exclusive, physical and discursive space of the theatre. The small number of colonial women playwrights may well cause a wrong impression of invisibility, but in fact it should be explored as a potential case of "non-recognition" that historian Uma Chakravarti (1998, viii) has cautioned to be a more serious social act of suppression with reference to women's invisibility in social histories.⁵

It is on this contextualising backdrop that the meaning of being a woman playwright in the colonial modern Marathi theatre is fully revealed. For native colonial women, becoming a playwright probably implied acquiring agency of social thinking and change, rather than being reduced to an object of (male) reflective concern. In hindsight, it may also imply acquisition of different ways of articulation, thought and independent perception of social systems. Therefore, it is not the number that calls for critical consideration regarding the native colonial women, but the intentions and variety of forms they experimented with, apart from their interest in translations and adaptations. The existing lack or brevity of critical focus on their works may be explained by the largely hostile social assumptions, historical circumstances or ideologies about women that have "crippled our ability to read and appreciate" (Tharu and Lalita, 2013, xv) women's work. Therefore, within the matrix of Marathi theatre, Marathi public sphere and colonial Marathi women playwrights, the questions that need to be asked are about non -documented reception of women's plays, about the hostile conditions as well as historical significance of their writing, and about the intentions and methods by which they sought to intervene in the theatrical discourse.

In order to explore the systemic reasons for the said invisibility of colonial women playwrights, I would like to dwell upon two examples, namely Hirabai Pednekar (1885-1951), who is considered to be the first woman playwright in Marathi language to write a musical play, and Girijabai Kelkar (1886-1980), who is honoured as the first woman playwright to have written a social play.⁶

Through these two particular cases, I draw attention to the set of questions mentioned above. Together they offer scope for understanding how the birth, character, skill, caste and social prestige of a colonial woman counted for her recognition as a playwright. On

the ontological level, my project adopts a constructionist view of social reality considering human actions to be responsible for a particular social situation. The project



(Hirabai Pednekar 1885-1951)

sympathizes with the socially marginal and asks questions of hierarchies of ideas as well as of people. I submit that these two women playwrights' attempts at writing, publishing and pushing for a theatrical production of their plays can be marked and read as their respective 'performances'. It is possible to do so because collectively the events happen to be actions presented with a quality of liveness in them. These actions qualify to be called as performances also because they constitute uncommon behaviour when measured against standards of gender, caste and class in life-worlds of colonial women. Moreover, the processes of play writing in both the cases resulted in some tangible result in terms of actualised event of theatre performances. These 'performances' can be explored in different ways, and can be comprehended in both the inward and outward dimensions or in the internality and externality of their dramatic texts. In case of Hirabai Pednekar (hereafter referred to as Hirabai), there is an externality to her play in the sense of an associated and contextualizing chain of real life events that reveals one shade of meaning of being a colonial woman playwright. On the other hand the internality of Girijabai's text that I want to explore, and in this I mean her reflection on women and education as embodied in the play through

which she speaks her mind and answers the contemporary male imagination about women's worth, reveals another meaning of being a colonial woman playwright.

The playwrights can be understood to have performed also because in writing their respective plays, they use "multiplicity of



Girijabai Kelkar 1886-1980)

strategies for constructing selfhood" in which women "often imaginatively scrutinize and critique the social world" but are little recognised as such (Ghosh, 2008, 2). Nevertheless, as we shall see, the respective ways of the two playwrights of constructing selfhood are very different and are not equally successful. In clubbing these contemporary playwrights who belong to different social classes basically due to their caste backgrounds, the crucial link happens to be a peculiar fact that Kolhatkar, who refused to accept Hirabai's dedication of her play and denied her request to write an introduction it, willingly wrote an introduction to Girijabai's play within a year's time of turning down Hirabai's request.

My interest in Hirabai resides in exploring the reasons for her renouncement of her career as a playwright. The fact that her wish to dedicate her play *Sangeet Damini* [*Damini* (musical play), first performed in 1911] to Kolhatkar, who happened to be one of her patron-friends from the theatre, and her request to him to write an introduction to her play, were turned down plays an important role here. She was a woman of *kalavant* (low) caste, hailing from Goa region and a *naikin* (professional singer or dancer woman) by profession.⁷ As such, the larger social and ethical questions of declaration of the relationship of a prestigious playwright with a non-genteel woman, however pleasant, enjoyable and melodious her company he might have found as a *naikin*; and thus also of elevating her social status by acknowledging her creativity, are involved in this example. It exemplifies denial of opportunity and desire to a woman of low caste. Unlike Hirabai, the second playwright Girijabai Kelkar (hereafter referred to as Girijabai) was an upper caste (Brahmin) woman and a known writer before she turned to writing plays. She was "married into a family of illustrious Marathi literary figures" (Anagol, 2005, 230) which certainly benefited her writing career. In 1927, she received the honour of being elected as president of the Marathi Dramatists' Annual Meeting. Her act of writing the play *Purushanche Band* (Men's Rebellion, 1913) as a rejoinder to another well-known playwright Krishnaji

Khadilkar's (1872-1948) play, *Bayakanche Band* (Women's Rebellion, 1907), exemplifies a desire to engage into conversation with the male dominated theatrical discourse "to show where men go wrong and what their responsibilities are in the contemporary period" (Kelkar, 1912, 2, my translation).

Hirabai lived the life of a naikin in the colonial city of Mumbai, which meant that she was not counted as a woman of good birth and had no opportunities of getting accommodated into the respectable, mainstream/male stream institution of patriarchal family as someone's wife. Various factors like her knowledgeable training in music, beautiful looks and melodious voice, the flair for composing poems, stories and plays, and her esteemed acquaintances/ visitors from the Marathi theatre world and the Marathi press - all contributed in direct and indirect ways to give her a rich experience of the arts in general and theatre in particular, and kindled the desire in her to be recognised as a playwright.⁸ Her foster mother was a mistress to the actor brother of the famous playwright Govind Ballal Deval (1855-1916). Hirabai thus had opportunities to meet Deval who lovingly encouraged her attempt of writing plays. The private musical concerts in her house became famous among the circle of theatre and literary personalities to the extent of receiving good and veiled publicity through oblique references in contemporary press reports. That her company was much desired is evident from some angry remarks made in private correspondence of P R Lele, who was a close acquaintance of Kolhatkar, on not being asked to accompany Kolhatkar on his visits to her (Varadpande, 1969). When Kolhatkar met Hirabai, she had already found a lover and a patron in Nanasaheb Joglekar, the handsome actor and owner of the famous Kirloskar NatakMandali, but the affair ended shortly with his sudden death in 1911.⁹

There used to be a peculiar dependence of Marathi theatre companies, playwrights and musicians on the naikin women in the matter of unacknowledged collection of new compositions and melodious tunes that were later incorporated with suitable changes in theatre productions as per requirement. It needs no mention that there was no due public acknowledgement of the naikin women, since declaring such a stigmatised source of the stage music and songs would have understandably harmed the social prestige of prominent theatre personalities. With his deep and studious interest in music, playwright Kolhatkar, a lawyer by profession, was directed to Hirabai with a similar requirement in 1901 and found in her a very mannerly and pleasant personality, different from that of the routine image of naikin that had ruled his mind till then. He was aware of Hirabai's love for and relationship with Joglekar. This was the period when Kolhatkar had begun to rise as a successful playwright of Kirloskar NatakMandali, his forte being the independent social plays that

were not based on any remote historical or mythological legends like the past plays produced by the same company. His early fondness for the Mumbai based Parsi musical theatre had impacted the way he composed songs and his melodies were found to be different and new by Marathi audiences. Shanta Gokhale describes him as “an intellectual and social snob” (2000, 25) whose popularity was due to his appeal to the “urban, college-educated youth” by virtue of “trying to tease the brain” (ibid. 29). His cousin and famous actor Chintamanrao Kolhatkar’s memoir (cited by Madkholkar in varhadpande, 1969, 8) analyses Kolhatkar’s natural obsession for novelty of beauty, ideas, melodious voice or tunes; and states that his restraint in everything resulting from his timidity, put limits on his actions and imagination. Kolhatkar’s well-wishers and disciples like Gajanan Tryambak Madkholkar express a difference of opinion with Chintamanrao Kolhatkar regarding such analysis of his nature. In their opinion, Kolhatkar’s behaviour resulted from frequent challenges of several kinds in his life and they appreciate his preference for intellectual faculties to ethical behaviour that need to be appreciated in an individual. Hirabai impressed Kolhatkar as an intelligent *rasik* (appreciator of various arts) and attained the status of a muse for his literary imagination as he himself acknowledges in his autobiography, *Atmavritta* (published in 1935 but written in 1918). He admits to have found in her an example of the *nayika* (aesthetically superior heroine) after his own aesthetic preferences for intellectual faculties in a woman rather than physical beauty. He acknowledges that women characters in his plays received a better depiction after he was introduced to Hirabai. Varadpande remarks: “The sublimated Hirabai of Kolhatkar’s emotional world appears to enter his literary world” (1969, 30, my translation). Deval, who was Kolhatkar’s predecessor playwright in Kirloskar NatakMandali, had requested Kolhatkar to write a response to Hirabai’s first play, *Sangeet JayadrathVidamban* (1904) in the magazine *Vividh Dyan Vistaar*. The play carried influences from Deval’s dramatic works but did not see a theatre production. Unlike his later refusal though Kolhatkar agreed to write, perhaps because of his still new and blooming liking for her, the magazine denied the piece for other different reasons; one of which inevitably was the concern for Hirabai’s status as *naikin* (Kolhatkar’s letter of 29-06-1905 cited in varhadpande 1969, 27).

Meanwhile in 1906, Kolhatkar replaced Deval as the playwright of Kirloskar NatakMandali following Deval’s difference of opinion with the company manager, Shankarrao Mujumdar. He frequently visited Hirabai who had by then come under his literary influence that was visible, for instance, in omission of the customary opening scene of Sutradhar and Nati in her play *Sangeet Damini*. When the play was recommended for production to Kirloskar NatakMandali by Joglekar and Kolhatkar - the two men with influence as the owner and the chief playwright respectively, the company was put in

dilemma because other members involved in the decision (the company manager Mujumdar, for instance) did not think the play worth the company's reputation. Here, a little familiarity with the colonial history of Marathi theatre companies would reveal that the choice of a theatre play for production by a company did not singularly rely on the quality of the play. In practical terms, it had much more to do with the financial condition of the company and its reputation with audiences at that time. It was only in a strong financial position that the companies used to encourage new and less known playwrights. Therefore, it was plausible in case of Hirabai that her social status as *naikin* must have weighed more on the minds of those who were supposedly not involved with her in emotional ways as Joglekar and Kolhatkar were. Prominent playwright Bhargavram Vitthal Varerkar (1963) did not hesitate to explain later in a newspaper article that Hirabai's play was opposed because of her social status as *naikin*. Kolhatkar's letters written during 1908 to his friends and disciples in Mumbai reveal his continued interest in the play as vouched by his repeated inquiries about the company's decision (Varhadpande, 1969, 32). It is known that the play was finally produced in 1911 by another company (Lalit Kaladarsha) as a rival production, but no details about the reception of the production are available.

This was not the first or the only incidence for Hirabai of denial of recognition and subsequent exclusion as writer from archive, because of her stigmatised existence. In another instance, her poems were invited for the third volume of *Abhinav Kavyamala* (Novel Garland of Poetry) that was to be edited by Narasimha Chintaman Kelkar (1872-1947). He used to be one of the guests at her musical concerts, and was a close ally of the nationalist extremist leader of Indian independence movement, Tilak.¹⁰ But the secretary of the said literary project, Lakshman Lele, found it socially inappropriate to give place to a *naikin* alongside prestigious poets in the volume (endnote 93 in varhadpande, 1969, 94). Despite being a close acquaintance of Hirabai, Kelkar preferred not to intervene in his capacity as an editor of the proposed volume. In the other instance that took place around 1914, Hirabai was not included in the group of writers who were to pose with Kolhatkar for the archival photograph meant for the magazine *Manoranjan*. Kolhatkar's nonintervention disappointed Hirabai.¹¹ The idea was to place Kolhatkar at the centre, surrounded by all writers who were either his direct disciples or admirers and followed his literary style. The photograph was published first in the magazine *Udyaan* and later in the magazine *Samikshakin* 1944 under the caption: *Guru, Shishya ani Mitra* (The Master, Disciples and Friends). This event represents the phenomenon of how women were deprived from getting accommodated officially in the archive. Nonetheless, in this

particular case, Hirabai acquires poetic justice when varerkar writes an article referred to above after her death and addresses her as Kolhatkar's first disciple right in the title.

The shadow of such discouraging experiences may be said to linger in her humble and wise articulation of worry about the possibility of production of her play and also of her politically rather problematic acknowledgement of her own 'uneducated' status in the Prologue to *Sangeet Damini*. Her experiences inform her awareness of how various theatrical transactions take place and it reflects well in the subtle and ironic realisation of the gap she describes in her humorous article called *Maze Atmachritra* (My Life, 1910) between what playwrights can achieve and what they claim as their achievements. Hirabai's life exemplifies that a talented woman like her had to submit to social taboos of low birth and the contemporary reality of feminine gender, despite the absence of domestic restrictions and access to the public domain of the theatre through her patrons.

There is not much documentary evidence to conclude about when Hirabai wanted to dedicate the play to Kolhatkar and wished that he would write a forward to it so that it would serve as recommendation for production by the reputed company. Kolhatkar's autobiography and his private letters do not remain consistent in narrating the episode. He acknowledges in his *Atmavritta* that Hirabai desired his 'Foreword' and displays awareness about his power to facilitate theatre production but mentions that on his uncle's advice he refused to do so (varhadpande, 1969, 33). He remains silent but for obvious reasons on why his uncle advised him like that. In one of his letters, he takes the stance that he denied the dedication in order not to hurt Joglekar, suggesting not exactly a love triangle, but his intimate relationship with her. To explore the way in which Kolhatkar's unwillingness to accept Hirabai's dedication impacted her career as a playwright, the trail of events around Hirabai's request to Kolhatkar - the existence, date or order of which cannot be exactly identified owing to different contradictory narratives – requires to be considered.

Hirabai's frail mental and physical conditions due to the demise of her patron and lover Joglekar in 1911 and her heavy consumption of liquor, required support that she hoped to find in Kolhatkar. She went to stay in Khamgaon, a small town in north Maharashtra, where Kolhatkar was residing at that time for his work as a lawyer. But she soon moved out, finding his unwillingness to contact her and thus to provide fodder for public gossip. Back in Mumbai, she made a contract around 1915 with Krishnaji Nene, another less known well-wisher and a railway (Bombay, Baroda and Central India Company) employee, who conditionally agreed to provide for the rest of her life. From her side, she had to entirely forgo her back life and had to abstain from keeping any contact with her previous admirers to the extent of burning or tearing away the past photographs and letters. She spent the rest

of her life in oblivion and away from Mumbai, mostly in Palshet, the small village in Konkan region where Nene owned a piece of land and a traditional house. She did not have any visits from or written correspondence with any of her admirer friends after this agreement and altogether stopped writing plays and holding concerts or composing songs. In exchange for safety and provision for life she thus saw the death of a writer, musician and an artist in her. Hirabai's estrangement from the world of music and theatre was so very complete after Kolhatkar turned down her request that from the letter correspondence of her acquaintances with Nene, it appears that they did not even come to know of her real death (1951) till past a decade, nor was there any news ever in the newspapers about it. Hirabai as a real naikin woman was always on the social periphery, but as a woman writer she was compulsorily thrown on the periphery of the contemporary world of literary expressions. The obliqueness of reference ("H" or "Baburao") that Hirabai's presence received in Kolhatkar's letters metaphorically thus extended to the theatrical world.

On the other hand, Girijabai was received differently in the same linguistic public sphere due to her mainstream caste and class position (Brahmin caste, middle class), and as such she did not have to face similar experiences of dejection from the literary and theatrical world like those of Hirabai. Her critique of the male dominated world appears in the way she conceptualises women characters, their attitude towards life, and their confidence of walking over problems in her play, *Purushanche Band*. At the base of the critique, there is a set of abstracted ideas invested in women's characterisation in the play: that empowerment is derived from education, both the vices and glorified virtues associated with the feminine gender are artificial and false constructions, women's labour is invisible and women can perform tasks that usually men are employed to do. These ideas require to be examined for their exact nature, utility and limitations in the context of Girijabai's other writings and views; nonetheless, today they form a subset of the general post-colonial, feminist critical reflection on women's plight in the Indian society. In the wake of anachronistic oddity of addressing them as feminist ideas, probably Girijabai's education, her upbringing and activism in later life form the source of these ideas, as can be guessed from her autobiography *Draupadichi Thali* (1959).¹²

Being educated and over aged by contemporary standards (15 years), and having attained puberty, Girijabai was married to the twice-widowed Madhav Kelkar, an assistant Mamledar (government official responsible for collecting revenue) posted in north Maharashtra. Her educated status invoked mixed reactions at the in-laws', but her favourite past-time remained to be writing and reading. She used to send articles and stories, sometimes anonymously and without bothering about the husband's permission, for

publication in magazines like *Dyan Prakash* and *Manoranjan*.¹³ Her active nature prompted her to gather women wherever she went due to her husband's transferable jobs and it generally used to lead to establishment of *Bhagini Mandal* (Associations of Sisters) and small libraries associated with them, as the one in Jalgaon. *Bhagini Mandal* and Marathi press for women were useful bodies for Marathi women's articulation in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Anagol, 2005). Due to such activities, the unused potential of women and benefits of education for them remained life-long subjects of reflection for Girijabai.

Marathi theatre was not an unfamiliar social arena to the in-laws' household since Girijabai's brother-in-law Kelkar, whom we have referred to above as Hirabai's acquaintance, was a known playwright and literary figure. His play *Totayache Band* (Revolt of the Pretender, 1913) had received an extended critique by Kolhatkar in the magazine *VividhDyanVistaar*, and it may be regarded that their friendship introduced Kolhatkar to Girijabai. Her mention of Marathi theatre as "our prime means of entertainment" (Kelkar quoted in Bagchi et al., 2014, 205) shows that she understood its importance for spreading ideas. Her play *Purushanche Band* emerged from a bet with an acquaintance about writing a play. She read the play out to Kolhatkar who then introduced it to yeshwantraoTipnis, the owner of Bharat NatakMandali. Girijabai recalls in her autobiography (1959, 52) that Kolhatkar tempted Tipnis to produce the play by pointing out that he would gain the rare credit of staging the first work of a woman playwright in Maharashtra. During the second show of the play in Jalgaon, Tipnis invited social leaders from the neighbouring town of Dhule who, being pleased with it, bestowed a gold medal on Girijabai (ibid.).

It is interesting to know that Girijabai does not claim that she wrote her play as rejoinder to Khadilkar's play. She rather mentions that she did not think of Khadilkar's play till she wrote half of it (ibid. 53). But most of the historians and critics of Marathi theatre (Bhavalkar in Khandage et al. 2002, 181-196) including playwright Kolhatkar perceive it as rejoinder. This is so because the title and the main plot of Girijabai's play capsize those of Khadilkar's, and her theme befits the content of Khadilkar's in the sense of presenting the other side of the coin. In hindsight, it may conform to the feminist observation about inversion as mode of resistance but is not exactly an inversion.

Being a follower of the nationalist leader Tilak whose regressive views about women and their education (Rao, 2010) underlined and prescribed a patriarchal role for them, Khadilkar's choice of a story of subjugation of women from the epic of *Mahabharata* for

his play comes as no surprise.¹⁴ Stories of humbling women's power by men are spread across various regions in the country and they work against women's interest as equal human beings. For instance, the legend of Pandyan Queen Alli as is known in the area around Madurai (south India) reads, according to Vijaya Ramaswamy, to mean a moral lesson that "a bold and courageous woman, however beautiful, cannot be regarded as feminine or even as female"(2008, 213-4).

The situation of women's rule subverted by men is reversed in Girijabai's play only to the extent of emphasizing the requirement of conscious balance of power between sexes. More importantly what amounts for the feminist inversion in her play is her attempt to break down the exaggerated and essentializing male images of women that usually occur in the writings of male authors and "appear more 'attractive' [to readers] than women's own thinking, feeling and articulating selves" (Kosambi, 2012, 5) and thereby avoid edification of woman's normative self. In her study of Marathi women writers, Meera Kosambi reflects that the concept of gender equality is their gift to Marathi literature (ibid. 6). She also expresses astonishment to see "how far beyond the threshold the wings of imagination carried them—from a dreary and oppressive present to a utopian vision of gender equality predicated upon education, employment, and legal rights" (ibid. 2).

Girijabai's play presents such utopian vision of gender equality and does provide connection between education, employment, legal rights and women's empowerment. The plot is about a sudden subjection of women to the unfair royal decision of their mass desertion by husbands, taken under the influence of a misogynist spiritual leader Swami Vikaranand. The women do not lose their morale but remain equally resourceful and hard-working, and generate a parallel and even more organised a system of living on their own by employing women in every place. They do so under the guidance of learned Saraswati Devi, who happens to be the deserted wife of the Swami. The situation is resolved when the king is made to realise his mistake by the prince who falls in love with the woman doctor-manager in the women's hospital where he is nursed back to life. The example of a woman doctor appears to directly draw upon contemporary real life figures of doctor women, Anandibai Joshi (1865-1887) and Rakhmabai (1864-1955). Padma Anagol (2005) suggests that Girijabai has visualised two kinds of education for women in the play: the medical education for which she had real life examples and the knowledge of scriptures. Girijabai's visionary arguments in the interest of women appear veiled as retorts or counter-questions and are put in the mouths of men characters, rather than being invested in the plot. For instance, when the King questions the gardener about the unmaintained appearance of his garden, the gardener counter-questions him by saying how he could be

expected to work as he used to earlier when he has to cook and take care of his four children. His articulation of the impossibility of multitasking indirectly reveals everyday realities of women. The play does not look like a melodramatic plot since it shows a direct argumentative confrontation between Saraswati Devi and Vikaranand Swami that also draws upon scriptural sources among other points. The play displays its different quality in showing that though common men and women are unified in the end, Saraswati and Vikaranand prefer to stick to their own separate ways, and to their respective goals. In the wake of an unprecedented situation emerging out of their mass driving out of their homes, the women subjects become smart as to be aware of their legal rights. For instance, there is this wife who does not hesitate to call her husband as intruder on his re-appearance in her house and names his sexual intentions as an attempt of molestation. Certain new questions are raised - for example, what alternative is there for the widows who do not want to re-marry? Dramatic situations portrayed in the play were certainly meant to generate laughter; yet it is the body of ideas that is thrown at the audience in comic disguise that constitutes the real strength of the play. It is unfortunate not to be able to gauge audience reactions to the dramatic situations since details of performances of the play, apart from the fact that it was produced by Bharat NatakMandali in Jalgaon and received a full house of eminent personalities as audiences in the five shows performed, are not available.

The emphasis in the play on educating women raises scholarly interest that leads to an exploration of Girijabai's ideas and vision about the kind of education she recommends for women. In her other prose writings (*Gruhinibhushan*, 1910, and *Sansaarsopaan*, 1939) she follows Tilkaite school of thought which considers equal and similar education for men and women as unnecessary. The school did not believe in equality of sexes and considered the nationalist role model of *pativrata* (the devoted and sexually loyal wife) Hindu lady as worthy ideal for women. In its view that women's education should prepare them to become good mothers and housewives, it did not concern the implication that women should acknowledge their subaltern position in a patriarchal household. Since these ideas benefitted middle class men and their social and domestic privileges and were also strongly supported by the misogynist scriptural literature, Tilkaite view of women's education was readily absorbed in popular imagination. The phenomenon reflects well in Bapuji Anne's words of praise articulated in his foreword to Girijabai's autobiography. A social leader and family friend, he applauds her as a *pativrata* and recommends her life as an ideal model to the newly married ladies (in Kelkar, 1959, 4). That the nationalist ideal of a devoted wife was her preference is evident from her confession about her act of toning down the modern ideology and life style of some of the women characters in her Marathi translation (*StryanchaSwarg* 1912) of vaidya Amrutlalji Padhiyar's Gujarati novel *Striyanu Swarg*

(NA) . . . She justifies her decision by stating that Marathi readers would have found it unacceptable. Her siding with tradition and conventional thinking is also observed in her own stories by literary critics in recent times (in Khandage, 2002, 92).

It is interesting to notice that Hirabai, who was less educated than Girijabai, takes the stance in her play *Sangeet Damini* that there is no difference between sexes when it comes to education. The last song in the play exposes her dream of walking the road to knowledge with men (cited in varadpande, 1969, 22). She asks why men should desert women on the way to knowledge when their accompaniment is otherwise much desired in life. The contrast between the thinking of the two women playwrights with regard to women's education raises a question about Girijabai's understanding of the general principal of equality. It appears that they had different understandings of equality of genders which can be traced back to their life experiences. In this regard their different caste backgrounds play a major role. In her autobiography, Girijabai is explicit about her idea of being open minded and generous to others: "I am not rich and so I am not arrogant. But I also do not like to treat everybody unnecessarily equal for the sake of equality. I talk, love or help all - the poor and the rich alike – and caste does not come in between. But I am old fashioned. And I do not think that equality lies only in eating or sitting together" (1959, 134, my translation). This particular and firm conscience about what equality is does not mean and should not be read as part of the aspiring middle class cultural politics which otherwise does not want to let go its privilege of caste. In the capacity of a social leader of the Brahmin caste colonial middle class, Tilak had endorsed this attitude. He elevated the pro-caste movement to national movement and equated anti-caste movement to anti-national movement by arguing that only those who had faith in *varnashram dharma* could be *berashtravadis* or nationalists and others were "un-national" (Rao, 2014, 24). Girijabai can be assumed to be under the influence of Tilakite ideology by virtue of her brother-in-law who was a close associate of Tilak, though her autobiography, immersed in details about her household life as it is, does not elaborate on Tilak's politics or her reflection on it. But her social activities, speeches and chairing of various local meetings suggest her political ideology to be nationalist in Tilakite fashion. Her social activities like running libraries or BhaginiMandals are not known to have existed for women of other castes.¹⁵ The imagined sisterhood in her literary creations, like the play under scrutiny here, appears to place class appropriate behaviour and reactions of women, but seems oblivious of the category of caste that generates difference between women's life worlds, their ways and goals of emancipation. Girijabai's literary, theatrical and social activities happen to be contemporary with the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century that aimed at

unification of all Hindus by way of constructing a single notion of womanhood in alignment with Brahminical patriarchy (Rege, 2006, 32) and with the exclusion of women of other castes. These ruling political ideas concerning caste and gender have a complicated connection with Kolhatkar's recommendation of Girijabai's play for theatre production and his refusal to accept the dedication of Hirabai's play.

If Girijabai's play strongly put forth the women's side of the debate as appreciated by Kolhatkar in his Introduction to her play, Hirabai's mere attempt at writing a play was laudable in itself because she did not belong to the Brahmin caste which was traditionally equipped with the cultural capital of the skills of reading and writing. Veena Naregal identifies the attempt of Brahmin castes in colonial times ``to form a vernacular discursive network in the Marathi -speaking areas which simultaneously valorised upper-caste opinion and reinforced its enormous local clout, acquired through the dominant upper-caste presence in the provincial bureaucracy" (1999, 3450 and 3454) as the manoeuvre by which the 'vernacular intelligentsia' sought representative status. The process of seeking a socially representative status in the colonial times appears complicated because of the fundamental socio -economic changes geared by colonial revenue policies. But in brief, the colonial requirement of representative status among the Brahmin middle class was necessitated by the loss of political power of the Brahmin castes (Deshpande, 1995). Its implications need to be mapped onto the theatre because after inauguration it quickly attained the status of being the only secular cultural form of the new elites (that is the Brahmin middle classes) who carried an ideological oeuvre filled with nationalist ideas, Brahmanical patriarchy, and a desire for socially representative status. Accordingly, dominating the theatre in caste terms was a way of attaining social representation and it followed that carving a different identity for the theatre as a respectable, serious entertainment and public sphere became equally necessary.

In other social aspects, the caste-desire for respectability and subsequent representative status came to shun the existence of the old and lowly professional performer castes for their perceived immorality. Its impact on the professional women entertainers is explained by Anagol: "By condemning *kalavantins* as ordinary prostitutes, the women belonging to this movement were able to secure two objectives: preventing men from engaging in the practice of keeping mistresses by making the practice socially unacceptable and improving the status of their own role as *grihinis* [housewives] by assuming attributes traditionally associated with *kalavantins*, such as the ability to sing or play musical instruments"(2005, 125-26). Against the fallen woman, the pious Hindu pativrata woman was made to stand as a desirable counterpart since the gendered woman was important for the colonial caste

and class discourse (Rege, 2006). Kolhatkar's response to works of the same genre created by two women, who in a way represent the generalised, two colonial types of gendered women in living their own lives, thus becomes the litmus taste for the nationalist and patriarchal reception of their works.

CONCLUSION

Reviewing Hirabai's stories for reflection of her different and uncommon experiences of the male dominated world, Tara Bhavalkar (in Khandage et al., 2002) concludes that Hirabai under-achieved success as a writer because she did not include such experiences in her writing. With regard to her plays, I propose that it is more in Hirabai's external actions than her literary works that her "strategies for constructing selfhood", by which she wanted to carve an identity as a playwright beyond her salon appearance, can be read.¹⁶ Her renunciation of the literary, theatrical and the musical world proved fatal for her creativity but can be explored to understand as containing her critique of the world.

In pairing Hirabai and Girijabai, I call attention to caste as a facilitating factor for accessing male dominated social systems and institutions. Both were socially active, but their respective spheres of activities were different. The comparative ease with which Girijabai could continue her writing and be in contact with the public sphere and the theatre, explains the phenomenon well. The abrupt end of Hirabai's "performance" of playwriting reveals that non-Brahmin agency of shaping the theatrically produced social knowledge was almost nipped in the bud. Similarly, when it came to violating codes of caste differences or of risking one's honour, the reformist thinking proved hollow as shown by the withdrawal of Kolhatkar in Hirabai's case. Prevailing notions of social prestige, good birth and taboos around low caste professional women entertainers overpower the feminine agency and feminine desire and in that, reveal limitations of the leading class and caste in being truly progressive.

NOTES

¹ The term Dashavtar refers to the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. The popular and traditional theatre form performed annually in the south districts of Maharashtra as well in the north districts of Goa is eight hundred years old. The other folk form of Lalit uses Bhajans (devotional songs) while the Keertana includes story-telling with bhajans.

² An instance of native students' dislike for predecessors in Marathi theatre can be found in K P Gadgil's Introduction to Vinayak Janardan Keertane's play, Thorle Madhavrao Peshwa: "Illiterate players have usurped the stage/ With scenes obscene depraved this rising age" (cited in Gokhale, 2000, 11). Another colonial playwright M B Chitale considers it as the duty of the educated natives to write good plays when he states that: ". . . ^{Marathi Literature} in this respect is as yet in its infancy, and it will, I am afraid, belong before it can reach that height of excellence, which it is the duty of the educated natives of this country, to try their best to attain . . ." (cited in Sathe, 2011, 77).

³ Today, it is generally agreed that compared with other regional theatres of India, Marathi theatre is bestowed with a strong tradition of playwriting. Audiences habitually look for the playwright's name with interest before they choose a theatre performance for watching. Since the written word receives more importance in designing theatre performance, it has come to be known as text-based theatre and inevitably deprives a non-Marathi speaker from enjoying it fully. *The Playwright's Theatre* (2000) happens to be the title of theatre critic Shanta Gokhale's book, chosen in acknowledgement of continued importance of the playwright in the history of Marathi theatre.

⁴ Jotirao Phule's main contribution lies in exploring caste hegemony in several walks of life, including literary and cultural productions, as the source of social exploitation (see Omvedt, 1976).

⁵ The apparent myth of invisibility of women playwrights also possibly mean that theatre critics and audiences have failed to give them their due place and credit in public and archival memory. Madhura Koranne (2000) lists around 70 women playwrights and their 116 plays written between 1896 and 2000 in her study of Marathi women playwrights. These playwrights or their works rarely find mention in the mainstream narratives of history of Marathi theatre.

⁶ These women playwrights already exist briefly but separately in fragmented narratives about the history of Marathi theatre, and have become subjects of different scholarly interests. See Padma Anagol (2005) for Girijabai Kelkar and M L varadpande (1969) for HirabaiPednekar.

⁷ *Kalavant* is one of the castes included in *Devadasi Community*. In the nineteenth century, its members used to work as professional entertainers, singers, dancers and players of various instruments. Women members who sang or danced for their patrons were called

naikin. They were known for staying loyally with one patron at a time (varadpande, 1969, 19-20).

⁸ Hirabai's familiarity with Marathi theatre began with the love and appreciative encouragement she used to receive in her childhood from the famous playwright and rehearsal master Govind Deval (1855-1916). He used to visit her aunt-guardian and *naikin* Bhimabai Pednekar who had migrated to Mumbai from Gomantak region.

⁹ Kirloskar Natak Mandali was the premier theatre company in the first two decades of twentieth century. It was founded by Annasaheb Kirloskar in 1880 and has many popular plays like Shakuntal, Sharada, veertanay, Punyaprabhav, etc. to its credit. Most of the famous female impersonators and playwrights worked with the company. The musical plays (Sangeet Natak) were its main forte.

¹⁰ N C Kelkar was the trustee and editor of *Kesari* and a playwright as well as prolific writer in his own right. He was the brother-in-law of the second playwright selected for discussion in this paper, Girijabai Kelkar. Kolhatkar wrote a detailed critique of his play *Totayache Band* (1912) in the magazine *Vividh Dyan Vistaar*.

¹¹ Edited by Kashinath Raghunath Mitra, the monthly *Manoranjan* was founded in 1895. It attracted the finest poetry and fiction of the times.

¹² *Draupadichi thali* as an idiom refers to abundance of things and derives its meaning from the *Mahabharata* story of Queen Draupadi who used to worship a plate (thali) given to her by Krishna in Pandavas' exile incognito to feed any number of guests arriving without notice. Here, Draupadi also refers to the maiden name of Girijabai and it is important that she expresses her satisfaction about her life in her memoir using her maiden name.

¹³ Dyan Prakash was a bi-weekly published from Poona (Pune).

¹⁴ In *Bayakanche Band*, Khadilkar (1872-1948) adapted a story from the *Mahabharata* about the kingdom of women and showed how the allegorical kingdom was defeated by men. The epic story of *Mahabharata* mentions a queen's brave attempt of holding the ritualistic horse captive that was let loose by the Pandavas after performing the ritual of Ashwamedh Yagna to re-establish their supremacy. Arjun on his duty to protect the horse is forced to surrender to the queen who rules an all-women kingdom and who has

banned entry of any male in her kingdom. Later with Krishna's intervention, Arjuna marries the queen and thus humbles her.

¹⁵ "Founded by Girijabai Kelkar, [the Bhagini Mandal in Jalgaon] largely catered to the needs of Brahmin women; Anandibai Shirke, a Maratha woman, claimed that, only after her arrival in 1925, did the organization throw its doors open to other Hindu women like Pathare Prabhus and Marathas" (Anagol, 2005, 66).

¹⁶ Hirabai's popular concerts and enchanting gatherings at her place reminded some visitors of the salon of Madame de Stael (Tuljapurkar cited in Varadpande, 1969, 94 fn 85).

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