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Women in the Indian Performance Tradition

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SAMYUKTA: A JOURNAL of GENDER AND CULTURE

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Women in the Indian Performance Tradition

WOMEN'S INITIATIVES

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Guest Editorial

The Samyukta special issue on 'Women in Indian Performance' is a continuation of the research focusing on women in Asian performance which I started in 2013.. Being a performer and researcher on Kutiyattam from India, I am specifically interested in studying the contribution of women to Indian performance traditions and this special issue is the culmination of that ambition. The volume brings together eight essays and two interviews contributed by scholars from India, the United States and Italy. The contributions also cover a range of highly interesting topics, from the interview of Kalanidhi Narayanan about her initial years of training and career, to a critical review of Nirbhaya, a play on the Delhi gang rape written by Yael Farber in 2013.

Essays and interviews this volume feature offers a radical reassessment of the place of women in Indian performances. What is the purpose of this special issue beyond the personal reasons listed above? Indian performance practice have been an active area of study among theatre scholars and practitioners all over the world for several decades, exerting substantial influence on the contemporary performance practices and actor-training methods. Nevertheless, critical debates and studies that aim at investigating and reassessing the role of women and their contribution to artistic practices in the Indian performance scene are relatively limited. Given the fact that Indian performances are broad and varied in number and style, such studies only marginally address the place and contribution of women in Indian performances. Critical work generating a more comprehensive view On women in Indian performances and mapping a broader territory in this relation is indeed necessary. Therefore, Samyukta special issue on 'Women in Indian performance is a novel attempt at initiating thoughts, generating scholarly work and critically reassessing the contribution of women in Indian performances.

Complexities involved with assessing the place of women in Indian performances are manifold and I am attempting to simply map the territory. Academic essays and interviews published in this special issue aim to acknowledge the creative contributions of women practitioners in Indian performances. I genuinely hope that this volume will make significant contribution to the area of gender studies in India.

Guest Editor - ARYA MADHAVAN

IMMORTAL NIRBHAYA – FROM VICTIM TO VICTOR AROUND THE GLOBE

DEEPSIKHA CHATTERJEE AND CLAUDIA ORENSTEIN

Abstract: Yael Farber takes a real episode of brutal domination and power, hatred and violence, horror and bloodshed, shame and anguish, and creates a stage worthy award winning production that is touring the world. Responding to the infamous gang rape and murder of a young woman on a bus in Delhi in 2012, which engendered protests throughout India and a national reassessment of the place and perception of women in Indian society as well as the prevalence of sexual violence, this production, has stirred the hearts of audiences. This article aims to understand the power and strength of Nirbhaya and the show's relationship to the real events and their impact nationally, and, on the other hand, assesses the intercultural nature of the project, with its international cast, its South African director, its UK premiere and tour, and its subsequent New York performance. Born from a collaboration of committed performers and guided by Farber's artistic vision, Nirbhaya is a unique theatrical response to the explosive events of December 2012 within the Indian theatrical community, in its simultaneous incorporation of confessional material, its use of ritual and poetic elements within a strong theatrical structure and its approaches for reaching audiences.

Keywords: Nirbhaya, rape, young women, Indian society, violence against women, sexual violence, Delhi gang rape, rape laws, women's subordination, patriarchal control

On the 16th of December 2012, a young woman and her male friend, Awindra Pratap Pandey were returning home after watching the movie *Life of Pi*. When they were unable to find auto rickshaws that would take them where they wanted to go, they accepted an offer to ride on a chartered bus. The now infamous events that took place on that bus changed both their lives forever. Six male riders, including the driver, beat Awindra and then proceeded brutally to attack and gang rape his friend. When they were done, the men threw their victims off the bus, leaving them by the side of the road. It was hours later that

the Delhi Police took the two for emergency medical care. The Indian Government moved the woman to Singapore for further treatment but she succumbed to her injuries on the 29th of December, 2012. ‘Nirbhaya’, ‘The Fearless’¹ was the name the Government used to identify the woman to safeguard her privacy.

The story, now infamous, became headline news in media across the globe and provoked strong reactions in India. Public street protests denouncing the event took place across the country, starting in New Delhi, and continued in virtual form on Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and other social media sites. Celebrities and others criticised the poor state of law enforcement and called on the Government for fast judicial action against the rapists, resulting in five adults and a seventeen year old being charged for the crime.²

Given the enormous drama of the events themselves and the social outcry they elicited in India’s streets, courts, media, and political institutions, what could theatre have to offer as a further response to the situation? How might enacted artistic expression frame a story like Nirbhaya’s and offer something more, or in a different mode of expression, than what the population itself, the newspapers, or *India’s Daughter* (the important BBC documentary on the subject),³ all expressed?

Writer-director Yael Farber’s stunning production *Nirbhaya* provides a provocative answer to these questions. *Nirbhaya* is a devised work, created in collaboration with a team of six women and one man in which not only is Nirbhaya’s story told but each of the actresses in turn, recounts and enacts her own true, personal tale of being the victim of abuse. It reveals Nirbhaya’s brutal death as a catalyst for new, widespread social and personal confrontation with the misogyny and sexual violence rampant in Indian society. The play’s combination of ritual structure, confessional storytelling and poetic stage imagery lift Nirbhaya’s harrowing tale beyond the raw, barbarous facts of the events to a plane of theatrical metaphor that allows spectators simultaneously to confront the subject of sexual violence, reflect on it and see their own situations expressed onstage. It is not drama therapy but a theatrically rich production that puts accomplished artistic expression at the service of social introspection. Moreover, while Nirbhaya’s case might suggest that such abusive behavior emerges primarily within lower class environments (given the poor economic backgrounds of her assailants), this show clearly and even importantly addresses the situation as it exists within more affluent urban circles and to audiences of that class. Within a political climate committed to economic development, this production shatters any illusions that economic means or high social standing alone keeps gender discrimination and violence at bay. A cultural environment that habitually undervalues

women puts all women at risk. Publicly unveiling the extent of the situation and the damage it inflicts on society in a way that allows people to listen, can open doors for social transformation and personal and collective healing.

Theatrical responses to the Delhi Gang Rape

As the December 2012 events made clear, rape is not a rare occurrence in India. What was unique about Nirbhaya's case, however, was the enormous response it elicited. Israeli filmmaker Leslee Udwin, who produced the film, *India's Daughter*, states,

It was an Arab spring for gender equality. What impelled me to leave my husband and two children for two years while I made the film in India was not so much the horror of the rape as the inspiring and extraordinary eruption on the streets. A cry of 'enough is enough'. Unprecedented numbers of ordinary men and women, day after day, faced a ferocious government crackdown that included tear gas, baton charges and water cannon. They were protesting for my rights and the rights of all women. That gives me optimism. I can't recall another country having done that in my lifetime (Udwin, 2015).

Millions of Indians, both men and women, marched in New Delhi, Bangalore, Kolkata and other urban centers fighting for justice for Nirbhaya and raising awareness against this kind of brutality. Photos, media reports and social media thoroughly documented the public's response to the savage torture of the young woman. It is a well-known fact that the police in India harass rape victims when they lodge complaints and resolutely ignore their cases. The Indian Government and the police marred by corruption, with no accountability for their actions, rarely protect women in these circumstances. However, the brutality in Nirbhaya's case engendering mass protest and global media coverage, shook the Government into action. Nonetheless, when the population reacted with volcanic emotions on the streets, the police resisted them by closing roads, subways, and buses (Popli n. d.).

The theatre community within and outside India joined in responding to these events. Tony award recipient and internationally acclaimed playwright and women's rights activist Eve Ensler was particularly outspoken. Ensler's internationally produced and renowned, Obie award-winning play *The Vagina Monologues*, has offered a theatrical model for speaking out on women's sexual abuse since 1996. Ensler created a genre defining model of theatre based on her interviews with girls and women from diverse backgrounds about their sexuality, their relationships to their bodies, and other intimate issues. Ensler threads the women's words into a beautiful, humorous, and eye opening play. In conjunction with the

play, she founded v-Day, a non-profit organisation that raises funds to help end violence against women. Originally performed by Ensler herself, today students, actors, and activists around the world perform *The Vagina Monologues*, re-enacting the testimonials of Ensler's interviewees on stage. The aim of the play and its proliferating productions, especially on valentine's Day, is to raise awareness about the prevalence of sexual abuse and, through education, to eradicate it. Speaking of the Delhi gang rape, Ensler stated,

I think that the gang raping and the murder of Jyoti was a really horrific incident but a huge turning point in India and the world. And I actually was there for three weeks in the middle of all of it. And I have to say, in my lifetime, having worked every day of my life for the last fifteen years on sexual violence, I have never seen anything like that, where sexual violence broke through the consciousness and was on the front page, nine articles in every paper every day, in the center of every discourse, in the center of the college students' discussions, in the center of any restaurant you went in. And I think what's happened in India, India is really leading the way for the world. It's really broken through (Ensler, 2013).⁴

Street theatre in India has a long history of dramatising political issues in public spaces, and has addressed women's issues decades before the Nirbhaya case. Theatre Union (formerly known as *Stree Sangharsh*), a women's theatre company formed in 1981 dealt with social aberrations like dowry deaths publicly accepted as common kitchen accidents (van Erven, 1992, 117).⁵ In the 1980s, Safdar Hashmi's long running theatre group Jana Natya Manch (also referred to as Janam), performed *Aurat* (Woman), dealing with women's daily lives, throughout India and even in Pakistan and *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai* (This too is violence), a poetic street play highlighting violence against women in Hindu mythology (van Erven, 1992, 151 and 172).⁶ Buland Natya Manch staged their production of *Sati* in 1987 after an incident of actual widow burning in Rajasthan (Mitra, 2013, 230).

It is thus not surprising that Indian activists turned to street theatre in response to the 2012 events. Artist Shilpi Marwaha, with the Asmita Theatre Group asks the most important question about the incident in her street play: '*Isskazi medarkaun? Police, prasashan, sarkaryaah hum or aap?*' (Who is responsible for this? Police, the government or is it you and me?). Her performance follows the prevailing Indian style of street theatre: An ensemble of actors dressed in black with colorful belts or scarves tied around them gather people outside a college, marketplace, slum or factory, and start a show. These events bridge different modes of expression — polemic, political protest, communal gathering and theatrical enactment. In the tradition of guerrilla theatre, the production elements are

minimal, the sketches and dialogues are short, and the shows capture the audience with a quick burst of expression to raise consciousness about a burning issue before spectators disperse and return to their daily activities. In Marwaha's piece, a young woman is seen being lured by a man on the pretext of presenting her with a new phone. Slowly a large group of male actors engulfs her from all directions. The audience watches this helpless woman as she is consumed by this all male group until they lose sight of her. Marwaha then breaks up this devouring mass and bids her company members to chant 'yeh ab manzoornahi' (This will not be tolerated anymore) until the audience joins in to commit to this motto (*Fire-brand street theatre artist Shilpi Marwaha protests Delhi gang rape*, 2012).

The Nirbhaya event inspired Sangeet NatakAkademi Award- winning actress Maya Krishna Rao to create her solo show *Walk* which argues that women should reclaim the streets and be able to walk alone, night and day. Though not in the tradition of street theatre as described above, Rao takes her short, monologue-based show to diverse audiences. She has performed this thirty-five minute piece in Mumbai, Delhi, Jaipur, Thrissur and several other Indian cities, in unconventional spaces like cafes, colleges, and multinational banks. Her performance bids the audience to claim each citizen's basic right to safety in public space. She implores spectators to eschew criticising how women dress in public, a type of criticism which often balloons into justification, especially by older patriarchs, to rationalise acts of sexual violence, placing blame on the victim rather than the perpetrator. Rao has made slight changes to the play for each different city in order to connect her work and her message to disparate audiences. *Walk* is less about rape itself *per se*, and more about the need to change cultural consciousness around the dialogue of women's safety, which contributes to the greater climate that allows rape to occur and remain unquestioned (Rao, 2013).

Rasika Agashe, another theatre artist, through a workshop process with her theatre group, Being Association, created the Hindi play *Museum of Species in Danger* (2013). It presents stories based on women from history, literature, and the contemporary world, strung together by satirical monologues and accompanied by folk singers and musicians (Bumper Clap Presents *Museum of Species in Danger* - (A Satirical Hindi Play), 2013). In a larger offering in 2013, to mark the first anniversary of Nirbhaya's plight, The People's Theatre Association of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and theatre groups Swaang and Majma hosted *Jurrat*: a week-long event of Indian plays, skits, musical performances, and speeches commemorating the incident and reflecting on the safety of women in India one year on from the events (Malik, 2013).

Even beyond theatre spaces, the response to this incident has been deep and far reaching. Vibha Bakshi's 2014 film *Daughters of Mother India*, the winner of the 2015 National Award for the Best Film on Social Issues, captures its aftermath in many circles, notably in legislation and law enforcement. The film depicts a variety of victims of sexual abuse, even several minors, shows how the Delhi police is now handling a far bigger volume of female victims' phone complaints, how gender violence laws have changed, and how the police force in metro cities is educating, sensitising, and reaching out to the public to regain trust and ensure safety for women.

***Nirbhaya*, The Production**

Award winning actress, Poorna Jagannathan, the original producer of *Nirbhaya*,⁷ and a central performer in the show, was also inspired to use theatre to respond to the public outcry over the Delhi rape and to express the anguish she and so many other women were feeling about the case (Jagannathan, 2015).⁸ In 2013, she reached out to the noted South African director yael Farber to collaborate on a theatre project. Farber was similarly moved by the swelling outburst on the streets and in an interview with Soutik Biswas for the BBC, stated,

It's hard to say what it was precisely about this case that broke through the defence systems of numbness and indifference towards the staggering figures and brutal nature of sexual violence around the world. Who knows why this woman's fate touched so many lives? What matters is that it broke the barrier of indifference and an appropriate level of righteous rage suddenly manifested on the streets of her nation and caught the attention of the world (Farber, 2013).

Jagannathan was first drawn to Farber's capacity for creating moving theatrical work on traumatic social issues when she saw *Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise* in New York (2006) a show built from the cast's harrowing true experiences under South Africa's Apartheid system (Isherwood, 2006). Farber's full body of theatrical work as a writer and director, through both testimonial plays and reinterpretations of classics, engages head on with experiences and the aftermath of trauma, notably in addressing the scars left by South Africa's colonial history and Apartheid. With actress Thembi Mtshali-Jones, Farber created *A Woman in Waiting*, which premiered in Grahamstown, South Africa in 1999, based on Mtshali-Jones' memories of a lifetime of racial oppression. *A Woman in Waiting* delves into the pain of separation between black mothers and their children in the common, recurring scenario of black women leaving their townships to take domestic work in white

only areas, caring for other people's children, and coming home, sometimes only once a year, to see their own. The play reveals how this situation shaped Mtshali-Jones' childhood and her relationship with her own daughter. In *He Left Quietly*, another of Farber's testimonial plays, first performed in Berlin in 2003, Duma Kumalo shares the true events of his being sentenced to death for alleged participation in the death of a town councillor in Sharpeville, South Africa. Kumalo was given a stay of execution just fifteen hours before his death, in response to international outrage, but remained in prison until 1991, never exonerated of this crime (Farber, 2008; The Forgiveness Project, 2010). In breaking open political and social injustice, Farber's work emphasises the toll these circumstances take on individuals. In the opening of *He Left Quietly* Kumalo states,

In 1985, I was condemned to death of a crime I did not commit. I spent three years on Death Row, and a further four years of a Life Sentence. I have been measured for the length of my coffin; the size of the rope for my neck; I took my last sacrament; I said - to my broken father - a final goodbye. (*Smiling gently.*) And with each of these movements, my soul left my body behind. The dead leave the living with a burden. When going to their deaths- they would shout to us: Those who survive - tell the world! (Farber, 2008, 188-189)

Mies Julie, debuting in Edinburgh in 2012, is Farber's reworking of August Strindberg's 1888 classic *Miss Julie*. Here she refracts the class and gender conflicts in the original through the lens of a post-apartheid South Africa where the issues play out on a desert farm between a white mistress and her black labourer. In *Molara*(2003), a version of *The Oresteia*, Farber places Aeschylus' ancient family feud within South Africa's racial divide. Farber's Clytemnestra, a white actress, defends the murder of her husband to her daughter Electra, played by a black actress, before a chorus made up of Xhosa women from the Ngqoko Cultural Group of traditional singers who stand as witnesses and judges of the events. While addressing formidable social and political struggles, past and present, Farber's works are theatrically compelling and poetic.

On a more practical level, Farber's participation in the project, because of her international connections and renown as a director, along with her theatrical vision and vast experience with this delicate testimonial work, guaranteed that the piece would reach an international audience, connecting the situation in India to shared global concerns.

Born from a collaboration of committed performers and guided by Farber's artistic vision, *Nirbhaya* is a unique theatrical response to the explosive events of December 2012. Within the Indian theatrical community the production is distinct in its simultaneous incorporation

of confessional material, its use of ritual and poetic elements within a strong theatrical structure, and its approaches for reaching audiences.

Confessional Themes

The creation of the play was a team effort from the beginning. The process of assembling the participants came about through a combination of careful sifting of applicants and serendipitous encounters. Early workshops took place in Mumbai with several women. They explored their personal experiences with sexual violence to develop various episodes. Pieces that fit the play stayed and the company eliminated those that didn't serve the storytelling. Although all the actresses shared their own experiences, some, like Priyanka Bose, had never spoken about them before and didn't realise she had a story worth exploring. According to Jagannathan, some of the women had no practice narrating their own tales or frameworks for expressing them, artistically or otherwise. Farber patiently listened to the facts the actresses shared with her and then wove them into lyrical, stage-worthy episodes. As Farber describes her process of working on testimonial plays, Despite being based on true events -- testimony does not come with a natural dramatic arc. This must be worked and paced. The audience must be transported from indifference to empathy, from their own limited perspective to deep inside the interior landscape of another person's world (Farber, 2008, p. 20).

As the workshops progressed, the team realised the need for the production to address a wider range of circumstances of sexual violence and gender oppression in order to make a larger statement about the maltreatment of women in India. Jagannathan and Bose had both suffered sexual violence during their childhood years. The team reached out on social media to include victims of sexual crimes in adulthood and women who had endured other forms of gender related abuse. Distinguished Bollywood actress Rukhsar Kabir got involved, sharing her experience of violence and harassment within the walls of her first marriage. Sneha Jawale, already well known in activist circles for fighting against dowry torture, came forward with her personal tale of being burned and abandoned as a dowry bride. Her face, still bearing the indelible scars from these brutal events, offers its own powerful and irrefutable statement on the play's subject, amplified in the space of performance and within the structured theatrical framework.⁹

In the process of filtering through prospective performers, the company had to find not only women who had endured such experiences- the number of interested participants answering the company's call was both impressive and unsettling - but, of equal

importance, those who would be comfortable telling their harrowing tales on stage in front of an audience, night after night. It was essential that reliving their experiences on stage should not exacerbate the women's painful relationship to the events or trigger further personal trauma. The Combination of looking for confessional tales and seeking performers with the strength to tell them in performance led to including non- professional actors in the cast. Jawale and Sapna Bhavnani initially had no theatre training. Through acting workshops, voice lessons, and the company's creative process and rehearsals, they became flawless ensemble members acting alongside Bollywood veterans.

Sensitive staging choices also serve to make these novice actors comfortable on stage. In the current production, Jawale tells her story in her mother-tongue, Hindi, while Ankur Vikal translates it into English, allowing her to narrate the disturbing incidents she endured in the language that makes her most relaxed and expressive in performance. The collaboration between trained and untrained actors gives strength to the show overall as the trained performers support the work of untrained actors. Seeing film celebrities, who can seem larger than life on the big screen, sharing similar experiences to lesser known individuals, underscores the ubiquity of gendered violence.

While Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* also employs confessions, she and other professional actors embody the women she interviewed and recount the interviewee's experiences. Likewise, in Maya Rao's *Walk*, also drawn from interviews, actress/author Rao uses her own voice to present a creative statement drawn from the lives of her subjects. In *Nirbhaya*, by contrast, the victims themselves perform their confessional tales, sometimes in trembling voices, allowing the audience a more direct confrontation with the events. Reviewer Laura Barnett notes, 'This is not an easy show to watch – and neither should it be' (Barnett, 2013). *Nirbhaya* enables the women in the show to express their experiences even though Nirbhaya herself can no longer tell her own. Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, writes that 'In 'Nirbhaya,' it would seem, they [the actresses] are restoring themselves — and the woman of the play's title — into visibility' (Brantley, 2015). In erasing the distance between performer and character, the show makes its subject more present and difficult to dismiss. Maggie Inchley, in "Theatre as Advocacy: Asking for It and the Audibility of Women in *Nirbhaya: the Fearless One*," reminds us that, Caruth, in discussing Freud's use of the story of Tasso to illustrate the psychic revisiting of catastrophic events upon their victims, notes the power of 'the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*.' (Inchley, 2015, p. 276)

In the current version of the piece, (the show has undergone several transformations), Nirbhaya's own story ends the drama, with the most violent moments taking place early on, followed later by enactments of the protests and finally by a ritual laying to rest of the woman and her anguish. After the initial introduction of the gang rape, six other testimonials weave the theme of violence against women from one episode to the next and build in momentum as they take us through to the concluding ritual sequence.

Jagannathan's tale centers on a trusted family friend, a person she called 'uncle', who becomes a poisonous presence in her life after her family moves to Islamabad. Farber leads Jagannathan's story into Kabir's, set in her conservative Muslim neighborhood in Lucknow. Kabir recounts a childhood, seemingly protected under a hijab, and yet not shielded from her domineering father's wrath. Married to an abusive husband, marriage and motherhood turn out to be far from the ideal escape she expected. Circumstances finally force her to make a difficult choice about her own and her children's future. She leaves her marriage and her oppressive in-laws behind and, wrenchingly, also her young son, whom they claim as their own. Taking her daughter with her to ensure the young girl's safety, she sets out to make a new life for the two of them.

Jawale's story is probably the most poignant. In spite of the very real scars on her face, the heart-breaking narrations that Ankur Vikal, playing her son, helps her present through his translation, still surprises and shocks. In clear Hindi, she chronicles the journey of dowry torture meted out to her, from early suggestions about further dowry payments at her in-laws' house to the physical abuse, lies, pain and torture inflicted on her later as their demands increase. Her scarred face, a palpable reminder of the culmination of her struggles, when her husband attempted to burn her, is directly in front of the audience throughout. She closes her testimonial by expressing her yearning one day to see the son, now grown, that her husband's family took from her when they threw her out of their lives, disappearing into obscurity while she recovered from her burns in the hospital. The very real facts of her physical appearance and her endless yearning stretch beyond the confines of the play's narrative.

For Bose, even powerful Hindu Goddesses have no power to alleviate the outwardly invisible, but equally present emotional scars she still carries from the abuse she suffered in childhood. Her story recounts how many boys and men serving as domestic help repeatedly assaulted her in her own home. Only her younger brother knew of her secret trauma, having witnessed his elder sister's victimisation. He is her only comrade and supporter at home, until he moves to boarding school. When he returns, he is emotionally

evasive, the result of his own sexual victimisation at the hands of teachers or fellow pupils, the show never specifies. While earlier Bose could talk to him about her own struggles, after his return, they are no longer able to communicate.

Pamela Sinha's experience of rape by a stranger who infiltrated her apartment in Canada is the final episode in the play, showing that rape and abuse happen everywhere, in developed Western nations as well as in poor, developing ones. These crimes are a global phenomenon demanding global attention. Sinha was tied up and tortured by a psychopathic stranger who cut and raped her repeatedly with no intervention from her neighbors, even though intense and unnatural sounds from the crowbar he used continued to escape from her apartment for several hours.¹⁰ In working on the show, Sinha was more practiced in telling her story than others in the cast, having been through therapy and having previously created and performed a one-woman show dealing with the horrific events that derailed her life. Her story forcefully brings home the questions reiterated in each of the episodes: How can people not only commit such brutal acts, but how can others — family, friends, co-workers, teachers, neighbors — turn a blind eye to them so easily, inadvertently allowing them to go unpunished so that such threats persist?

Initially, the play was carved out as a women's play, on women's issues, performed only by women. However, this changed when established actor Ankur Vikal expressed his interest in joining the team because of his personal devotion to the project. Farber and the workshop unit decided to include him before they knew exactly what his role would be within the process. In the end, Vikal, an established and passionate actor, with international stage and film credits, provides a much needed masculine presence in the show. His research into the issues from a male point of view and his performance of a variety of men in Indian society, ranging from supportive family members to aggressive rapists, offers an essential dimension to the storytelling. He plays both Kabir's authoritarian father and her weak yet willful husband. He is Jawale's innocent and loving son and the ferocious aggressor in Sinha's life. Vikal is alternately assailant and confidant, sometimes even victim. Having the same actor perform these many male positions offers male spectators a diversity of paths into the topic and different reflections of male experience within a play focusing on women's victimisation.

Through his interactions with the actresses onstage, Vikal also helps reveal the positive sides of the female figures: innocent young girl, hardworking, yet fun loving, student, obedient daughter, faithful wife, endearing mother, loving sister, passionate young actress. These somewhat idealised images counteract the criticisms often leveled against women in

India who have been the victims of sexual assault, labeled later as defiled, dirty, or lustful. At several junctures, his presence on stage demystifies the idea that sexual violence is always male against female, especially in Bose's story, with its suggestion that her brother was also raped at boarding school. Sexual violence against men and boys, an equally taboo subject in India and elsewhere, is barely touched on in this show. Through Vikal's presence, *Nirbhaya* cries out for a partner production, addressing the issue of sexual violence from this allied perspective. Moreover, Vikal's participation and his desire to be involved in the production remind spectators that the struggle to end this social malady depends on men and women working together. His presence, sometimes as a supportive friend or understanding brother, can help the audience see that women may have male comrades who support them when others turn a deaf ear and offers models of how men might act when confronted with these situations. He himself points out the biggest problem facing Indian society right now ' . . . we are constantly talking about how we are a developing nation and an evolving economy. I don't think we are going to manage to figure things till we address the issues that are so integral to our culture right now' (Vikal, cited by Werman, 2015). His presence echoes the powerful actions of all the men who were part of the protests across India, alongside women.

Ritual/Poetic and Theatrical Structure

Farber and the creative team paint a rich theatrical canvas, by interweaving various narrative threads. Yet the show never becomes unwieldy or clumsy. Audience members quickly grasp that they have landed in people's private lives, where things that never get mentioned in public, but occur regularly behind closed doors, are acted out. The team had to judge how graphically or metaphorically to depict these disturbing events. They made successful choices not only in how *to tell*, but also how *to stage* the testimonial stories so they are emotionally effective and theatrically compelling.

The production uses a minimum of design features on a mostly bare stage, and recasts the few props and other scenic elements in various roles so that visual motifs from props, lighting, costume, and music repeat and build continuity between the episodes. As the play starts, two rows of seats on stage, a used and beaten bucket, and a red and white striped *gamcha* (washcloth) place the action in the interior of an Indian bus. The bus is an iconic image for India in this play, not only as the location of *Nirbhaya*'s attack, but as a symbol of the hustle and bustle of India's growing cities, attracting the thousands of migrant workers and others who pack into overcrowded vehicles on their daily commutes. The

cast, as Ben Brantley put it, ‘a mere half-dozen performers evoke the explosive contingency of life in an overpopulated city’ (Brantley, 2015).

Indian buses are also famous spots for so-called ‘eve teasing’. Women (and sometimes men as well), are relentlessly subject to unwanted groping by strangers in the cramped, crowded spaces. Straphangers have trouble resisting or protesting these small, daily harassments but these minor actions help establish a cultural climate where uncontested violations escalate into larger criminal deeds. When the onstage bus empties out, it becomes the site of Nirbhaya’s gang rape as the play begins to tell her unique tale. However, the cast reassembles the same scenic elements that construct the space of the bus —chairs and poles —to stage the other stories, allowing the presence of Nirbhaya and her fate to echo physically throughout. The *gamcha*, as another example, appears over and over again—sometimes evoking the lower class status of the rapists, at others swaddling for a young baby.

Costumes also allow for easy transition from one episode to the next and visually connect the different stories. The performers wear a basic black outfit of pants, with a shirt or tunic, or a draped sari-like outfit that allow them to transform easily from one character to another. The use of the *bindion* some female actors is reminiscent of women in India but also of the social media profile pictures of black bindis in use after Nirbhaya’s incident indicating collective shame at her gang rape.

Since Farber constructed the play from the women’s narrations of their own experiences, drawing sometimes from long buried memories, the presence or description of sensual elements, sounds and fragrances, helps to revive the subtle nuances of distant moments. The play gets some of its ritual and poetic style from these evocations of fragmentary memories. In an interview with Amanda Stuart Fisher, Farber describes her process on earlier productions, stating

Memory is seldom effortlessly accessible, linear, comprehensive or even necessarily compelling when told. In my experience, an individual’s story will first emerge in a very two-dimensional narrative, driven by dates and dry accounts of watershed moments.

My first step is to let the subject expel the narrative in this way in order to map out the exploration ahead -- like the markings an archaeologist makes in the dust before beginning the dig. I then proceed by asking specific questions: ‘A Christmas Day from childhood -- what was the color of your dress? What did your shoes look like?’ The real story will inevitably emerge in the delicate human details (Farber, 2008, p. 19).

In her monologue, Jagannathan recalls the fragrant scent of *raatki rani* - (white tube roses) when she stepped into her uncle's home as an innocent child. Bose remembers the chants of her God-fearing grandmother beckoning all powerful Goddesses Durga and Kali in her young years. Kabir's memory of the love song *chalte chalte koi mil gaya tha*,¹¹ beautifully rendered by Japjit Kaur, evokes a fondness for a lyrical past. As Nirbhaya is no longer alive to share her own memories, the play revives spectators' recollections of her assault and death and the energy that surrounded that moment by including snippets of the media reports that were ever present at the time. Deeper emotions, bonds of love, Nirbhaya's hopes and dreams, come alive again as Nirbhaya, played by Kaur, strolls on stage throughout the play, clad in pure white, humming soft tones of Urdu *shayari* and bygone Bollywood tunes, reminiscent of a better world. In her modest white long-sleeved salwar kameez, she stands in contrast to the others dressed in severe black. The women's performances bring back the sights, smells, and sounds from the vulnerable moments of their lives which remain alive in their memories even as they have felt the need to whitewash the past. Accessing the past within a framework of memory helps distance the actors from their brutal experiences. Yet the evocative references to particular flowers or tunes allow the audience, looking at the events from their own remove, to connect to the stories on a deeper emotional level.

The theme of loss recurs throughout. While the physical loss of Nirbhaya in her death is well known, the play highlights a further loss—the loss of her dreams, those of a living, breathing individual full of life. The other stories also depict loss: Jagannathan loses her innocence as a child when raped by her uncle. Kabir loses the faith she held in marriage and motherhood. Jawale not only loses her very physical identity in her disfigurement from dowry burning but also her ties to her young son. Bose and Sinha both lose not only their honor but the personal connections they shared with their younger brothers. Their brothers were both unable to protect them and then struggled just as much as the victims themselves in trying to cope with the reality of their situation.

The physical and visual motif of raising one's hand also unites the disparate women and their stories. At the beginning of the play, in an image of Delhi, we see all the actors raising their hands in protest. This action become more forcefully symbolic as each time a performer starts to narrate her story, standing amongst the actors clustered in a group, she raises her hand and then steps out of the crowd to begin. The gesture signifies each woman taking a stand, electing herself as representative and witness to the acts of sexual abuse that have scarred the nation. At the end of the play, acting as the silent masses from earlier, the

cast raise their hands in unison, once again in respect for Nirbhaya and her bravery, and express the collective realisation that it is time to break the barriers created by resignation and indifference. One member of the cast says ‘The whole world now knows what I could not speak of before.’

Farber, as a director, frequently uses the natural elements of earth and water in her directing to connect her theatrical imagery to primal sensibilities. In this play, with its Indian setting, these natural elements, judiciously woven into ritual or ritual-like stage actions, have a strong resonance. During the workshops, the Indian performers enacted rituals like *Karva Chauth* (a fast observed by some Hindu women on the fourth day after full moon in the month of Kartik, for the long lives for their husbands) and *Shraddh*(death) ceremonies, and Farber interspersed them throughout the play. For example, at the end of the play, when Nirbhaya is back on stage, her white salwar and kameez having been stripped off by the rapists, she lies marred in dirt as a fragile, bare and helpless woman. The other performers clean the dirt from her, the earth representing her defilement. The silent witnesses in India who had no power to prevent her suffering make a collective effort to clean her as a ritual act. In the play, as in the reality of India at large, Nirbhaya is no longer a defiled victim but instead, like a deity, she is cared for, praised, and honored. Onstage, as in life, amidst the intense glare of the media, the attention of doctors, and the public outcry on the streets, she slowly breathes her last. The performers gently cleanse and prepare her for her *Shraddh*, final rites. They carry her to her cremation in a procession and the staging evokes crowds uniting to lay her to rest and pay their final respects. The slow cleansing and mummification is read as an attempt to commemorate her forever. In a beautiful allegorical image, sand, another form of earth, trickles from a clay pot, first hanging over and then carried around the stage. The trickling of the grains signifies her passing from one life to another, one realm to another, not only from the here to the hereafter but metaphorically from victim to victor.

Although not from India, Farber captures the centrality of rituals in Indian life in her staging. In using Hindu ritual imagery Farber makes a calculated choice. Incheley in her article about *Nirbhaya* writes ‘Though overtly feminist, Nirbhaya’s testimonies are framed by traditional Christian and Hindu religious tropes that have not historically wholly suggested the liberation and equality of women in public spaces and spheres’ (Inchley, 2015, 284). *Nirbhaya*, by contrast, connects ritual actions with honoring women’s cultural empowerment. In seeking liberation from oppressive social views and circumstances, many Indian women search for a path that allows them to embrace cultural heritage and religious perspectives or practices while still transforming constraining circumstances.

Reaching Audiences

The configuration of the theatrical space, performance venues, talk-backs after the show and partnerships with allied organisations all play a part in shaping the audience's engagement with the production. Thoughtful consideration of how to place the audience in relation to the action, given the sensitive nature of the material, is essential to Farber's direction. Because she is protective of the audience's sensibilities while encouraging people to empathise with the characters, she insists on placing the show on a thrust stage, where the audience embraces the action from three sides. Gathering around the drama, as in a public assembly, imparts a feeling of community among spectators and performers. The use of a thrust space enables the testimonial presenters to get fairly close to the spectators, creating a further feeling of intimacy and immersion in the story. Removing the audience's feeling of separation from the action casts them as witnesses and participants in the narrative. Only Kaur, playing Nirbhaya, never approaches the audience, in a theatrical attempt to eulogise her image and as a reminder that her experience cannot be changed or erased.

Farber also insists on a raked seating area, which puts spectators in the position of looking down on the acts of violence. Although physically in a superior position, they are unable to help those tortured. Even as the events may make spectators cringe, their perspective implicates them in the action and imparts a sense of guilt and responsibility.

In spite of its apparently simple scenic design, the play has significant production demands. Along with the specified audience set-up, use of elaborate lighting, fog, and natural elements like dirt, sand, and water require theatres with adequate infrastructures capable of handling these needs. It is therefore not surprising that the play has been performed only in big cities in India and elsewhere (Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi, Edinburgh, New York), where well-equipped theatres are available to host it.

While it was not necessarily the original intention or the ultimate aim of the production, the show's primary audiences have, therefore, been Indian middle class and foreign Western spectators.¹² The fact that the play is performed predominantly in English, also addresses it to this constituency. Maggie Inchley warns of the 'ethical objections' that can arise 'by presenting the issue of violence against women as universal, grouping its witness within a totalising 'we', and skating over the local and specific contexts in which incidents take place' (Inchley, 2015, 273).

While one might be critical of offering this production primarily to this privileged demographic, in the end it strengthens one of the show's main messages: Even city-bred, educated women, who are otherwise empowered, are nonetheless, unable to ward off predators. Sexual violence is unmistakably a daily reality for Indian women. It ranges from 'accidental' grabbing of female bottoms to deliberate caressing of breasts in very public forums – a bus or a temple, for instance. Female bodies, in Indian patriarchal set ups are 'public properties' to be fondled with at the hands of men. Silence on the subject by men and women of relatively well-to-do means contributes to a culture that remains officially blind to sexual crimes, and in so doing, silently condones them.

Reaching young people in India is another goal of the play. A tie in with media conglomerate *The Times of India* solidified the power of the play to reach urban youth in cities like New Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. The production team aims to continue reaching such groups across India, the US, and the UK in future performances. Ticket prices at Rupees 300 keep it affordable for young Indian college attendees.

This strategy is directed towards the bulk of those who joined the mass protests. Moreover, as India currently has the world's largest youth population (*The Hindu*, 2014), it is essential to bring this conversation to young people to effect change for the future. Fortunately, young Indians already have a markedly different point of view from the older generations, who routinely avoided this dialogue. When performed in diaspora communities, young people of Indian heritage often bring their parents to see the show, exposing them to an issue and discussion that was invisible or avoided in their own communities. Interactive discussions between the cast and the audience after the show are a staple feature of the production. In Indian locations open mike sessions took place at which spectators offered their own testaments, some voicing their own experiences of abuse, bringing the play full circle. Maggie Inchley cautions that problems arise with universalising experiences of violence or trauma. She wonders if Nirbhaya's testimony 'so far displaced from the original context in which the events it referred to occurred -- was made audible by the same forces of global power and market economics that might exploit and exacerbate the suffering of women whose voices remain unheard' (Inchley, 2015, 279). Her concerns are valid, but they don't fully discount the useful cross-cultural dialogues that can occur in these circumstances. In May 2015, Hunter College students participated in a post-show panel with the cast in New York where the discussion reinforced the reality that such incidents don't just occur in India but everywhere. While foreign audiences may be unfamiliar with events in India, parallels appear in news headlines across the globe. For example, in US

news, accounts of the politically driven yet sexually aggressive terrorist group ISIS, mounting accusations of rape against formidable celebrity performer Bill Cosby, and the growing issue of so-called 'date rape' on US college campuses is visible as a testament to the crime. In all its performances the show reminds spectators not to be silent but to speak out to help stop future episodes of gender violence.

With every instance of audience engagement through student nights and invited youth audiences, the creative team discovers something new and in response, the play continues to change and evolve. Over the two years of performances, episodes have been added and deleted, tweaked or sharpened to make the storytelling even stronger. At the talk-back we attended in April 2015 in New York, Jagannathan mentioned that it was only since they'd been performing in New York that she and another cast member had found the courage to use the word 'rape' in performance to refer to their own experiences (Jagannathan, 2015).

A future possibility for *Nirbhaya* is to make it available as a film. This would help bring the play to a much larger audience, beyond the confines of theatre spaces in metropolitan cities. As Vikal in his interview with Marco Werman points out I think most of the cultures that need to see the play are the cultures that are not going to get to watch it. So we will probably go to a lot of developed nations. But we will not go to the Middle East or we won't go to Iran. Vikal, cited by Werman, 2015).

So the need and potential to reach far wider audiences remains with the production even now.

Conclusion

Since Indian society claims to value and respect women, it is difficult to come to terms with the negative predatory practices that exist in real life. Just as incidents of rape and torture of women have been regularly hushed and side-lined in the public eye, they are also absent from traditional Indian theatre. It avoids dark and bloody episodes since, according to classical aesthetics; they can't serve the purpose of direct enlightenment of the audience and may act as a negative influence.

Yet modern Indian Theatre, whether it is through earlier works by Theatre Union, Janam or recent productions by Asmita Theatre group, where they question and educate audiences on streets, provides other routes for staging the victim's story. The bloody gang rape in 2012 that became India's shame also elicited many performative responses from creative

individuals who felt the urge to speak up. *Nirbhaya* joins millions of Indians by offering its own model. Although the young woman herself could not be revived from her injuries, she lives on in this stage depiction, which continues to portray her and the unsafe atmosphere that led to her demise. *Nirbhaya*, shares her story, her strength, her suffering, her hopes and dreams over and over again.

Chilling first person testimonials reinforce the beautifully crafted mythic tale about her endurance and the re-enactment of the unified protests on the streets in her memory, all reminding the audience that such brutality hasn't ended. *Nirbhaya*'s experience continues to be that which many women face across the world. In spite of its poetry and elegance, *Nirbhaya*, the play, serves as agitprop theatre. It is inspiring to see celebrity performers like Poorna Jagannathan, Japjit Kaur, Rukhsar Kabir, Ankur Vikal and Priyanka Bose, with Bollywood and international credits under their belt, publicly talking about their traumatic pasts and in doing so, beseeching audiences to open up, ask questions and take a stand. They help lift the shame of public ownership of these experiences both from themselves and others through a dramaturgical style that is poetic, ritualistic, and metaphorical. Yet this dramatic rendering, with episodic narration from real victims, leaves a lingering impression that outlasts street theatre's momentary adrenaline driven response.

Nirbhaya helps break down barriers of silence and resignation. With its strong serving of cathartic storytelling, it leaves most audience members reeling with questions, thoughts, and responses and an immense urge to purge any of their own deeply buried experiences of sexual violence from long past. The international audience and Indian diaspora in New York, Dublin, or the UK who see the play can be moved and spurred into action, even if action simply means telling friends and family something they have long kept hidden.

Nirbhaya's suffering brought courage to hundreds of women across India to stand up and speak about their own experiences. Farber's rendering brings *Nirbhaya*'s story to many across the world and shows educated women in India that their silence empowers abusers. One unreported crime leads to another, one victim leads to another. *Nirbhaya* continues to engage people with its appeal to stand up and speak out, even now that the initial uproar and Government focus on the issue has died down. It continues to empower with the power of the collective and by recognising the on-going urgency of the problem so that the difficult process of confronting the truth and dealing with its effects on individuals and society at large can ensue.

NOTES

¹ Real names of rape victims cannot be publicly revealed in India (<http://www.legalindia.com/rape-laws-in-india/>, 2011). In keeping with this policy, we will use the name “Nirbhaya” in the paper to refer to the victim.

² In March 2013 one of the rapists appeared to have taken his life in prison. The five others were all convicted and sentenced by the Delhi High Court. As we write this article, the Supreme Court has yet to hand down a final verdict on the appeals against their death sentences.

³ The documentary was banned on Indian television when it was broadcast around the world on March 9, 2015. The filmmakers interviewed the defense lawyers and one of the rapists, who seemed on camera to provide justification for the assailants’ acts. These justifications had the potential to incite the public further and influence the judicial process.

⁴ Eve Ensler’s One Billion Rising campaign, launched on valentine’s Day 2012, is another attempt on her part at a global action to end violence against women. In 2013, 2014, and 2015, One Billion Rising partnered with victims of abuse as well as men and women across the globe in defiance of such abuse, to fight for justice and rise in revolution. This movement aims to inform the world that one in three women is abused in her lifetime leading to a dizzying figure of one million victims globally.

⁵ Many of their plays were devised with inexperienced actors and used to start conversations with female audiences from slums and villages. Another one of Stree Sangharsh’s plays, *Dafa 180*, dealt with prison rapes among female inmates and female field workers. As the play depicted, these women were rarely allowed a fair trial (van Erven 1992, p.119).

⁶ As Dia D Costa shows, *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai (This too Is Violence)* is ‘a poem captures the essence of this method as it decries the violence against women typically celebrated in Hindu mythology. The icon of Sita and her trial by fire, the reviled demon Surpanakha and the cutting of her nose, the turning of Ahalya into stone—each image and character valorised as emblems of strength, danger, and purity in myth, is revealed for the act of violence it really is. This play introduces women as objects in public and private space regardless of their age, caste, or occupation. The play suggests that physical violence against a woman becomes a logical outcome when she is routinely treated as an object (and hence less than human) in images and daily life’(Da Costa, 2013, p. 167). Speaking of

Janam, Da Costa says, 'In their plays, the challenges to women's empowerment are social conditions where women are barely safe from violence, hunger, and a consumerist society that increasingly legitimises dowry. Janam offers powerful representations of the conditions under which traditions like dowry are invented and proliferated' (Da Costa, 2013, p. 170).

⁷ Currently the production has multiple producers taking it to different venues across the globe.

⁸ Our insights into the conceptualisation and creation of *Nirbhaya* come primarily from three sources 1) Interview with Poorna Jagannathan on 15 July 2015 conducted via Skype by Deepshikha Chatterjee and Claudia Orenstein 2) The performance of *Nirbhaya* at Culture Project, New York on May 9, 2015 and 3) The post-show discussion with the cast and the audience after the May 9, 2015 performance.

⁹ Jawale was also involved in Eve Ensler's One Billion Rising event.

¹⁰ Some details of this event were shared by Sinha in the post-show discussion on May 9, 2015 with the Hunter College audience.

¹¹ Lata Mangeshkar sang this song written by Kaifi Azmi and composed by Gulam Muhammad in the film *Pakeezah* (1972) directed by Kamal Amrohi.

¹² The show ran its first previews in London in early 2013 and premiered in August 2013 at Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Even though it was a risk initially to take a play based on incidents in India, it found instant recognition. In Edinburgh it won the Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award for raising awareness of human rights. It has been touring ever since. In 2014 it toured to Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore in India following which it ran in Dublin, South Africa. In 2015 it has completed several shows in many cities in UK including the South Bank in London, the Pavilion in Dublin and the Culture Project in New York. They make an effort to reach out to venues that can support their message such as the Culture Project in New York. Current performances are running in Canada with future plans of possible performances on the west coast in the US, more cities in India, Switzerland and Australia among others. The play makes a concrete effort to reach South Asian audiences who typically do not participate in mainstream theatre but can serve as the primary catalyst for change. There is a possibility ahead of creating a documentary out of the play, but plans for that still have to be solidified.

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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 portrtayed 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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FREEDOM IN PERFORMANCE: ACTRESSES AND CREATIVE AGENCY IN THE *KUTIYATTAM* THEATRE COMPLEX

LEAH LOWTHORP.

Abstract: Widely known among Indian theatre forms for its historical inclusion of female performers, the Kutiyattam theatre complex of Kerala encompasses three related performance forms – Kutiyattam, the enactment of Sanskrit drama with multiple actors and actresses; Chakyar Koothu, men’s solo verbal performance; and Nangiar Koothu, women’s solo acting performance. While women were nearly erased from the Kutiyattam stage through a variety of techniques over time, the postcolonial period has seen a dramatic revival of both Nangiar Koothu and women’s roles onstage in Kutiyattam, reflecting a wider democratisation of the art in terms of both performers’ bodies and performance spaces. This article considers the contemporary performance by professional Kutiyattam actresses of both Nangiar Koothu and Kutiyattam. While the two forms belong to a single overarching performance complex, they are remarkably different in terms of women’s performance. Drawing from nearly two years of ethnographic research among the Kutiyattam community in Kerala from 2008- 10, it highlights the perspectives of actresses themselves. In examining whether actresses prefer performing Kutiyattam or Nangiar Koothu and why, the article explores questions of gender and creative agency in women’s contemporary Kutiyattam performance.

Keywords: Kutiyattam, postcolonial period, female characters/roles, solo performance, intangible cultural heritage

Widely known among Indian theatre forms for its inclusion of women as performers since its origins in the eleventh or twelfth century, the *Kutiyattam* Sanskrit theatre complex of Kerala encompasses three related yet distinct performance forms – Kutiyattam, the enactment of Sanskrit drama with multiple actors and actresses; *Chakyar Koothu*, men’s solo verbal performance; and *Nangiar Koothu*, women’s solo acting performance. While

women were nearly erased from the Kutiyattam stage through a variety of techniques over time, the postcolonial period has seen a dramatic revival of both Nangiar Koothu and women's roles onstage in Kutiyattam, reflecting a wider democratisation of the art in terms of both performers' bodies and performance spaces. Against the background of these changes over time, this article considers the contemporary performance by professional Kutiyattam actresses of both Nangiar Koothu and Kutiyattam, two forms that, while belonging to a single overarching performance complex, are remarkably different in terms of women's performance. Drawing from nearly two years of ethnographic research among the Kutiyattam performance community in Kerala from 2008-10, it highlights the perspectives of actresses themselves. In examining whether actresses prefer performing Kutiyattam or Nangiar Koothu and *why*, it explores questions of gender and creative agency in contemporary Kutiyattam performance.

Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu in historical Perspective

Literally meaning 'combined performance' (*kuti + attam*), Kutiyattam is a theatre of the imagination, one where actors and actresses have the power to spend hours improvising upon a single line of text, to embody heroes, heroines, demons and goddesses, and to move backwards and forwards through time, millennia even, in a single sitting. Composed by classical Sanskrit playwrights such as Bhasa, Saktibhadra and Harsha, Kutiyattam presents plays dating from approximately the second to tenth centuries C.E. which generally narrate the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics, although a few address Buddhist themes.¹ Conveying its narrative through mudra hand gestures, highly emotive facial expressions, stylised movements, and rich percussive accompaniment, Kutiyattam is distinguished by the fact that the art never performs a play in its entirety, but rather a single act of a play over multiple days of performance, generally between five and twelve days. These extended performances consist of three parts, beginning with the *purappad*, or the solo entry of a character, followed by several days of each character's solo *nirvahanam* flashback sequence that constitute the bulk of performance, and ending with one to three days of *kutiyattam* proper combined performance with multiple actors/actresses onstage (see Diagram 1).² Most plays require the entry and flashback sequences of several characters before the dramatic kutiyattam proper conclusion can take place, although in temple practice this is sometimes reduced. In order to avoid confusion, from this point forward I will use the terms Kutiyattam complex, Kutiyattam (the performance form), and kutiyattam proper (combined performance) to denote the three levels of performance outlined in Diagram 1 below. As Kutiyattam performs individual acts as self-contained performances, the purpose of the nirvahanam flashback sequence is to bring the audience

up to speed with the particular act being performed by recounting everything that has happened up until the point where the act at hand begins. While this unabridged model is still performed on hereditary temple stages, Kutiyattam performance on contemporary public stages is usually restricted to an abridged single night of combined kutiyattam proper performance.

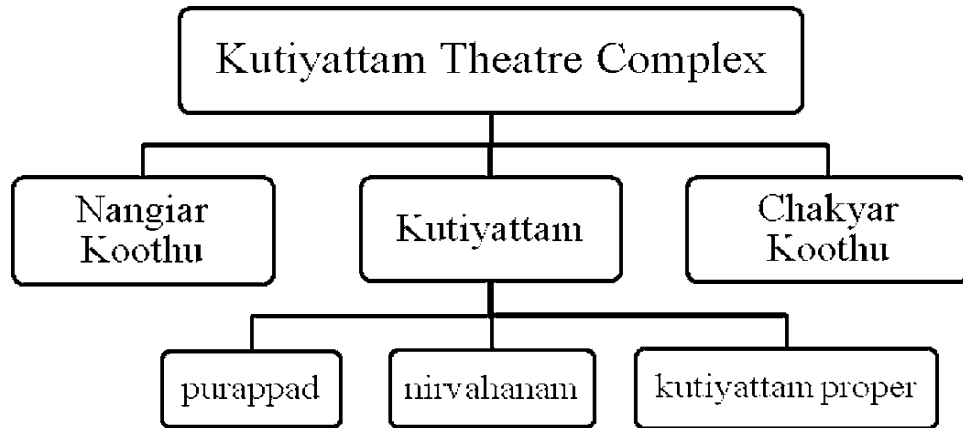


Diagram 1: The Kutiyattam theatre complex as emically categorized

While it is not unusual to hear proclamations that Kutiyattam is two thousand years old, scholars generally date the theatre's origins to Kulasekhara varman, a ninth/tenth or eleventh/twelfth century C.E. Kerala king who is attributed both by oral tradition and historical records with the reshaping of Sanskrit dramatic performance that marked the birth of Kutiyattam (Moser, 2011; Raja, 1980 [1958]).³ The composer of two plays still part of the Kutiyattam repertoire, *Subhadradhananjayam* (The Wedding of Arjuna and Subhadra) and *Tapatisamvaranam* (The Sun God's Daughter and King Samvarana), Kulasekhara is credited with introducing several innovations that deviated from wider Sanskrit dramatic production, namely: 1) The reduction of performance to only one act at a time and the associated introduction of the nirvahanam flashback; 2) Movement away from *lokadharmi*, or realistic acting, towards *natyadharmi*, or stylised acting, through theatrical elaboration that included a four-fold interpretation of each Sanskrit verse (its oral recitation; grammatical rendering through mudra hand gestures; exploration of the verse's inner meaning through mudras; and the interpretation of all possible implied meanings through mudras) as well as the introduction of the *pakarnattam* technique, whereby the solo actor or actress switches back and forth seamlessly between various roles; 3) The addition of humorous material to performance by adding material outside of the dramatic text such as the parody of the four *Purusarthat*s (The Aims of Human Life); 4) Introducing

local language used by the *vidushaka*, jester-figure and companion to the hero, to explain the Sanskrit and Prakrit passages to the audience; and 5) The confining of Sanskrit stage production within the temple and the Nambiar/Nangiar and Chakyar hereditary performance communities (Gopalakrishnan, 2011; Raja, 1964).⁴ Through meticulous historical research, Heike Moser (2011) has convincingly argued that Chakyars and Nangiars most likely started performing together in Kerala beginning in the eleventh or twelfth centuries. Prior to this, records indicate that both were performing an art of some kind, Nangiars in Kerala and Chakyars in Tamil Nadu respectively, although how or if these performances were related to Kutiyattam is not clear. While the meaning of Kutiyattam as ‘combined performance’ is usually taken to indicate the presence of multiple actors and actresses on the dramatic stage, Moser provocatively suggests that it originally connoted the ‘performing together’ of two previously independent groups of performers, the Nangiars and the Chakyars.

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, Kutiyattam remained an exclusively hereditary occupation performed by upper-caste Chakyar actors, Nambiar drummers, and Nangiar actresses, in exchange for land, food, and clothing. During this time it was performed solely in upper-caste temples of Kerala in three different contexts – as yearly performance cycles (*adiyantaram*) often corresponding with a temple’s annual festival, as privately sponsored theatrical events (*kazhchekoothu*), and as either temple or privately sponsored rituals (*wazhiwaddu*), the last generally for the benefit of childless couples desiring children. In the midst of extreme social, political, and economic upheavals in early twentieth century Kerala, hereditary Kutiyattam families found themselves both bereft of financial means to support themselves and socially stigmatised if they continued to practice a ‘backward-looking’ hereditary occupation inside the temple. As with many others of the time, members of Kutiyattam families began leaving their hereditary occupations in droves. For those who remained, pressure mounted to adapt the art form to keep up with the times, particularly to bring it outside of the confines of the temple. Painkulam Rama Chakyar became the first to take such a risk by performing outside of the temple for the first time in 1949, just after the birth of the new postcolonial nation.⁵ Thereby paving the way for the widespread democratisation of the art’s performance space, he would later play a major role in the Kutiyattam department of Kerala Kalamandalam by democratising performer’s bodies as well, training the art’s first non-hereditary actors and actresses.⁶ As I have elaborated elsewhere, contemporary Kutiyattam is thus characterised by two separate, yet overlapping spheres of performance – the temple sphere of hereditary performance and the public sphere of democratised performance (Lowthorp, 2013a; 2013b).

Nangiar Koothu, by contrast, is the female solo performance form within the Kutiyattam complex. Essentially the purappad and nirvahanam of the heroine's maid servant Kalpalathika in the second act of Kulasekhara varman's *Subhadradhananjayam*, contemporary Nangiar Koothu was at some point extracted and expanded upon as a separate solo performance with its own mandated performance time within various temples.⁷ In this extended flashback sequence, the actress narrates the entire story of Lord Krishna (*Sri Krishnacharitam*) up until the point where Krishna's good friend Arjuna (Dhananjaya) marries Krishna's sister Subhadra. Performed as various single episodes, Nangiar Koothu is composed of upwards of two hundred verses that if performed in their entirety would require up to forty-one days of performance. Nangiar Koothu has historically played a crucial role in the making of every actress – with Nangiars, Nambiars, and Chakyars unable to assume their caste name until the completion of their stage debut (*arangettam*) just before puberty, young girls have been initiated as both actresses and members of their caste through the performance of the purappad and certain verses of Nangiar Koothu for centuries.⁸ As Nangiar Koothu is an extension of one of King Kulasekhara varman's plays, it is no surprise that Kutiyattam oral tradition ties the origin of the form to him. As the legend is told, the king fell in love and married a brilliant Nangiar actress and, motivated by his love, created a solo performance form – Nangiar Koothu – for her to perform.⁹ Moser (2011) has noted, however, that this flashback sequence of *Sri Krishnacharitam* was probably introduced sometime in the sixteenth or seventeenth century as part of the Krishna bhakthi devotional movement in Kerala. Until the 1980s, the art was performed strictly on hereditary temple stages in Kerala, initially lasting twelve days but eventually cut down to seven or three (Daugherty, 1996).¹⁰ As an art of the hereditary Kutiyattam community, Nangiar Koothu was similarly affected by Kerala's intense twentieth century upheavals, and as we will see in a later section, the art has played a seminal role in the process of revitalising women's performance on the Kutiyattam stage.

Gender differentials in Performance

This section briefly considers the possibilities for women's performance within the Kutiyattam complex by examining differences between performance opportunities for actors and actresses in both Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu. It thus takes a look at gender differentiated opportunities for performance rather than performance- in-practice at any given time. Later sections will elaborate how these opportunities have been translated into practice both in historical and contemporary contexts.

As mentioned above, Kutiyattam consists of three parts – the purappad entry of a character, the same character's nirvahanam flashback, and the kutiyattam proper, with multiple characters reciting their own Sanskrit or Prakrit lines onstage.¹¹ The kutiyattam proper is the only portion in which multiple characters appear alongside each other onstage, although as Daugherty (2011) has observed, even here the focus remains upon the individual performer, with other characters often exiting the stage and only re-entering right before their next line. While in kutiyattam proper actors and actresses stay in character (or their character's thoughts) the majority of the time, in the solo nirvahanam the actor or actress is generally given more freedom as a narrator with the power to embody varying genders, deities, demons, and animals, moving through time and space at his or her discretion.¹² This fluidity of form is accomplished through the acting technique of pakarnattam, literally 'performance of transformation' in which an actor transforms into different characters of the narrative during his or her storytelling.¹³ The technique forms an important part of the imaginative elaboration that characterises the art form as a whole. The most obvious signal of pakarnattam transformation is undertaken when actors transform into female characters by tucking the end of their skirt into their belt while placing both hands on their right hip, which they then exaggeratedly cock to one side.¹⁴ There is no similar signal when actresses transform into male characters while enacting pakarnattam (Madhavan, 2010; Sullivan, 2010). While the technique is often employed within kutiyattam proper generally as a way for characters to give imaginative form to their thoughts, pakarnattam peaks in nirvahanam performance where the actor or actress has free imaginative reign as solo storyteller.

In terms of gender differentiation, however, both kutiyattam proper and nirvahanam performance are predominantly male domains. Without taking into consideration whether available female roles are actually staged, the number of male characters in Kutiyattam plays far outweighs the number of female characters, meaning that the opportunities actors have to perform in kutiyattam proper as well as nirvahanam flashback sequences vastly outnumber similar opportunities for actresses. While the actor's sole purpose on the Kutiyattam stage is to act, actresses are assigned a number of other tasks as well. When not acting onstage themselves they still appear, but are restricted to a seated position playing the cymbals and/or reciting verses for actors during their nirvahanam sequences. Additionally, while actors have a wide range of types of characters that they enact as well as different costumes and make-up styles for many of these characters, as Johan (2011) has remarked, all female characters share the same costume and make-up style, and the majority of them share the same emotional state (*bhava*), enacted as 'modest, shy, discreet (*lajja nanam*)'.¹⁵ Thus, while Kutiyattam allows ample space for actors to creatively

inhabit multiple roles onstage, it generally leaves actresses decreased opportunities for performance, both in number and variety of roles.



Image 1: Kalamandalam Sindhu enacting *lajja nanam* as Sita alongside Margi Raman as Rama in *Surpanakhankam*

(The Act of the Demoness Surpanakha), Jan. 24, 2009 (Photo by Author).

Nangiar Koothu, by comparison, offers a stark contrast. A strictly women's domain, it represents the extended nirvahanam sequence of the heroine's maid servant in Act II of *Subhadradhananjayam* as described above. Whereas a standard nirvahanam generally comprises between nine and fifty-five verses and is performed in one to five days, Nangiar Koothu is significantly longer, with 217 verses and performed in up to forty-one days.¹⁶ In terms of women's performance, Nangiar Koothu thus allows actresses a freedom similar to Kutiyattam's nirvahanam, with creative license to adopt the pakarnattam technique in their role as storytellers fluidly embodying a variety of characters – men and women, gods and goddesses, humans and non-humans. I argue that it actually grants the actresses more freedom, for whereas nirvahanam focuses on the backstory of a single character with the actor or actress retaining that character's persona throughout their performance, Nangiar Koothu is much more than the backstory of Subhadra's maid servant Kalpalathika. The actress in Nangiar Koothu assumes the persona of Kalpalathika only at the very beginning and very end of the entire performance sequence, but does not retain it throughout, instead narrating the full story of Krishna as an omniscient narrator.¹⁷

The Erasure of Actresses from the Kutiyattam Stage

While several of the dramas enacted in Kutiyattam have female characters and even mandate that some of them should perform both a purappad and nirvahanam, these roles were erased from the Kutiyattam stage over time.¹⁸ K. G. Paulose (2006) suggests that this process happened for a number of reasons, namely: 1) When Kutiyattam entered the temple it became a ritual form which required Kutiyattam troupes to travel from temple to temple, thus likely cutting actresses to decrease troupe numbers; 2) Actresses were required to spend a lot of time maintaining the family and, unlike actors, were forbidden to enter the temple for performance on certain occasions (for ex. their menses); and 3) The technique of pakarnattam, in which actors have the power to enact female roles, gave them a convenient means of erasing actresses from the stage. As the *Natyasastra*, the Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts dating from 200 B.C.E to 200 C.E., mandated the participation of women in theatre, Madhavan (2010) sees this elimination as part of a larger historical trend of erasing women from the stage throughout the Indian subcontinent (see also Yarrow, 2001).

There is definitive evidence that by the fifteenth century some women's roles had already been erased from the stage. An anonymous fifteenth century critique of Kutiyattam's deviations from the *Natyasastra*, the *Natankusa* (A Restraining Book for Actors) rails against the art's use of the technique of pakarnattam as well as its 'distortion' of the dramatic text through its added nirvahanam flashbacks.¹⁹ One of the details it specifically takes issue with is an actor in the costume of the monkey god Hanuman enacting the roles of a number of other characters, including Sita.²⁰ While Rajagopalan (1997) observes that it appears the author of the *Natankusa* had viewed only a limited number of plays, we know from this account that some women's roles in some temples had already been erased from the stage by this time.

Looking at the Kutiyattam temple stage today, Johan (2011) observes that the participation of women is often limited to a 'voice only' role sitting onstage as a 'singing Nangiar,' and details how this erasure of women onstage occurs in a number of ways. First, the roles of female characters accompanied by their husbands are replaced by actors through both the pakarnattam technique and that of *kettatuka* (hearing and acting).²¹ In the latter, the actor stops and pretends to listen to the female character recite her lines, and then proceeds to enact the female character himself through pakarnattam, thereby becoming the character and communicating her lines through mudra hand gestures without them being recited loud.

A second strategy for erasing actresses from the stage is by having a ‘singing Nangiar’ simply recite the character’s lines from the side of the stage. The stage manual (*kramadeepika*) of *Ascharyachudamani* (The Wondrous Crest-Jewel) puts it plainly, ‘Usually in *Abhisekanataka* (The Coronation Play) the female roles are not acted; the lines of the female characters are recited by the Nannyar who recites. The Nannyar who recites must recite all the lines of the female characters. This is the custom’ (Jones, ed, 1984, 98). And thirdly, female characters may be replaced onstage by a physical object such as a lighted lamp or piece of cloth, with their lines either recited by a ‘singing Nangiar’ or enacted through *kettatuka*. The *purappad* and *nirvahanam* of female characters mandated in certain Kutiyattam production manuals are simply not performed on the temple stage. One strategy for avoiding the performance of a female character’s *nirvahanam* is to add her verses to the *nirvahanam* of male characters in the same act – in this way, the full backstory of the act and its characters is enacted without an actress having to set foot onstage.²² While this erasure is generally viewed as lamentable, Johan argues that at least theatrically speaking, the exclusion of actresses on the temple stage served to enrich Kutiyattam performance by inspiring ‘dramatically powerful substitutes’ such as those listed above (2011, 268).

Despite this erasure of actresses onstage over time, however, legends of talented Nangiar actresses and their acting feats still abound

– the feat of the ‘floating Nangiar’ in *Tapatisamvaranam*, actresses outperforming Kathakali actors, manifesting acting illusions for the audience onstage, training Chakyars and Kathakali actors, falling to the floor violently in the suicidal hanging scene of *Nagananandam* (How the Nagas were Pleased), and circumambulating the temple atop an elephant as the goddess Kartyayani in *Subhadradhananjayam* (see Paniker, 2005 [1992]; Rajagopalan, 1997). The bulk of these legends most likely stem from the last few centuries, and the last two accounts, the hanging scene and the goddess atop the elephant, have both been enacted on the temple stage within living memory. It is therefore difficult to know the exact degree to which women’s roles were erased from the stage when and where, as each Chakyar family in Kerala had its own temple obligations where they would have independently decided which roles to stage depending upon the circumstances. We do know that for at least several decades, the only Kutiyattam that has been performed upon the hereditary stage has been by the Ammannur Chakyar family, who in their five Kutiyattam performances still stage the roles of Lalitha and Subhadra, but cut the roles of Sita, Tara, and vijaya, as well as Lalitha’s *nirvahanam*.²³ However, Rajagopalan notes that even here the women’s roles staged are made ‘as short as possible’ (1997, 16). Thus, as

Moser has noted of the recent history of women's hereditary performance, '[f]emale roles were minor, short, and, at least for the last two or three centuries, without lengthy elaborations; often they were sitting on a stool and gesturing with the hands only [...] (with) the principal part of the Nangiar on stage consist(ing) in reciting verses during the long *nirvahanam* flashbacks of the male characters' (2011, 179).

As for the state of Nangiar Koothu, not much is known from the historical record. We do know that it has been performed in the temple consistently as the right and obligation of various Nangiar families in Kerala through the present-day, although in ever-decreasing number and capacity. Moser (2008) reproduces a list of temples in the southern Kerala kingdom of Travancore in which Nangiar Koothu was being actively performed in 1934 for anywhere between eight and twelve days (see also Gilchrist Hatch, 1934). Whereas in 1934 there were fifteen temples actively presenting Nangiar Koothu in southern Kerala, by 2008 only four yearly performances remained in the entire state, none of them among the earlier fifteen. This decrease encompassed not only the number of performances but the number of days of each performance as well, with some decreasing from twelve days down to three (Daugherty, forthcoming). Before the revival of Nangiar Koothu began in the mid-1980s, as Daugherty (forthcoming) reports, it was in such a reduced state that D. Appukuttan Nair, one of those instrumental in later reviving the art, considered it 'irretrievable'.

Revival of Nangiar Koothu and Women's roles in Kutiyattam

The postcolonial period has seen a dramatic revival of both women's roles in Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu as part of a wider democratisation of performance space and performers' bodies in the art. Painkulam Rama Chakyar was instrumental in democratising both, taking the art outside the temple for the first time in 1949 and teaching the first non-hereditary professional artists at Kerala Kalamandalam, the state performing arts institution.²⁴ The 1965 opening of a Kutiyattam department at Kalamandalam under his direction ushered in a period of aestheticisation and intense creativity in the art, part of a search for a greater audience base that would guarantee the art's survival. This process entailed the standardisation of a strong, aestheticised body, the development of class syllabi, recreation of the female costume, revitalisation of female roles onstage, revision of the mizhavu percussion technique, and the editing of repertoire for 'modern' audiences with lower attention spans. This process of aestheticisation and editing was intended to adapt the art form to the changing times and wider, non-expert audiences outside of the

temple, and was central to the constitution of the public face of contemporary Kutiyattam (see Moser, 2008; 2011; Lowthorp, 2013a).

An integral part of this process of aestheticisation and innovation was centered around women in Kutiyattam, particularly the beautification of the female costume and the reinsertion of all female characters onstage, including the revival of the female purappad and nirvahanam. Painkulam Rama Chakyar reinserted and extended the parts of characters such as Sita, Lalitha, vijaya, and Ajjuka and her companion, taught the Lalitha purappad and nirvahanam (Act II) to his female students, and choreographed new sequences such as *Udyana Varnana* (Describing a Garden), in which two female characters perform onstage together in an aesthetically pleasing description of a beautiful garden. Due to his conscious redesigning of the Kutiyattam stage, Casassas (2012) has referred to Painkulam Rama Chakyar as the art's 'first stage director'. Before his death in 1980, he had already started to engage Nangiar Koothu, sending Kalamandalam Girija to study for a time with a hereditary actress and teaching verse number eighty of *Srikrishnacharitam* to his female students (see Daugherty, forthcoming).

The wider revival of Nangiar Koothu began with the 1984 publishing of mizhavu guru P. K. Narayanan Nambiar's *Sri Krishnacharitham Nangiarammakoothu* (Stories of Lord Krishna for Nangiar Koothu).²⁵ Gathering verses from several different palm leaf manuscripts, he assembled them into a single 217-verse performance manual to expressly facilitate the revival of Nangiar Koothu. This publication marked the first time the material had ever been publicly accessible. In 1986, Kalamandalam Girija became the first actress to perform Nangiar Koothu on a public stage (SNA, 1986-87). Around the same time, a parallel process began of Usha Nangiar learning and performing the entire *Sri Krishnacharitham* story under the direction of Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, and Margi Sathi, later together with Margi Usha, learning and performing the entire story under the direction of D. Appukuttan Nair.²⁶ Today, Nangiar Koothu is an indispensable part of women's performance in the Kutiyattam complex -- as a female solo performance it is easy to both organise and sponsor, and has been readily incorporated into dance festivals nationwide. As a result, Nangiar Koothu is now performed more often than Kutiyattam.

Beginning in the 1990s, in addition to reinstating and re- choreographing the entire sequence of Nangiar Koothu, actresses were involved in several productions that saw the revival of multiple Kutiyattam dramas for the public stage. The institution Margi in Trivandrum, in collaboration with Ammannur Madhava Chakyar of Irinjalakuda, was responsible for most of these revivals during this period, which included the revival of both

female characters and their purappad and nirvahanams onstage (see Daugherty, 2011).²⁷ Since the turn of the new millennium, innovation within Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu has increased exponentially, in particular innovation undertaken by actresses themselves.²⁸ This trend began in 1999 with the publication of Margi Sathi's production manual for the story of Rama, *Ramacharitham*, which pushed the boundaries of Nangiar Koothu by going outside its exclusive performance of the story of Krishna for the first time.²⁹ Since then, several solo compositions have been written and performed by actresses focusing on the life of women both within and outside of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics, for example by Kalamandalam Girija (Kunti, Madhavi); Kalamandalam Shylaja (Parvathi); Kalamandalam Sindhu (Bhadrakali); Usha Nangiar (Subhadra, Mandodari, Menaka, Draupadi, Sakuntala); Margi Sathi (Kannaki, Sita); and Margi Usha (Kali in *Darikavadhom*), among others.³⁰ Several actresses have additionally revived and newly choreographed new Kutiyattam performances, as well as engaged in other new forms of creativity.³¹

Image 2: Margi Sathi performing the episode *Ahalya Moksham* (Ahalya's Liberation) from her Nangiar Koothu production manual *Sri Ramacharitham*, accompanied by Kalamandalam Sajith on mizhavu, Aug. 18, 2009 (Photo by Author).



Contemporary Women's Performance and Perspectives

Possibilities for women's performance in the Kutiyattam complex are thus vastly different now from only thirty years ago. In terms of women on the contemporary stage, with nearly all female Kutiyattam roles now staged, Nangiar Koothu performed by all actresses, and new choreographies abounding, the art is perhaps closest to its full potential for women than at any previous point in its history. It is important to reiterate that this represents the situation for Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu performed on the public stage -- on the temple stage women's participation is still extremely limited. Some limitations do, however, still remain on the public stage. While in the last section we saw several female characters' purappad and nirvahanam segments revived, these are still rarely staged. Furthermore, the bulk of public Kutiyattam performances feature the combined kutiyattam proper performance where male roles still generally dominate, both in number and the opportunities afforded them for improvisation. As mentioned above, Nangiar Koothu is generally more popular today with audiences and sponsors, offering actresses greater opportunities to both display and hone their skills, as well as to make a living. Margi Sathi observed the difference between the two forms from an audience's perspective: "When there are a lot of characters onstage like in *Balivadham* -- Bali, Sugriva, Lakshmana, Rama, and Tara -- the audience doesn't know who they all are. But in Nangiar Koothu there is only one artist onstage, and if the audience concentrates on her facial expressions they'll definitely be able to understand the story" (Margi Sathi, 2009b).

This last section is devoted to bringing the voices of contemporary, professional Kutiyattam actresses to the table.³² As we have seen in previous sections, the possibilities for actresses in Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu performance both in the present-day and historically are remarkably different from each other and that of actors. In presenting actresses' answers to the question, "Do you prefer performing Kutiyattam or Nangiar Koothu and why?" it explores the notion of creative agency in women's contemporary Kutiyattam performance from their own perspective.

The theme of valuing 'freedom' in performance emerged as overwhelmingly dominant among the actresses interviewed, with the majority preferring Nangiar Koothu over Kutiyattam. As Aparna Nangiar replied, "Of course I prefer Nangiar Koothu, because it's a solo performance which offers us full freedom onstage. In Kutiyattam, women's roles aren't given that much importance, and to a certain degree they're not performed. Compared to men's roles, there aren't many women's roles that are performed. That's why

I prefer Nangiar Koothu” (Nangiar, 2010). As the only actress interviewed with hereditary temple stage experience, we can see her perspective from both public stages -- “women’s roles aren’t given that much importance”-- and temple stages -- “and to a certain degree they’re not performed” -- emerge in her answer. The rest of the actresses interviewed, as with the majority of professional Kutiyattam actresses today, do not have hereditary temple stage experience.³³ And yet several others echoed this perspective. In Margi Usha’s words, “I prefer performing Nangiar Koothu to Kutiyattam because in Kutiyattam we perform only limited roles. For example, in *Subhadradhananjayam* we are only able to play the role of Subhadra and nothing else. Because Nangiar Koothu is a solo performance, we can therefore decide how we would like to perform the emotional states of the characters (*bhavas*) and how to act out the scenes. [...] It has an immense scope for performance” (Margi Usha, 2010a). Margi Sathi also reflected, “There are very few female roles in Kutiyattam, so I think Nangiar Koothu was created to give actresses more acting opportunities” (Margi Sathi, 2009b). She made a similar reflection when she told the story of first learning Nangiar Koothu, describing, “Appukuttan Sir asked if I had studied Nangiar Koothu, and I said I hadn’t, that I didn’t know it. He told me that it’s like Kutiyattam’s *nirvahanam*, and he asked me to try it. I thought it was interesting, because in the dramas females have very small parts, but there is only one actress or actor on stage in *nirvahanam*. It therefore presents a challenge to portray all of the characters at once, constantly switching between them. That prospect interested me a lot” (Margi Sathi, 2009a). In this context, among other things, freedom means the freedom to come to the stage in the first place, as well as to be given importance and authority in performance.

In the majority of other responses, ‘freedom’ in performance already assumed actresses’ presence onstage, denoting instead the freedom of creative agency, of having an unfettered imagination and of becoming anything they wanted onstage. As Kalamandalam Shylaja asserted, “Nangiar Koothu is my favorite. Solo programs give us the greatest chance to demonstrate our full acting abilities. Kutiyattam doesn’t allow us to do that. In Kutiyattam when you play the female role, you simply recite that character’s lines and act her part, and then it’s over. you’re *only* able to act that particular role. In Nangiar Koothu you can become men, demons, gods, women, men -- you can perform anything you want. We can become anything we want in Nangiar Koothu” (Kalamandalam Shylaja, 2009). Kalamandalam Krishnendu similarly reflected, “When I consider the question from an artist’s viewpoint, I prefer Nangiar Koothu. I like to perform Kutiyattam, but Nangiar Koothu allows actors more freedom. [...] Kutiyattam gives us less freedom, we always have to stay in character.³⁴ you also have to pay attention to the convenience of the other actors, and when there are several characters onstage it is challenging [...] When you take

that into account, our freedom onstage decreases. Nangiar Koothu isn't like that, nirvahanam isn't like that. It's according to our own agency, our own wishes -- we have the whole stage to ourselves. That's why I'm more interested in Nangiar Koothu. Even though I have less interest in Kutiyattam, I still like it, it's just that I usually perform very small roles" (Kalamandalam Krishnendu, 2009).

Margi Usha characterised this creative freedom using the wider term *manodharmam* (improvisation), and further elaborated upon what this means for artists in terms of technique, "In Kutiyattam, there are certain restrictions -- timing restrictions and others that you cannot ignore. However during solo performance we can decide to do as much manodharmam as we like. [...] It is only when we are given a wide performance scope that we are able to really succeed onstage. [...] Nangiar Koothu uses pakarnattam. Even though it does not have the character Arjuna, we can still become Arjuna onstage. Nangiar Koothu therefore has the greatest potential for acting. It gives us the freedom to act to our highest ability. [...] In Kutiyattam, women's roles, especially those we perform the most -- Subhadra, Tara, and vijaya -- don't have pakarnattam" (Margi Usha, 2010b). She further described how this individual creative freedom leads to diversity in performance, with each actress free to interpret each story and how she wants to present it onstage, "Each actress performs Nangiar Koothu according to her own point of view." She proceeded to discuss the example of Puthanamoksham (the demoness Puthana's liberation).³⁵ The performance generally sees the demoness transform into a beautiful woman before setting forth to kill the children of Ambady in search of the baby Krishna. The way that Margi Usha performs the scene, and how I have seen a few others perform it as well, is by gently breastfeeding several babies to death with poisoned nipples. As Margi Usha explained, "Puthana is a demoness, but inside she still has a sense of motherhood. Even though she kills children, she still always has a sense of gentleness that is deep inside of the demoness in whatever she does. We have this conception of woman. So when we kill children onstage we don't do so violently, we don't break their bones or hit them with sticks. [...] Sathi *chechi* (Margi Sathi) has chosen not to transform into a beautiful woman before she enters Ambady. She enters the town in the form of a demoness, and has imagined that a demoness would kill children violently" (ibid).³⁶ This creative agency similarly gives actresses the freedom to constantly reinterpret their own performances, as she stressed, "If you repeated something today that you said yesterday, you would say it differently, wouldn't you?" (ibid).

Actresses further related this freedom of creative agency and improvisation to other areas of performance. Margi Sathi spoke of creative freedom in a different sense, namely that of choreography, as she played a seminal role in the choreographing of *Sri Krishnacharitham*:

“The basic text of what I perform comes from Nambiar *ashan*’s (guru) book, but Nangiar Koothu allows more freedom, so after reading other texts and selecting other parts to perform onstage I tried it. Nangiar Koothu has that kind of freedom” (Margi Sathi, 2009a). Similarly echoing Kalamandalam Krishnendu’s point that actresses in Nangiar Koothu “have the whole stage” to themselves, Kalamandalam Shylaja humorously related this to artistic recognition, laughing, “When you perform Nangiar Koothu, you perform in your own name. After a successful Kutiyattam performance, everyone’s contribution is acknowledged. Not in Nangiar Koothu! In Nangiar Koothu, if I perform well, I get all of the credit!” (Kalamandalam Shylaja, 2009). Thus we see the freedom of creative agency related to the freedom of recognition -- Nangiar Koothu gives actresses not only the opportunity to showcase their abilities in both acting and choreography, but to be recognised for them as well.

Image 3: Margi Usha performing *Narasimhavataram* (The Man-Lion Avatar) from the



episode *Dasavataram* (The Ten Avatars of Vishnu) in Margi Sathi’s *Sri Ramacharitam*, Nov. 17, 2009 (Photo by Author)

Despite framing their responses in terms of freedom in performance, some actresses were hesitant to give Nangiar Koothu a clear win over Kutiyattam. As Margi Sathi reflected, “I like both of them, but there is more freedom in Nangiar Koothu. In Kutiyattam there are several characters onstage and you play only one of them, so from start to finish you must stay in the mind of only that character. It is a drama with several characters onstage

together, so it's a different experience. In Nangiar Koothu you have more freedom, we don't have to depend upon anyone else. We have the freedom to become anything. I like both and have the same feelings about both; they're just different" (Margi Sathi, 2009b). Similarly, Kalamandalam Sindhu replied, "I like to perform Nangiar Koothu a little more, because it gives us the ability to perform several characters within a story. Kutiyattam mandates that we can only perform a single character at a time, although it still gives us plenty of acting opportunities. In Nangiar Koothu, however, it is different, we are able to embody all characters onstage. That's why I enjoy performing Nangiar Koothu a little more than Kutiyattam" (Kalamandalam Sindhu, 2010).

Kalamandalam Girija was the only actress interviewed that highlighted a feature of Kutiyattam that she preferred to Nangiar Koothu, namely the ability to recite one's own lines. Sitting with me in a performance space at Kalamandalam, she answered, "I like both. In Kutiyattam, however, we're able to have more of a sound effect, whereas in Nangiar Koothu there is only acting. For example, in Kutiyattam you can express sadness or anger in your voice while reciting your lines [...] you act while you recite, whereas in Nangiar Koothu you only show mudras while someone else recites for you. When you recite yourself while acting, it has a greater effect. That's my opinion. [...] They're different, but I like them both" (Kalamandalam Girija, 2009). She proceeded to demonstrate her point, breaking into a verse of sadness, her voice, high-pitched and trembling, dripping with emotion. In the next moment, she switched to reciting Lalita's lines after being rejected by both Rama and Lakshmana, her voice starting out at a low pitch and crescendoing into a high pitch of anger. She had indeed touched upon the single point where Kutiyattam offers actresses more expressive ability than does Nangiar Koothu.³⁷

Within the various discussions of Kutiyattam, the only actress to bring up the subject of nirvahanam was Kalamandalam Krishnendu. With the terms of the discussion being Nangiar Koothu and Kutiyattam, actresses interpreted the latter to mean kutiyattam proper, as most hadn't had the opportunity to perform a female character's nirvahanam onstage.³⁸ Kalamandalam Krishnendu, however, discussed her performance of a male character's nirvahanam. As part of the Kutiyattam M. A. program initiated at Kerala Kalamandalam in 2008, Kalamandalam Rama Chakyar assigned his students the performance of opposite gender roles several times.³⁹ For one of these assignments, Kalamandalam Krishnendu performed Ravana's nirvahanam in *Asokavanikankam* (The Act of the Garden Asoka; Act v of *Ascharyachudamani*) over two and a half hours. She described the experience, "I have mostly performed women's roles in Kutiyattam, but I have gotten the most satisfaction from playing Ravana in *Asokavanikankam* (The Act of the Garden Asoka); last year. [...]"

Everyone came to watch the performance. [...] When I take that into account, I get a lot of satisfaction performing Kutiyattam, and one of the reasons I found it so satisfying was because it was nirvahanam, which allows the actor more freedom” (Kalamandalam Krishnendu, 2009).

‘Freedom in performance’ thus emerges as that which professional actresses of the contemporary Kutiyattam complex most value -- the freedom to be onstage, the freedom of recognition, and most importantly, the freedom to improvise and innovate, to become anything they want as omniscient storytellers regaling the audience with their tales. For most of the actresses interviewed here, Nangiar Koothu gives them the freedom they so value. They generally find Kutiyattam more restrictive, giving actresses less opportunity onstage. Women have performed on the Kutiyattam stage for nearly a thousand years. Their presence has ebbed and flowed, responding to the changing times, and yet they still endure. We have seen how they were nearly erased from the dramatic stage, their creative agency in performance curtailed, yet they were and are still celebrated in legend as powerful agents with legendary dramatic skills. And we have seen how they were gradually welcomed back to the stage, consciously reinserted into performance as part of a drive to help the art change with the changing times by attracting new audiences. Kutiyattam thus became part of a larger trend within postcolonial Indian theatre and dance to support and celebrate the presence of women onstage. Painkulam Rama Chakyar’s initial vision to reinsert actresses on the Kutiyattam stage and to revive Nangiar Koothu has perhaps succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Nowadays, female students of Kutiyattam far outnumber male students, Nangiar Koothu has surpassed Kutiyattam in both popularity and frequency of performance, and much of the contemporary innovation in the Kutiyattam complex is undertaken by actresses. The art has gone back to its roots and yet moved far beyond, offering freedom in performance to all actresses who now seek it.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Margi Sathi (1965-2015), one of the most prominent Kutiyattam Actresses of her generation, and instrumental in making the art form accessible to wider audiences.

NOTES

1 While the famed playwright Bhasa has been dated by scholars between 200B.C.E – 200 C.E., the claim that Bhasa is the author of the Trivandrum plays part of the Kutiyattam corpus is still debated (Brückner, 1999/2000).

2 While this is the general sequence, there are exceptions such as that described in the production manual of Act I of *Ascharyachudamani* which calls for the following order of performance: 1) Lakshmana's purappad + nirvahanam; 2) Lalitha's purappad + nirvahanam; 3) kutiyattam of Lakshmana and Lalitha; 4) Rama's purappad + nirvahanam; 5) kutiyattam of Lakshmana and Rama (Jones, ed 1984).

3 UNESCO is one of the culprits that often proclaims an exaggerated age for the art. For an examination of the effects that the art's 2001 recognition as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage have had upon the art, see Lowthorp 2015a; 2015b. According to Moser 2008, as Kulasekhara is a dynastic family name, there are numerous kings in the historical record named Kulasekhara varman, making it impossible to pinpoint exactly which one authored *Subhadradhananjayam* and *Tapatisamvaranam*.

4 Paulose (2003) argues that the third and fourth innovations listed above occurred after Kulasekhara, and suggests that the innovations did not herald the creation of Kutiyattam as we know it, but only prepared the stage for the theatre to emerge two centuries later (Paulose, 2006). Furthermore, the last innovation is not agreed upon by all scholars, some of whom date the art's entry into the temple during the thirteenth or fourteenth century (see Narayanan, 2006). And finally, upon investigation into historical sources, Moser (2008) found that all of the innovations attributed to Kulasekhara are based solely upon oral tradition.

5 See Madhavan 2015b for a brief summary of Painkulam Rama Chakyar's contributions to Kutiyattam.

6 It was actually Mani Madhava Chakyar who taught the first non-hereditary students, although none of them became professional actors. These included his two sons in the 1950s, one of whom is the illustrious mizhavu guru

P. K. Narayanan Nambiar, and Christopher Byrski in the 1960s, the first international student in Kutiyattam. According to a narrative related to me by Diane Daugherty (2015), the Ammannur family was so upset that Mani Madhava Chakyar taught his sons to act that they stopped inviting him to their Kutiyattam performances in Thrissur's vadakkunathan temple.

7 As Paniker 2005 [1992] has noted, in some temples Nangiar Koothu was presented without the purappad.

8 According to Daugherty (1996), whereas all Nangiars were earlier expected to perform their arangettam in the art, few Nangiar girls have debu performances nowadays.

9 According to Rajagopalan, several Kerala kings throughout history have had Nangiar wives, as they were ‘noted for their beauty and histrionic talents’ (1997, 8).

10 According to Moser (2008), the first public performance of Nangiar Koothu was at Kerala Kalamandalam in 1984 by Kalamandalam Girija. For further details on the hereditary performance of Nangiar Koothu, see Daugherty 1996, Moser 2008, and Paniker 2005 [1992].

11 Casassas 2012 has aptly observed that whereas in kutiyattam proper actors and actresses recite their own lines as the verses generally represent a character’s direct speech, in both nirvahanam and Nangiar Koothu they are recited by a fellow actress-cum-musician seated stage right. It is important to note that only noble male characters recite in Sanskrit, whereas female and lesser male characters recite their lines in Prakrit, a colloquial form of Sanskrit.

12 This non-linearity is characteristic of wider Indian storytelling (Arya, 2010).

13 Madhavan 2010 writes that the term means ‘performance by transferring from one to another’ in which the actor undergoes a ‘chain of transformations’. The root of the first part of the term, *pakarooka*, is defined in the Malayalam- English dictionary as meaning ‘to change position, transfer, pour from one vessel to another’ – an apt description of the technique (Warrier, Bhattathiri and Warrier, 2001).

14 See Madhavan 2010 for an extended discussion of pakarnattam.

15 Two exceptions to the standard costume and make-up for women’s roles are the goddesses Kartyayani in *Subhadradhananjayam* and Gauri in *Naganandam*, who have special costumes and distinctive make-up, notably employing what is generally the hero’s make-up, with a green face and rice-paste *chutti* frame (see Rajagopalan, 1997).

16 The length of nirvahanam performance varies widely depending upon which act of a play it belongs to, as later acts incorporate the nirvahanam verses of all preceding acts

into their performance. See Rajagopalan 1997 for a translation of the performance manuals for several female nirvahanams.

17 I would argue that the role of the actress as an omniscient narrator in Nangiar Koothu is more akin to the actor's role in *Anguliyankam* (The Act of the Ring).

18 For example, known nirvahanams exist for the characters of Lalitha in *Ascharyachudamani*, Subhadra in *Subhadradhananjayam*, and Mandodari in *Ascharyachudamani* (this list is not exhaustive).

19 See Madhavan 2015a for a provocative argument that pakarnattam is indeed included in the *Natyasastra*.

20 This is referring to the performance of *Anguliyankam*.

21 It is worth noting that kettatuka as a technique is not only used to cut female characters; it is also used to cut minor male characters. For an extended explanation of the contemporary erasure of female and other minor characters on the Kutiyattam temple stage, see Johan 2015.

22 Diane Daugherty related these details to me in a telephone conversation in 2015, giving the example of how some two dozen slokas of the character Lalitha's nirvahanam in Act II of *Ascharyachudamani* were incorporated into the nirvahanam of the character Rama, thus avoiding its performance onstage. Specifically, the nine slokas from Lalitha's Act I nirvahanam plus additional slokas reframing the action of Act I as nirvahanam in Act II were moved from Lalitha's Act II nirvahanam to Rama's Act II nirvahanam.

23 Namely Act I of *Subhadradhananjayam*, Acts I and III of *Abhishekanatakam* (The Coronation), and Act II of *Ascharyachudamani*.

24 Kalamandalam Girija became the first non-hereditary woman to be trained as a Kutiyattam actress in 1971.

25 Nirmala Paniker (2005) [1992] describes a parallel process of revival at Ammannur gurukulam in Irinjalakuda. In the early 1980s she and her husband G. Venu conducted research on Nangiar Koothu, and in 1984 guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar began

composing an *attaparakaram* (acting manual) from two extant manuscripts which he began teaching to his students in Irinjalakuda in 1986.

26 See Moser 2008; 2011; Casassas 2012; and Paniker 2005 [1992] for more details about the revival of Nangiar Koothu.

27 The revival of all seven acts of *Ascharyachudamani* was undertaken by Margi with the funding of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, whereas the revival of Act II of *Subhadradhananjayam* and Subhadra's Act v *nirvahanam* were sponsored by Dr. Diane Daugherty with the funding of the American Institute of Indian Studies (Daugherty 2011).

28 It is worth noting that several others have been active in this regard as well -- the Ammannur gurukulam, with G. Venu choreographing several new pieces for both the Kutiyattam and Nangiar Koothu stages (see DuComb, 2007; Venu, 2002), and more recently Ammannur Rajaneesh Chakyar; Guru P. K. Narayanan Nambiar at the Mani gurukulam in Lakkidi; and Margi Madhu Chakyar. See Casassas 2012 for details concerning the innovative strategies of Kalalamandalam Girija, Margi Sathi and Usha Nangiar.

29 This sparked a debate as to whether the performance of non-Krishna stories could be considered Nangiar Koothu. Kalamandalam Sindhu is currently undertaking a project to perform *Ramacharitham* in its entirety for the first time.

30 Solo compositions without a strict focus upon women have also been choreographed.

31 For example, Kalamandalam Girija has choreographed several acts of *Venisamharam*, and Usha Nangiar has participated in the revival of the *Naganandam* hanging scene as well as Act v of *Subhadradhananjayam* in which the goddess Kartyayani appears, although without the elephant. Aparna Nangiar has more recently (2009) performed the hanging scene. Margi Usha has gone further to experiment with creating a new art form, Nangiarattam, which uses the basic performance style of Nangiar Koothu while adding text sung in Malayalam behind the performance.

32 Please see Casassas 2012 for an article on Nangiar Koothu that has done an exceptional job of foregrounding the personal visions of actresses.

33 Margi Sathi is an exception to this, as she was once invited to perform Nangiar Koothu as an adiyantaram on a hereditary stage in the Kottayam Kaviyur temple.

34 It is interesting to note that ‘we’ in this context refers to actresses, as male actors do in fact have the freedom in kutiyattam proper to perform pakarnattam.

35 For a vivid description of the performance of Puthana Moksham in Nangiar Koothu, see Daugherty forthcoming.

36 According to Arya Madhavan, a student of Margi Sathi since the mid-1990s, Margi Sathi used to perform the scene the way most actresses do today, but changed her interpretation based on research into the episode in the *Bhagavatha*.

37 It is worth noting that several new Nangiar Koothu choreographies by G. Venu, such as *Narasimhavataram* (The Man-Lion Avatar), include the innovation of the actress reciting her own lines onstage.

38 As far as I know, among the actresses I interviewed in 2008-10, only Margi Sathi and Margi Usha had performed Lalitha’s nirvahanam onstage, although both Kalamandalam Girija and Shylaja had been taught the piece by Painkulam Rama Chakyar (Daugherty, 2015). This number has since increased, and Aparna Nangiar recently performed Mandodari’s nirvahanam both at the Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam’s twenty- eighth Kutiyattam festival (January 1-12, 2015) and at the same institution’s 2014 Gurusmarana Kutiyattam festival (July 1-12, 2014), whose focus was on the research and performance of female characters in Kutiyattam.

39 The first class of students included Kalamandalam Krishnendu, Kalamandalam Athira, and Kalamandalam Sangeeth Chakyar.

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THROUGH THE WOMEN'S BODY: STAGING REBELLION IN THE PLAY *PURDAH* BY ISMAIL

MARA MATTA

Abstract: This article examines the play *Purdah* (1993) by the playwright Ismail Mahomed, a Pakistani writer and director born in Johannesburg (29 May 1959) who has been active on the theatre scene in South Africa for the last thirty years. *Purdah*¹ is a one-woman stage performance that addresses the issue of seclusion and subjugation of the Muslim Indian women of Lenasia, the neighbourhood of Johannesburg, which during the apartheid regime was constructed as a ghetto for the Indian community. I argue that the play, narrating the story of Ayesha, a young girl subjected to the customary practices of her community and Muslim family laws, is an instance of 'issue theatre' that creates a venue for discussing the seclusion of women in *purdah* not just as a curtailing of freedom and a breach of human rights, but also as a psychological form of 'colonisation of the mind' that impinges on the development of woman's psyche and impedes the act of 'creation', in the double meaning of artistic 'creativity' (*poiesis*) and 'fabrication' of subjectivity.

Keywords: Muslim Indian women, post apartheid, women's body, theatre, Muslim family law, South asian community, Intiaz Dharker, customary laws, religious laws

Introduction

*They have all been sold and bought,
The girls I knew,
Unwilling virgins who had been taught
Especially in this strangers' land, to bind
Their brightness tightly round*

*Whatever they might wear
In the purdah of the mind
(Dharker, 1997, 18)²*

This article examines the play *Purdah* (1993) by the playwright Ismail Mahomed, a Pakistani writer and director born in Johannesburg (29 May 1959) and who has been active on the theatre scene in South Africa for the last thirty years.³

Purdah narrates the story of Ayesha, a young Muslim Indian girl who is forcefully married to Ahmed, a man ten years her senior, whom she meets only once during one of the Sunday gatherings of relatives and friends arranged by her obnoxious aunt to showcase her as a prospective bride. After refusing a few potential husbands, her father decides – with the active collaboration of her horribly despotic aunt – to marry her off to Ahmed. The marriage takes place as convened, and Ayesha is made to tie the knot with an unknown man through the most conventional of the customary laws: the shedding of her blood during the first night of the wedding. Once this ‘covenant of blood’ has been ‘cut’ through her body, the marriage is considered consummated and valid under the Muslim family laws that sanctions such rites. However, despite trying her best to fit into her role of a dutiful wife and an obedient daughter-in-law, Ayesha finds herself at odds with her life as a newly wedded bride. Incapable of putting up with her mother-in-law’s abuses and her husband’s physical assaults, Ayesha firstly decides to abort her baby, then tries to kill herself, and finally – after betraying Ahmed with his best friend Ridwaan and upon hearing that her husband is going to take a second wife– murders Ahmed during sexual intercourse. Taken away by the police, she has to face trial for murdering her husband. Her lawyer is her lover Ridwaan, who has asked her to plead guilty. The play sets out from this point, when Ayesha is waiting to be taken to court.

Purdah is a one- woman stage performance that addresses the issue of seclusion and subjugation of the Muslim Indian women of Lenasia, the neighbourhood of Johannesburg which, during the apartheid regime, was constructed as a ghetto for the Indian community.⁴ Devised around a single character who, through the use of stage props, re-enacts her life-story (whilst simultaneously enacting all the other characters of the play), *Purdah* belongs to the genre of what Ismail Mahomed has called ‘issue theatre,’ a theatre that ‘deals with social topics such as racism, gender equality, and sexuality, and favours short, one-actor plays because they can be most efficiently produced and toured to a variety of venues’ (Graver, 1999, 154).

Despite the many socio-political changes that have occurred in the South Asian community of Lenasia, and notwithstanding the fact that twenty years have elapsed from the writing of *Purdah*, the play still occupies a crucial space in the theatrical scenario of post-apartheid South Africa, as it opens a space for discussing the seclusion of women in *purdah* not just as a curtailing of freedom and a breach of human rights, but also as a psychological form of ‘colonisation of the mind’ that impinges on the development of woman’s psyche and impedes the act of ‘creation’, in the double sense of artistic ‘creativity’ (*poiesis*) and ‘fabrication’ of subjectivity.⁵ Both these acts of ‘creation’ can be accomplished through words, through the semiotic- symbolic system of language. The *purdah* of the mind can be defeated through *poiesis*– real ‘creation’, an *act* that, as Plato states in the *Symposium*, serves to ‘bring something into existence that was not there before’ (Plato, 1971, 43). This may be equated to the ‘fabrication of subjectivity’, which is made into an ‘I’ only by virtue of language. Thus, it is through the symbolic field of language, via the *poietic* creations of literature, drama, and poetry, that the *purdah* of the mind, of which the secluded space of the house is a mere reflection, can be dismantled.

Entering the debate on the ‘fabrication of subjectivity’ and the issue of the ‘subject,’ Julia Kristeva (1984, 215) affirms: ‘The subject never is. The subject is only the signifying process and he appears only as a signifying practice [. . .].’⁶ Distancing herself from the materialist tradition that looks for explanations regarding women’s subordination and ‘lack of subjectivity’ in the patriarchal social institutions and material and economic conditions, Kristeva instead investigates those ‘psychic structures and patriarchal colonisation of the imaginary and the culture’ (Oliver, 2000, vii) where, through the analysis of language and what she calls the ‘socio-symbolic system’, she arrives at the conclusion that woman cannot ‘be defined’ (*‘La femme, ce n’est jamais ça’*).⁷

Kristeva’s psycholinguistic feminism capitalises on Saussure’s notion of language as a system of signification and is heavily indebted to Lacan’s theories of the ‘symbolic’. In this semiotic and symbolic field of analysis, ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are simple signifiers that do not refer to any pre-existing reality: quite the opposite, it is *through language* that the concepts of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are produced, as a reflection of the symbolic order dominated by the Law of the Father. As such, Kristeva affirms, it is only from *within* the socio-symbolic order that struggle against fixed notions can be carried out, not creating another parallel socio-symbolic system that, ultimately, would be just a reversal of the phallocratic one, weakened by those same faulty premises. She has thus put forward a program of ‘demassification of the problematic of difference’ (1981, 51-52) where she has

refused to adopt an *écriture féminine* as essentialist and ultimately not conducive to radical change.⁸

The problems highlighted by Kristeva are quite central to feminist writers and playwrights who use literature and theatre to debunk stereotypical and fixed notions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. It becomes a matter of the utmost importance for challenging the phallogocentric literary and performative constructions of a permanent and unitary subject to stir ‘a revolution of the Symbolic and a consequent re- invention of the way of thinking, speaking, and writing’ (Duchen, 1987 in Cetorelli, 2010, 24-5). Moreover, the feminist artist engaged in this struggle should be aware of the pitfalls highlighted by Kristeva, such as the tendency to further essentialise concepts like ‘woman’, ‘man’, ‘feminine’, and ‘masculine’, or, perhaps even worse, of the risk of romanticising the newly fabricated ‘woman subject’.

Ismail Mahomed, as a playwright fully committed to the dismantling of the phallogocentric symbolic system represented in phallogocentric linguistic and dramatic performances, delivers a theatre of great physicality, where performativity and narrativity are carefully constructed in order to give body to the historical and psychological conditions that support these types of androcentric systems of power, often sustained by allegedly religious discourses deemed as ‘sacrosanct’ and, thus, unquestionable. *Purdah* - as a semiotic and symbolic dramatic stage - is devised as a perfect performance of multiple subjectivities that struggle to find wholeness and *jouissance*. In this sense, the play is nothing short of a revolutionary work in a battle over meaning, over signifiers and signified, over binary constructions such as Man/ Woman or Self/Other.

At a first reading, the play presents a realist reconstruction of diachronic facts and analyses the plight of Ayesha and her dramatic journey from ‘victim’ to ‘murderer’ in a determined socio-historical realm, that of Lenasia community. The play functions at its best when it engages an audience that either shares the plight of the character or is, at least, *aware* of these abject situations, raising a debate and encouraging the search for viable solutions at a practical and legal level. Much in the way Boal’s Forum Theatre and Legislative Theatre would do,⁹ Mahomed uses the relatively ‘safe’ space of theatrical performance to tackle stories of oppression, alienation, disenfranchisement and violence in order to create dialogue and find ways out from situations that sometimes seem almost fatally determined and hence unchallengeable.

Hence, Ayesha is a character *representative* of the invisible women of Lenasia, often forced into subordination, divested of their rights by the patriarchal social institutions in place.

The actress enacts the story, but is also enacted by it, as every performance becomes a ritual process (Turner, 1979)¹⁰ where small transformations are made possible. Taking the act of performing as ‘a paradigm of liminality’ (Schechner, 1985, 123), the performer becomes an individual who acts ‘in between identities’ (ibid.), performing a role of ‘between personae’ in a liminal field ‘where they are neither themselves nor their roles’ (ibid.).

It is this symbolically charged space of the theatre stage that allows the drama to unfold and the audience to witness the events in a safe space of potentiality where challenges to the status quo, reversals of positionalities and, ultimately, revolutionary actions are made possible.

A Socio-Historical Reading of *Purdah*: Amina Begum And The Muslim Women of Lenasia¹¹

Purdah is a kind of safety.

The body finds a place to hide.

The cloth fans out against the skin Much like the earth that falls

On coffins after they put the dead men in

(Dharker, 1997, 14).

Inspired by a true event, *Purdah* was written by Ismail Mahomed in 1993 and premiered on 14 February, that same year, at the Wits University Downstairs Theatre ‘as part of student orientation at the request of the Islamic Student Association’ (Graver, 1999, 155). From there, it toured many different theatrical venues in other major cities of South Africa, like Durban (Natal Playhouse), Grahamstown (Grahamstown Festival), and so on. What I found striking when first reading *Purdah* was the fact that such thought-provoking and subversive play was allowed to be performed also in the premises of the purdah itself, ‘offered in matinee performances at private homes for groups of Muslim women’ (ibid.). This is, I posit, even more remarkable since, in recent times, the ‘Indian Muslim’ community of Lenasia seems to be undergoing a process of radicalisation (Vahed, 2000, 43-51) that has increasingly brought to the front the risk of potential clashes between the advocates of a more flexible interpretation of the Islamic jurisprudence, and the defenders of a literal reading of the *Qur’ān* as codified by the ‘*ulemā*’ (scholars with expertise on religion and law as in Arabic). Notwithstanding the risks implicit in defying the laws and the injunctions held as ‘holy’ by these ‘wise men’, many intellectuals, writers and human rights campaigners have not refrained from speaking out. Addressing the question of

women's rights and Muslim family laws in South Africa, for example, Rashida Manjoo (2006) has argued that South Africa must face the challenge of accommodating diversity in the frame of a secular democracy without giving in to the rhetoric of 'untouchability' of religious tenets and texts. Discussing the sensitive issue of marriages contracted under religious laws (until recently not recognised as valid and not legalised by the South African state), Manjoo has repeatedly advocated the recognition of Islamic marriages under the supervision of the Law Reform Commission.¹² However, whilst urging the draft of a new *Muslim Marriage Bill*, she has simultaneously called for a consultation with the Commission on Gender Equality in order to implement the Constitutional principles of equality by providing legal recognition to all religious marriages. As she has often argued, the demand for the legal recognition of marriages conducted under Islamic Law is absolutely necessary. However, such recognition should not violate the fundamental rights and values that were established at the founding of South African democracy, including the right to gender equality (Manjoo, 2006).

Manjoo is deeply aware that too many violations of women's individual rights go under the cover of 'respecting tradition', 'following religious tenets', 'preserving culture' - statements that are often put forward to justify the most abject forms of abuse inflicted on women. It was under this biased conception of Islam as a system that predicates the total submission of the woman to the 'Law of the Father' that a 13- years old Muslim girl, Amina Begum, could be sold as a child- bride by her own parents to a 56- years old Saudi man. What the defenders of such 'customary laws' sanctioned by the 'wise men' of the Muslim community perhaps did not expect was that a group of young, educated Muslims would stand up and challenge such practices not just as unconstitutional, but even as un- Islamic. As the introduction to the play explains,

The inspiration for *Purdah* came first from the community workers who counsel battered women in Lenasia, and then from the story of Amina Begum, a 13-year old Indian sold by her parents as a child- bride to a 56- years old Saudi Arabian. The feminist themes of the play are linked to Mahomed's concerns over the Indian variety of Islamic fundamentalism that has become popular in some of South Africa's Muslim communities (Graver, 1999, 154).

Requesting the play to be staged publicly and privately, both domains in which forms of radical Islam may become more and more institutionalised, *Purdah* 'has elicited condemnations and threats' (ibid.). However, as Graver highlights, even among those 'conservative or fundamentalist Muslims' (ibid.) who, in a first moment, had attacked the play as offensive to Islam, there were many that - upon having seen it on stage - found its

arguments legitimate. Such may be the power of what Schechner (2003) has called ‘*basic performance*’, a type of theatrical experience that is so emotionally charged to turn spectators into ‘partakers’ of the performed action, bringing them to ‘respond sympathetically to the “as if” of the characters living out a narrative’ (Schechner, 2003, 356). The spectators, in *basic* theatre, ‘empathize with the experience of the performers playing. This empathy with the performer, rather than with the plot, is what permits Indian theatre to “wander,” to explore detours and hidden pathways, unexpected turns in the performance’ (2003, 358).¹³

In shattering the threshold that separates the private sphere of the house from the public sphere dominated by men, the emotions are allowed to flow in and out of the stage, and theatre becomes a space of ‘remarkable experience (ibid.), where even a spectator potentially unsympathetic with Ayesha’s plight may arrive, at the end of the performance, to ‘see’ (*theatron*) and to ‘unveil’ her ‘truth’ (*aletheia*). This is perhaps the reason why the play ends with a direct invocation to the audience where Ayesha does not reject Islam, but rather calls for a more nuanced and sensitive reading of the *Qur’ān*. Ismail Mahomed could have chosen to put Ayesha in radical confrontation with the symbolic system that had produced her dramatic life, but decided instead – much in line with what intellectuals like Rashida Manjoo have been advocating – to re-signify her identity of ‘Muslim Indian Woman’ inside the semiotic frame of the *ummah*, the ‘community of believers’. She never abjures her religion nor shuns her faith in God, but declares herself ‘a sinner’, imputing her state of wretchedness to the patriarchal system and to the *misreading* of the Holy *Qur’ān* by the men of her community:

[*Pages through the Quran*] I am a sinner. I have sinned. I sinned when I aborted my baby. My relationship with Ridwaan may not be right. I am a sinner, but I believe in a God who looks upon me with eyes of mercy. My God doesn’t shun sinners. *My God knows that I am a victim of other people’s injustices*. In studying this book, I have discovered that in the eyes of our creator, women are no less equal than men. My God has given my dignity back to me and yet when I look at other women and I sense the pain in their hearts, *I pray that when their husbands read the same Quraan that I do, they would realise that our God frowns upon the way that they have brutalised their women* (Mahomed, 1993, in Graver, 1999, 164-5; Emphasis is added by me).

In addressing the spectators as a ‘sinner’ rather than as a ‘woman’, Ayesha reclaims not just a space in the community of the believers, but also an agency: she has discovered that she can break those rules, even at the cost of life, because the *aletheia* needs to be

‘unveiled’ in order to see her as a portrait of thousands of other Indian Muslim women made ‘victim[s] of other people’s injustices.’¹⁴

Staging Dissent: The Theatrical Space As a *Panopticon*

Purdah is a ‘drama of liminality’ (Balme, 1999, 77) where theatre becomes a site of powerful transformation: in such space, the character of Ayesha, the archetypical battered and oppressed woman, can access a ‘betwixt-and-between’ dimension (Turner, 1979, 465), where ‘liminal time [. . .] is a time of enchantment when anything *might*, even should, happen’ (ibid.). In this ‘subjunctive mood’ (ibid.) of liminality, her character can rebel, resist and, eventually, even reverse the course of events, using the theatrical body as a channel of energy to transform her-Self and the world around her.

One can also imagine the space of the theatrical stage as one of the small cages of Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon* where, as Foucault has pointed out, the simple fact that the caged person is exposed to complete *visibility*, traps him/her unconditionally:

By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognise immediately. [. . .] visibility is a trap (Foucault, 1995, 200).

If we pay attention to the way Ismail Mahomed has imagined the stage – in terms of pure ‘visuality’ (leaving out, for now, the props and the arrangement of the space), we realise that the spectators are, indeed, posited in a privileged space from where they enjoy complete visibility - much like the guards of a tower of a Benthamian Panopticon. The audience can gaze at Ayesha on stage ‘as if’ she were inside one of the ‘small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible’ (ibid.). She is like a ‘shadow in a cell’, as the *Scene I* described by Mahomed makes clear:

A pre- set position: In a dimly- lit stage, Ayesha is seen standing against the window and looking out. As the audience settles down and as the lighting intensifies, Ayesha turns to face and address the audience (Graver, 1995, 156; italics in the original).

Trapped as she is in the panoptic space of the stage, the actress is left with no other choice but to face the audience in a sort of *parabasis* that, despite being uttered by a single person, echoes all the pathos of a collective drama. Ayesha narrates her personal story but

simultaneously, she is recounting the destiny of many other ‘good Muslim Indian women’ of Lenasia, whose fate is allegedly inscribed on their foreheads and, as such, must be accepted without questioning.

The audience acts the simultaneous roles of *spectator*, a simple observer of the caged individual caught on stage, and of *judge*, a more active persona that is aware of the system of control enacted and, thus, observes the ‘captive subject’ on stage *as if* he is sitting in a Court and have to pass a judgment on her behaviour according to the laws established by the power- holders of the panoptic system. In this theatrical Panopticon, we take the function of the theatre more literally, as a place of *theatron* – vision – where the spectators/judges gaze at Ayesha’s life even in her most intimate moments, in a voyeuristic ‘exercise of power’ (Foucault, 1995, 206) that, by its very spatial design acts directly on individuals; it gives ‘power of mind over mind’ (ibid.).

As Jain and Amin (1995, 2) have argued, ‘Purdah is the oldest form of colonisation, of domination and of control. [. . .] It defines space, action and relationships.’ The positionality of Ayesha in such a ‘trap’ of constant visibility subjects her to the ubiquitous (and yet almost invisible) rules of the patriarchal system of control, a phallographic mode of governance that is indeed structured as a tool of tight control. If we stretch the symbolism of the Panopticon a little further, we can subscribe to Foucault’s definition of it and apply it entirely to the system of seclusion and restriction of women’s free will and free movement in many societies:

It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organisation, of disposition of centres and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons (Foucault, 1995, 205).

The list that Foucault provides can be enlarged to include also the domestic space of the house, in an interminable repetition of the binary *ghar/ bahir*, ‘domestic/ public’, as theorised by Partha Chatterjee (2010). Discussing the colonial history of India and the period of the reforms when the ‘issue of women’s education and emancipation was brought to the front of the ideological and political debate, Chatterjee argued that the reforms for Indian women, as conceived in the frame of nationalist discourses, arose from the opposition between *ghar* (home)

- the ‘private’ or domestic space, and *bahir* (outside), - the ‘public’ domain occupied by men, the ‘world’ at large. He concluded that the portrait of the ideal, respectable,

‘modern’ middle- class woman (*bhadramahila*) was invented through a narrative where the *bhadramahila* should not exhibit traits found in lower-caste or peasant women, but should also avoid behaving like a European woman, a *memsahib*. This new orthodoxy, generated by an emerging nationalist movement and devised as instrumental to it, ended up subjecting women to a new patriarchy (Chatterjee, 2010), another androcentric system where the women were still subjected to the control and the rules of men.

This androcentric system has been analysed by many scholars also in migrant and diasporic settings: Abin Cakraborty, for example, in discussing the dynamics of ‘home, religion and gender in the diasporic imaginary’ and the way gender roles are *re- constructed* in diasporic settings, has argued:

The typical ‘unhomeliness’ of a migrant often leads to a privileging of tradition which not only fashions a route to one’s roots but provides a sense of belongingness. However, for women, the refuge of tradition often comes as a dubious gift as their imposed roles as uncontaminated bearers of cultural heritage in a foreign land subjects them to a series of constraints that lead to unavoidable subjugation, humiliation and loss of self-identity (2013, 72).

Diasporic Plights: South africa’s Indian Muslim Woman’s Double *Ghetto*

What Cakraborty finds reflected in the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker, namely a will to break free from the ‘purdah of the mind’, is reflected also in the play by Ismail Mahomed, where Ayesha challenges the so- called *tradition*, this ‘dubious gift’ that often translates into a life devoid of happiness and freedom. As Pakistani scholar Farida Shaheed (1995) has highlighted, though, such constraints are present not just in diasporic settings, but in almost all Muslim-majority countries, where the public sector, business, banking, the military, and so on, are areas mostly regulated according to laws exogenous to Islam, whilst the domestic sphere is rigidly and tightly regulated by Islamic sanctions:

In sharp contrast, the official laws governing personal and family matters are almost universally premised on Muslim jurisprudence and justified by reference to Islamic injunctions. Throughout much of the world, therefore, the Muslim identity of a community appears to hinge almost exclusively on the regulation of family and personal matters. (Shaheed, 1995, 81- 82).

Whether the Muslim community constitutes a majority or a minority, or is indigenous to a certain nation- state or diasporic, seems to be irrelevant: when it comes to the codes of

behaviour and the customary laws that regulate the lives of Muslim women in highly traditional and patriarchal societies, what resonates as a constant leitmotiv is the role and the space allocated to women in the society according to particular readings of the *Sharia*, as passed on from generation to generation, and even across borders and oceans. ‘Woman as ornament, woman as prostitute’, Ayesha Jalal (2000, 69) provocatively reminds us. According to her, this perception of Muslim women, during colonial times, was strictly codified by the work of Muslim thinkers and ‘*ulemā* who ‘were [...] determined to strictly consign women to the sacred geography of the Muslim household’ (Jalal, 2000, 70). Citing the impact of the work of Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1863-1943) on the Muslim South Asian communities around the world, Jalal states:

The elaborate detail, with which Ashraf Ali Thanawi outlines the ideal Muslim woman in his classic *Bihishti Zavar*, or heavenly ornaments, is more than a male fantasy. yet it has remained an agenda for perfection, impossible for Muslim women to attain. Ornaments of their homes, not of the heavens, women in the *ashraf* conception were inhabitants of the *zenana*. On the rare occasions when they did go out of the confines of their four walls, they were expected to don the *burqa*—that portable statement of *purdah* or physical seclusion and the cultural marker of the status of whole families as well as individual men (ibid.).

Such concept of women as ‘symbols of a distinctive Islamic cultural identity’ (Jalal, 2000, 71) seems to have reached the Muslim migrants living in Johannesburg, Durban or Cape Town. By the time the racial apartheid laws were imposed on the non- White people, the diasporic Indian Muslim community had been living in South Africa for more than a century, as many Indian Muslims had arrived there in the late nineteenth century as indentured labourers. The rather squalid area of Lenasia was slowly and painstakingly transformed into a lively and quite unique neighbourhood of Johannesburg, where the Indians had reconstituted their communities, built houses, opened schools, created businesses and, in line with their spiritual and religious precepts, also erected mosques and Hindu temples. Along with the search for a comfortable lifestyle, there was the need for preserving culture, tradition and religion. Customary and religious laws had to be maintained and the burden of preserving the honour of the community, as usual, fell upon women, on which it downed an increasingly restrictive code of behaviour allegedly sanctioned by religious scriptures. Even today, this ‘turning to the core’, as scholar Goolam Vahed (2013) has recently pointed out, seems to be affecting the Indian Muslims of South Africa in an increasingly worrying trend:

Among Indian Muslims, many have begun "turning to the core:" Many more women have begun to veil their faces; there has been greater concern with observing religious regulations concerning food; the numbers of Muslims going annually to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage has increased dramatically; televisions sets have been rooted out from many Muslim homes; there is a de- Westernisation of dress; many men have taken to wearing Arab garb, short hair, shaved moustache, and long beards; many have given up insurance and medical aid, and have turned to Islamic banks; Islamic media has flourished (radios, newspapers, and a television channel); and there is a dramatic growth in Muslim and Islamic schools. Theological debate is virtually absent as "truth" has become synonymous with the ulama. To question ulama means questioning the truth (Vahed, 2013, 3).

Purdah, as a work of 'issue theatre', can be contextualised in this environment, where the very questioning of the disabling codes of behaviour imposed on women by customary social and religious practices becomes a challenge to the 'Truth' predicated by the '*ulemā*', inscribed in and through the women's body. The struggle to break free from such suffocating 'panoptic mechanism' of control, then, has to be fought first and foremost *through the body*, in order to expose all its physical brutality - and symbolically annihilating power - the ways, as Ayesha states at the end of the play, Muslim men 'have brutalised their women' (Mahomed, 1993; Graver, 1995, 165). This is perhaps why Mahomed often privileges one- actor stage performances, where the interaction of the performer's body and her voice create a very dynamic stage, a performance charged with the cathartic power of transformation that only (good) theatre can effect. *Purdah* is one of these complex performances where the stage props and the physicality of the actress re-enact an event 'through the woman's body', thus bringing it from the level of factuality and historicity to a more complex level of psychoanalytic depth, almost up to a mystical realm of possible redemption and complete revolution.

According to Jain and Amin, for Muslim women (in India), [Purdah] has come to express a whole cultural attitude and in India, in some measure, it has come to stand for the dividing line between tradition and modernity. [. . .] *Purdah* defines the limits of freedom, it demarcates the confines, it outlines the margins. These are the margins which confer anonymity and erase selfhood, the margins which limit and stultify and annihilate (1995, vii).

Inheriting 'the complex value structures associated with the word tradition' (ibid.), the word *purdah* signifies a complex world, an enclosed space where women live hidden from society and where their 'selfhood' is erased in order for her to become that perfect 'ornament of the house' prescribed by the 'wise men'.

In Ismail Mahomed's *Purdah*, Ayesha is presented as a young Muslim girl both 'physically attractive and intelligent' (Graver, 1999, 155), a potentially disastrous combination as women are supposed to become simple decorations, ornaments of men's houses, deprived of a will of their own. Intelligence thus appears as a characteristic that Mahomed inserts to warn the audience that 'we are set for trouble'. Whilst the story is narrated by Ayesha, the playwright avoids turning it into a monologue by having the protagonist switching roles and personality through the use of her body and stage props. She is the main narrating voice but, at the same time, she also lends her body and her voice to all the other characters that compose the story and make up her world: she is herself as an adolescent girl, then her mother as a submissive woman, her father as the face of the patriarchal power, her aunt as the annoying, tradition-bound woman - sold to the system and a dutiful mercenary of it - her husband as an obtuse 'male' whose only performance is restricted to carnal acts devoid of any romance or intimacy, her mother in law, another stultified subject ready to uphold the patriarchal system. Finally, Ayesha presents the character of Ridwaan, her husband's best friend who becomes her lover and, at the end, her lawyer. The abandonment to Ridwaan's embrace, the orgasmic pleasure she feels (that her husband had never been able to stir), the realisation of the possibility of happiness as a 'woman' put Ayesha in touch with her deeper Self, the one which had been so far kept in *purdah*. From this cage set open emerges a new Ayesha, a woman whose subjectivity cannot be annihilated any longer: she is ready to kill her oppressor, ready to commit herself to public condemnation in order to allow the Truth to be unveiled. In doing so, she is actively performing both her social reality and her socially- caged subjectivity, and then, slowly as the performance unfolds, her body (under the voyeuristic gaze of the 'guards' in the audience) undergoes a transformation: it becomes a performed site of contestation.

As the play progresses, it preserves a dramatic tension that strongly impacts the spectators as it presents a personal story peculiar to one 'individual' woman (Ayesha), and yet it conveys a sociological and historical account of the plight of 'Muslim Indian' women, setting the stage for a debate on collective terms. Refraining from allegory, *Purdah* is not a 'fable which by itself has no truth either fantastic or direct [. . .] made for the demonstration of some moral truth' (Pirandello, 1925, in Bentley, 1952, 7). In Pirandello's concept of the 'naked mask,' the dialectic relationship between the actor and the characters portrayed is crucial. The actress cannot put on only Ayesha's mask, but steps into other roles whilst never losing her character of 'Ayesha'. She has to act 'herself' while enacting the 'Other', an extremely complex task that sets her into a journey of discovery of her inhibited and silenced possible 'selves'. Rather than in a moral fable, the spectators find

themselves engaged in a sort of ‘mythology of estrangement’ where Ayesha recognises her-Self in multiple bodies, as a split subjectivity in the perennial struggle to return to unity and wholeness.

Ayesha reclaims her freedom by murdering her husband Ahmed, stabbing to the core the phallocratic system that has enslaved her. She does so when she discovers that Ahmed has decided to take a co-wife, since Ayesha has not given him any children (he ignores that she has aborted their baby). Before taking this drastic and dramatic decision, Ayesha attempts to commit suicide:

Flashback: Frustratingly, Ayesha wraps herself in her Hejab. She picks up the knife and moves to sit on the prayer mat. She raises her hand as in prayer and then attempts to slit her wrists. As she does so, the children’s laughter rings outside. Ayesha hides the knife under the bed and dashes to the window. The children outside sing “Here comes the bride.” As song fades, dissolves into the present (Graver, 1999, 164).

After witnessing a procession of children, parading a bride carrying a ‘bouquet made of thorns and sharp twigs’ (ibid.), Ayesha goes to sit on the bed. That very night, she kills Ahmed. The actions seem to unfold very quickly now, as we proceed towards the end of the play: time is diluted and conflated in the moments of memory and desire, to the point that we are left always floating in-between the present and the past, between dreams of a different life ahead and memories of crushed desires and crumbled possible happy ‘pasts’ that have not materialised. ‘*Purdah*,’ as Graver (1999, 154) has argued, ‘exemplifies well Mahomed’s ability to turn monologue into theatre.’ In fact, Ayesha never fails to engage the spectator in a complex performance of roles:

The woman’s words do not simply flow from her mouth to the ears of the audience. They circle and are caught by the objects surrounding her. Her words draw her towards particular concrete things, making the story corporeal as her body comes into play with her physical surroundings. Her movements and actions lead, in turn, to the creation of tableaux among the props. Torn pictures, scattered sugar, and rearranged possessions leave a trace of the narrative that has passed through her body upon the scene she inhabits (Graver, 1999, 155).

Ayesha, her mother and her despotic aunt all represent different aspects of ‘femininity’ casted in a gynophobic world, where women’s sexuality is utterly controlled and women’s subjectivity suppressed, through a symbolic and real ‘curtailing’ of women’s space of agency and decision-making. All the women that the actress enacts (through the multiple

performances of ‘actress-playing-Ayesha-playing her aunty or her mother’) seem to portray three aspects of femininity, each one incomplete and complementary to the others. What they seem to have in common is the submission to the Law of the Father, a set of rules established, as Dharker puts it, by ‘a horde of dead men’ (1997, 18) that make sure the women are kept in a perpetual state of compliance:

*Whatever we did,
The trail was the same:
The tear- stained mother,
the gossip aunts looking for shoots to smother
Inside all our cracks*

(Dharker, in Cakraborty, 2013, 80).

Even Ridwaan, the man who seems to open up a possibility of rebellion through love and companionship, wishes Ayesha to plead ‘guilty’. At the end, she refers to him as ‘my lawyer’. Ridwaan is swiftly re-consigned to a codified function, that of a simple lawyer of a disgraced Muslim woman. He actually never performed more than a functional role in the diegetic economy of the narrative, remaining from his first appearance up to the end just ‘an interpreter’ between two semiotic systems that are at work in the play: on one side, Ridwaan knows the *episteme* on which rests the discourse of oppression of women like Ayesha (thus he perhaps condescends to her desire as an act of mercy); on the other side, he – as an educated South African citizen (and a lawyer at that) - also knows very well ‘the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within [. . .] a field of scientificity [. . .]’ (Foucault, 1980, 197). As a mediator between wor(l)ds, Ridwaan masters both languages that regulate these two epistemological sets of norms through different – albeit both androcentric – systems of ‘justice’: one based on the customary - and (allegedly) religious - laws that regulate the Indian Muslim community of Lenasia, and the other codified through the legal norms that order his nation-state. Ridwaan is the man of the Law of the Father in his double and most duplicitous meaning: in both systems, Ayesha’s ‘truth’ (*aletheia*) will never be acknowledged. According to both ‘legal’ codes, Ayesha is guilty of murder. She will be consigned either to jail or to death, but she believes that God will recognise her innocence. Whilst refusing to bend in front of those men who have sanctioned such cruel laws, *making* her into a murderer, Ayesha does not step outside the community of the believers and asks to her merciful God for forgiveness. As Imtiaz Dharker hints in her poetry, there seems to

be some kind of ephemeral peace in giving space to religious rituals and confidence in the help of Allah:

In the evening I cleanse my mouth. There is no help but Allah

And the rituals:

Wash the hands to the elbows,

A fluttering of fingertips,

A kind of peace.

(Dharker, in Cakraborty, 2013, 28).

However, for Ayesha this peace can come only after murdering the system to the core, cutting that masculine honour that, as Shahnaz Khan has highlighted, is based on ‘the sexual and social control of women perpetuated by their own families and communities’ (2002, 37). This is perhaps why she chooses to kill Ahmed rather than killing herself, and why she murders him during sexual intercourse. So doing, Ayesha performs a deconstruction (and a radical destruction) of the Law of the Father inscribed in the phallogocentric socio-symbolic system of patriarchy. Such a system is made almost unchallengeable by the constant recourse to a religious discourse based on an androcentric reading of the *Qur’ān*, where the signifier ‘woman’ is tied to a signified that implies ‘lack’, ‘inferiority’ and consequent dependence on men. By the end of the play, however, ‘Ayesha- the- Muslim- Indian- Woman’ comes to *re-signify* her-Self, advocating for a new semiotic reading of the *Qur’ān* and reversing the linguistic and symbolic shackles that had kept her subjectivity in a state of passive subjugation and seclusion. In this sense, *Purdah* is a drama of powerful resonance, as it does not contest religion *per se*, but rather challenges the ‘reading’ of the text, its misled exegesis that Ayesha proclaims biased and ultimately contrary to the will of her Merciful God, the ultimate legislator and judge of human behaviour.

In *Purdah*, Ayesha defies the reign of terror imposed upon women, reversing the violence and directing it against men, spilling the male’s blood in an upturned rite of passage that signs her coming back to life. If, in Dacia Maraini’s play ‘I sogni di Clitennestra’ (‘Klytemnestra’s dreams’, 1981), the protagonist fails to kill her husband and is driven to madness and suicide, ‘[d]efeated anew in history, [giving] up the dream of being herself and of being another – of having a self that can accommodate multiplicity and otherness’ (Komar, 2003, 19), in *Purdah*, Ayesha accomplishes this dream: she conquers a new voice

that is now loudly shouting to the other women to wake up and stop staring at a mirror where they look just like ‘an image, a mute image’ (Maraini, 1981, 10).

Conclusions

*It is the women who know you can take in the invader,
Time after time, and still be whole.
Whether they enter with loaded guns, Or kind words, you are quite intact.
The fact is, each one has a borderline that cannot be erased.
Every borderline becomes a battlefield,
And every night an act of faith*

(Dharker, 1989).

As we become increasingly wary of signifiers like ‘identity’, ‘subjectivity’, ‘sensitivity’, ‘men’ and ‘women’, the play *Purdah* by Ismail Mahomed is one of those works of drama and ‘issue theatre’ that forces us – through narrativity and performativity - to engage into contested discourses around issues like gender, race, religion, migration, human rights, sexuality, diversity, to name just a few.

Although Lenasia’s community has moved a long way forward from the times of the first indentured labourers, surviving apartheid and carving a space for the ‘Indians’ in South Africa, there are still many problems to be faced. As Goolam Vahed has reported.

Many Muslims are retreating to an Islamic identity in their private lives and constructing boundaries around various points of contact: between men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, Muslims and the state, Islam and secularism, and so on. In introducing new and tighter Islamic codes in the public and private domains, Muslims are using the new freedoms of a secular state to redefine the kind of Muslims they want to be (2013, 3).

Whilst many educated Indian Muslims in South Africa are challenging forms of radical Islam, trying to reconcile the freedoms and the rights guaranteed by the state with their religious tenets, ‘more conservative interpretations of Islam became institutionalised’ (Vahed, 2013, 2). Capitalising on the possibilities offered by the Rainbow Nation,¹⁵ where education for all immediately became one of the leading mantras, both state-run schools and religious educational institutions have thrived in Johannesburg and in other major cities of the South African state (Reetz, 2011, 84). The freedoms guaranteed by a democratic

constitution, though, paradoxically are also making space for other ‘undemocratic’ - even unconstitutional - practices that policy-makers and human rights advocates have repeatedly highlighted as problematic and in need of a quick and stable resolution.¹⁶

More plays like *Purdah* may be necessary, more theatrical performances are needed to engage the audiences in a critical debate over the role of Islam – and religion in general – in a modern and secular society. Moreover, as the poetry of Imtiaz Dharker and the plays of Ismail Mahomed prove, we need to listen to the voices of those who *inhabit* the diasporic worlds of South Asian communities around the world, in order to avoid coming up with patronising and misleading readings of socio-cultural and religious situations that we apprehend only as ‘onlookers’, or, at best, as scholars of these complex and ever-changing cultures. Briefly, we need to be ‘partakers’ and not just spectators of the events in order to engage with them in an effective and durable way.

NOTES

¹ ‘Purdah’ is a word of Persian origin which literally means ‘veil’ or ‘curtain’. It designates the practice of secluding women from contact with men, except immediate family relations (father, brother, husband, son). As Elisabeth H. White has pointed out, ‘Purdah is more than wearing the veil, [...] It is a complex of customs based on the concept of family honor, and designed to maintain the sexual purity of women’ (White, 1977, 31). Although in India such custom was originally restricted to upper caste Hindu women and Muslims, some scholars have highlighted how the veil and the practice of purdah are becoming more widespread among Muslim diasporic communities in South Africa. (Vahed, 2002; 2013).

² Imtiaz Dharker is a Pakistani poet, born in Lahore (1956) and currently living in the UK. I read her poems against the play by Ismail Mahomed, since I find that both Dharker and Mahomed universalise the plight of women subjected to patriarchal customary laws, while refraining to assume a Eurocentric stance against Islam as the main cause of the subjection of Muslim women. It is not religion *per se* or a particular set of clothes that trap women in a state of submission, but rather a ‘purdah of the mind’. I thus find that both the poems by Dharker and the play by Mahomed reflect the same spirit of deep awareness, commitment to spirituality and refusal of bending to patriarchal laws that are designed to keep women’s minds in seclusion (*purdah*).

³ Ismail Mahomed is the director of the Grahamstown National Arts Festival. Born in Johannesburg in 1959, Mahomed has worked in the arts industry for most of his professional life. In 1987, he founded the Creative Arts Workshop (CAW) in Lenasia, Johannesburg's largest South Asian community. A prolific writer and arts critic, Mahomed has contributed to South African theatre in a very incisive way, as the many awards can testify. He can boast of an extensive portfolio of arts based projects and participation to many international festivals.

⁴ Lenasia is approximately 35 kilometres southwest of the Johannesburg central business district. Whilst today it is a vibrant and thriving suburb located to the south of Soweto, it was first built as a ghetto for the Indian community of Johannesburg. Located close to a military camp (the Lenz Base), its name derives from the words 'Lenz' plus 'Asia', as the majority of its first residents were Indian migrants forcefully removed (under the Apartheid Government's Group Areas Act) from non-racial areas located more closely to Johannesburg. Today Lenasia is a township with a particular Indian flavour: since 2002, the community has a website where people post and advertise the major events that take place in this South Asian diasporic community. See [http:// www.lenzinfo.co.za](http://www.lenzinfo.co.za)

⁵ I use the word 'poiesis' in the way the Greeks understood it. As Giorgio Agamben has explained, The Greeks, to whom we owe all the categories through which we judge ourselves and the reality around us, made a clear distinction between *poiesis* (*poiein*, "to pro-duce" in the sense of bringing into being) and *praxis* (*prattein*, "to do" in the sense of acting). [C]entral to praxis was the idea of the will that finds its immediate expression in an act, while, by contrast, central to *poiesis* was the experience of production into presence, the fact that something passed from nonbeing to being, from concealment into the full light of the work. *The essential character of poiesis was not its aspect as a practical and voluntary process but it's being a mode of truth understood as unveiling*, ἀ-λήθεια (1999, 42).

⁶ For an analysis of the three main representatives of French psycholinguistic feminism, see Cetorelli (2010).

⁷ 'In "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said . . . From this point of view, it seems that certain feminist demands revive a kind of naïve romanticism, a belief in identity [which is] the reverse of phallocratism.' Excerpt from 'La femme, ce n'est jamais ça' ['Woman Can Never Be Defined'], an interview by 'psychoanalysis and politics' printed in *Tel quel*, Autumn 1974, later in

Polylogue (1977), Paris: Seuil, 23-54. Quoted in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds) (1981) *New French Feminisms*. New York: Schocken Books, 137-138.

⁸ Hélène Cixous, in her famous essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa', advocated an écriture féminine in order to 'break up, destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project.'

For Cixous,

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement (1990, 316).

⁹ The 'theatre of the oppressed' is a theoretical framework and a set of techniques developed by the Brazilian director, artist and activist Augusto Boal. He went on to devise a form of theatre for social change that could have strong political impact also at a legislative level. See <http://theforumproject.org>

¹⁰ Victor Turner has often described the akin modalities of ritual and theatrical performances in generating moments of collective reflexivity. As he has argued, 'Essentially, public reflexivity takes the form of a performance' (Turner, 1979, 465).

¹¹ All the quotations from the play *Purdah* are based on the script by Ismail Mahomed published in Graver (1999, 154-165).

¹² South Africa is in the process of fully recognising the marriages convened under religious laws (Muslim family laws and Hindu family laws). In 2014, more than one hundred Imams graduated as 'marriage officers', a position that allows them to perform the Muslim rites as public officers, so that the marriage could be recorded on the National Population Register and receive the full legal status afforded by the country's Constitution. In May 2014, during the ceremony for awarding the diplomas to the first graduated Imams in Cape Town, the Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe reportedly said:

As a result of the Imams being designated as marriage officers in terms of the Marriages Act (25) of 1961, the registration of Muslim unions will accord Muslim marriages legal status and with that, the protective instruments of the secular state may be accessed to

ensure that these Qur'anic values are realised and complied with within the Constitutional state.

See 'Full legal status for Muslim marriages in South Africa', accessible from: <http://www.southafrica.info/services/rights/muslim-020514.htm#vem5imBLdbw#ixzz3kmhTKlqg>

¹³ '[Rasic performances] insist on sharing experiences with partakers and participants; works that try to evoke both terror and celebration. Such performances are often very personal even as they are no longer private' (Schechner, 2003, 358).

¹⁴ There is a very hot debate going on inside the Muslim 'community of the believers' regarding certain quotes and sentences of the Quran that may (or may not) justify a rigid application of the seclusion and segregation of women in *purdah*. In 1939, Maulana Abul A'la Maududi's published his famous work *Purdah*, which, as his translator posits, 'has deeply influenced vast sections of the reading public in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent.' According to his followers, this book (translated also in Arabic as *Al-Hejab*), 'more than any other, has in recent years helped people to understand clearly the nature of the correct relationship between man and woman in the social life, and appreciate the great design that Nature wills to fulfil through them on the earth' (Maulana Abul A'la Maududi, 1939, 18).see https://jamaat.org/en/documents/Al-Hijab_and_the_Status_of_Women_in_Islam.pdf

¹⁵ The 'Rainbow Nation' is a definition of South Africa coined by Desmond Tutu to signify a country made of many diverse peoples, languages and cultures harmoniously living together side by side like the colours of a rainbow. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-04-17/rainbow-nation-betrayed-by-attacks-on-immigrants-in-south-africa>

¹⁶ As Vahed has reported, in 1996 in Cape Town, under the banner of Islam, a 'movement of political radicalism was formed "People Against Gangsterism and Drugs" (Pagad) [. . .] to fight the scourge of drugs and gangsterism. Pagad drew on elements in Islamic religious sources — without regard to historic context — that emphasised the believer's imperative to oppose indecency and crime through direct action to achieve a just and morally correct society' (Vahed, 2013, 2).

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EVOLUTION OF THE MAHALAKSHMI LADIES DRAMA GROUP 1989-2015

KRISTEN RUDISILL

Abstract: Bombay Gnanam (Gnanam Balasubramanian) started the all-women Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group (MLDG) in 1989. It hasn't been easy for the women to take time from family responsibilities, but they make the time because the troupe provides a space for them to talk about their issues with other women as well as a creative outlet through which they can act on stage. The MLDG has made a niche for itself in the male-oriented sabha theatre scene in Chennai, gaining acceptance as well as praise from even respected male Hindu religious leaders. I discuss the story of the MLDG and argue that their own identities as educated, affluent middle-class Brahmin women along with strategic storytelling and staging methods has allowed them to not only avoid censure but to become popular with the conservative, traditional Brahmin community in Chennai while bringing controversial topics to the stage. They have developed strategies over the years that range from basic cross-dressing to criticizing the actions and attitudes of other women, presenting all perspectives to an issue, leaving the plays without resolution so that audiences can insert their own values, and recently allowing male voices onto the stage through recordings.

Keywords: Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group (MLDG), lady drama group, female character, male voices, devotional plays, widow remarriage, Brahmin women, Tamil Brahmin community

Introduction

In the 1980s, Gnanam Balasubramanian, or Bombay Gnanam as she is commonly known, read a comment in a newspaper article in which leading Tamil theatre practitioners in Chennai like R. S. Manohar and Komal Swaminathan stated that it was “not possible” for women to write, act, and be fully involved in Tamil theatre. She took it as a challenge and started the all-women Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group (MLDG) in Bombay with a

group of her housewife friends in 1989 partly to prove them wrong (Santhanam, 2003). It hasn't been easy for the women to find the time away from their family responsibilities, but the troupe has done well over the last twenty-six years, bringing mixed gender audiences to performances about women's issues and drawing attention to women's struggles as well as to their talents. Gnanam and a number of the other members migrated to Chennai in the mid-1990s and have made a niche for themselves in the very male-oriented *sabha* theatre scene there.¹ Bombay Gnanam is the only playwright and director in the troupe, though she does include input from the others, and they have produced nineteen plays in over four hundred productions. Seventeen of those plays deal with women's issues and the two most recent are *bhakti*, or devotional plays. In this article, I discuss the story of the Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group and argue that their own identities as affluent middle-class Brahmin women along with strategic storytelling and staging methods has allowed them to not only avoid censure, but also to become popular with the conservative, traditional Brahmin community in Chennai (even the men) while bringing to the stage all manner of controversial topics.

Bombay Gnanam and the Sabha Theatre

In some ways, Gnanam has fit in easily to the sabha theatre system in Chennai. Sabhas are voluntary cultural organizations that sponsor performances in the city through the fees of their members. They are best known for their sponsorship of classical music and dance performances, particularly during the December-January Music Festival of Madras. As I explain elsewhere, "Sabha members are generally middle-class Tamil Brahmins, a community that is notorious for its social conservatism as well as for its high levels of education and appreciation of traditional culture" (Rudisill, 2012, 277). They provide the auditorium and bring ready-made audiences to the plays, usually also selling tickets to the public to offset the expense of paying the troupe a fixed fee. It is incredibly difficult to produce a Tamil play in Chennai without their support (although occasionally a university, corporation, or other group will provide funding and a performance space). This means that the sabha organizers have a lot of influence and control over the content and format of plays that are produced in the city. Gnanam grew up in an orthodox Brahmin family near Mayavaram in the Tanjore District of Tamilnadu and has a deep understanding of this community as well as what will be appreciated by them on stage. She knows how far she can push on different issues without offending her viewers and is rarely controversial (partly because she adheres to gender norms both in her personal life and in her plays), even if her themes of choice are.

The plays promoted through the sabhas tend to fall into one of the two categories: comic or serious. Gnanam's plays are of the "serious" variety, tackling social themes and having a primary goal of opening discussions about sensitive topics and a secondary goal of influencing people's thinking about them. She often includes some comedy to lighten the mood and entertain, not just educate, viewers, but this is not the main genre of the work. Her plays have addressed such issues as dowry harassment, the problems of working women, suicides, child marriages, widow remarriage, artificial insemination, adoption, surrogacy, mercy killings, the communication gap between husband and wife, immigration, postnatal depression, divorce, homosexuality, and the trend of unmarried couples living together. She says that "Dramas should hold up a mirror to society. Even if a handful of people go home thinking about what they have seen, I have achieved my goal" (Natarajan, 2015a). While the topics may be sensitive, they are issues that people are familiar with, if not from within their own families, then from their communities or the newspapers or television. Sindhu vijayakumar asked Gnanam once, "Hailing from a very orthodox family, what makes [you] take up pro-women issues?" (2008) which is clearly perceived to be quite radical. She responded "My themes have eighty percent truth in them. As I deal with thought-provoking, current and relevant family issues, people are able to identify with it. Besides, I refuse to give in to any pressure to do scenes and deliver dialogues that are not acceptable for my conscience" (vijayakumar, 2008). Since her own conscience is very much in line with the culture in which she was brought up, she rarely pushes anything too far out of the comfort zone of her conservative Brahmin audience.

The characters of sabha plays are usually meant to be everyday people, though, as I state elsewhere, perhaps more exaggerated and flamboyant than their non-fictional counterparts, and there are, of course, exceptions. Female characters in MLDG plays dress just like those in other sabha plays. One of the characteristics of the genre is that "the characters . . . are ordinary folk and they dress in ordinary clothes" (Rudisill, 2012, 286). So the female characters will be in saris, *salwar kameez*, nighties, or a *kurta* and jeans while the male characters wear shirt and pants, *veshti*, or a *lungi*, and in the MLDG, the performers are very often responsible for supplying and maintaining their own costumes.

Part of the goal of the MLDG plays is, as Gnanam says, to show "reality" and characters that the audiences will recognize and be sympathetic to. In an interview with M. Rajini, she said that

It requires great courage to enact such sensitive themes on the stage. It has to be subtle but the message should be clear; I was walking on eggshells. I was never worried about social acceptance of such plays. My stories only reflected reality. We have a social responsibility

to educate our audience. I don't believe in just tickling the audience with X-rated jokes which are in bad taste. (Rajini, 2015)

There is some contradiction in this statement. On the one hand, Gnanam has to be very careful about what she says, walking on eggshells so as not to draw too much criticism or drive away audiences while still managing to educate them about women's issues. She admits that "When we staged *Ellai Illatha Illaram* ("Household Without Boundaries")² which was on unmarried couples living together, viewers in the *moffusil* areas [outside of the city] asked me whether I was trying to corrupt the youth" (Santhanam, 2003). On the other hand, since her plays reflect the reality that audience members can see around them, she isn't worried about the social acceptance of her work. As I spoke at length with Padmini Natarajan, who was one of the founding members of the MLDG and is still very much involved, although she is no longer on stage, I could see how well this strategy has worked.

Creating Plays

Natarajan explained the process of creating a play. She says that first, Gnanam will read about or hear about some instance and become interested in it. She will sit down with her family, including her husband, sons, and daughters-in-law, to analyze it and see what everyone thinks. Without her husband's active and visible support, it is unlikely that she would have been accepted and encouraged by the rest of the community as she is, so this is important. After hearing his thoughts, she will bring it to the Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group for discussion. The MLDG grew out of the Mahalakshmi Ladies Club, and Natarajan says that there is still something of the social aspect of a ladies club about it:

The rehearsals were great fun always. We let loose. We could talk about anything. Because there was no question of social stigma attached to it or nobody said, 'How can you think like that?' And we dealt with very very sensitive issues in all our plays. Sensitive issues in terms of the middle class mentality in a closed society. In terms of, like, you know, gay marriages or surrogacy or adoption, divorce. We've handled every subject . . . In this group, through the plays, we have been able to come out with the arguments, the pros and cons of the situation and we have been able to present it to other women. And men. And we also have been able to think about it. To rationalize it, to evolve strategies or evolve arguments for or against. (Natarajan, 2015b)

The troupe provides a space in which women can talk about whatever they want and have fun doing it. They talk about things they read, things they hear, and things that happen to them, and this can all happen within the private and woman-centred space of the home or

rehearsal hall, away from “the oppression of family obligations” (Weidman, 2006, 139-140). Natarajan mentioned to me how some of the women have gone through troubles in their personal lives and found answers to their problems in the plays. All viewpoints and experiences are welcome in these discussions, because all together they help Gnanam put together a story that includes multiple perspectives on a topic. Very often, the ending of the plays is left open, with no resolution, which means that no particular point of view is seen as the right answer and privileged. Instead, as Natarajan puts it, Quite a bit Gnanam leaves it to the audience to decide whether you want to . . . You know, the ending was what you would like it to be. You know? Sometimes it’s a question. She just throws a question. And she says, you decide. You tell me. And very often, after the performance, when the curtain calls are on, people in the audience get up and give an answer . . . We’ve had arguments, we’ve had fights from the audience. How could you do this? You know? It’s been very interesting, the way that the audience gets worked up about this whole issue, whatever the issue is that you have been handling or talking about. (Natarajan, 2015b)

So part of the strategy for staying within the conservative values of the audience, and those of the affluent, educated, middle class families of the performers themselves, was simply to not take sides. The plays thus always align with the values of the audience as if each member can write his/her own ending. For example, in *Aarambam (Fresh Beginnings, c. 1998)* on widow remarriage, audiences expected that Gnanam would come out in favor of widow remarriage. Instead, she leaves it open. At the end, the widow turns to the audiences and says “Is it necessary for me to marry? Is there no life without marriage, without a partner? What should I do? You tell me what should I do?” (Natarajan, 2015b). There is no sense of what the playwright believes to be the right thing for this character, or for any other woman in her situation.

There is a clear sense of what the “woman’s side” of an issue is versus the “man’s side,” and Gnanam’s quality, of not wanting to take a stand for the woman’s side, as well as the fact that this troupe is all-women in some ways by default— they would not have been permitted by their families to have acted with men— makes me hesitate to call the MLDG “feminist” theatre. The group’s work does, however, share quite a lot with feminist theatres around the world, and of course everyone has his/her own way of being a feminist. Tiina Rosenberg writes that “The truly innovative aspect of feminist performance has been, and still is, the position of subject from which a feminist is able to speak and make statements” (Rosenberg, 2007, 85). The members of the MLDG speak out as subjects to address women’s issues, but they also want to include what they think of as men’s perspectives,

and employ cross-dressing to accomplish this. Marjorie Garber talks about how “The appeal of cross-dressing is clearly related to its status as a sign of the constructedness of gender categories” (Garber, 1992, 9). In the context of the MLDG, where everyone knows that the male characters are cross-dressed women, and there is no attempt at actually passing as the opposite gender, this staged construction of gender gives women a space in which they can play with gender stereotypes with impunity while still being protected from accusations of transgression. There has been much scholarship on the way the notion of an ideal Indian womanhood has been connected to middle-class status, Indian nationalism, modernity, and particularly the performing arts of classical music and dance.³ These connections have made it more difficult for women who wish to keep their reputations as good, middle-class women to go against traditional gender roles in their everyday lives. Already these women are somewhat subversive simply because they are acting on stage in a play, but this is mitigated to an extent by the fact that they are acting with women and including what would naturally be considered as the male point of view in the story line. Rosenberg writes that “Performance has been, and remains, a means of politicising and portraying the anger and frustration felt by many feminists. Feminist and queer insights are based on the awareness that something is *wrong* in the world” (Rosenberg, 2007, 84). The MLDG is pointing out situations and attitudes that are problematic in society, but they are not overtly about politics, anger, or solutions.

The very first play of the Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group was extremely personal for Bombay Gnanam, as it concerned the issue of dowry harassment, and grew out of her older sister’s experience. *Sindhikka Vaitha Streedhanam* (*The Dowry that Made You Think*, 1989) drew on the story of “This sister [who] had never lived with her husband and had been sent back to her parents’ establishment after being ill-treated by her in-laws. Gnanam began to question the system that put a freeze on a young woman’s life and longings because of custom and tradition” (Natarajan, 2015c). This play’s resolution was left open, though the narrative leading up to it was a sad one. The girl was killed by her mother-in-law, who had been shamed by her friends for choosing a bride for her son whose father couldn’t even provide a pair of diamond earrings as a dowry, being a simple clerk. Many years later, the mother-in-law repented her wickedness and offered her son in marriage to that girl’s handicapped sister, who left open to the audience the question of whether or not she should accept the proposal. Natarajan related that after each performance people would talk to Gnanam either in person or on the phone about their and their daughters’ experiences of being victimised by continued demands for money, jewelry, vehicles, or property. Sometimes, distraught parents would call asking for advice and a solution to this problem.

This was the first play Bombay Gnanam wrote, but not the first play she acted in. A few years earlier, she had played the wife of Saint Thyagaraja for the Matunga Dramatic Society where she worked with S. R. Kasturi and learned a lot about direction, sets, and other production aspects that was invaluable when she launched her own drama group. That was her only real preparation for the venture, as she says that “I have absolutely no formal training in acting, direction or playwriting!” (Santhanam, 2003). The name of the troupe comes from the Mahalakshmi Ladies Club, of which Gnanam was a member in Mumbai. She says “I sent an open invitation to those who were interested in acting and we got a huge response” (Vijayan, 2014). She then held auditions where hopefuls read from her script on dowry. She says, “Since it was my first venture, I was a bit scared myself. Will the person fit into this role? Will they cooperate? I believed that it was not enough if they are interested for just one day. There will be times when they have to come for rehearsals three months continuously” (Vijayan, 2014). After selecting the original fifteen members and rehearsing diligently, she publicly staged the play in Bombay, where “it turned out to be a hit” (Santhanam, 2003).

Negotiating Controversial Topics

Gnanam wrote and produced her first eight plays in Mumbai, where popular Chennai comedian S. ve. Shekher saw a show. With his support, the MLDG visited Chennai in 1991 and put on six productions. Gnanam appreciated that Shekher “took efforts to introduce us to Madras audiences” (Santhanam, 2003), and returned to the city to perform in 1994, then she permanently relocated there in 1996. One of the plays they performed in Chennai in 1991 was Gnanam’s second play, *Akkarai Pachchai* (The Other Side of the River is Green), in which a family found an American bridegroom for their daughter. This play showed “the alienation of the daughter, her inability to see her parents and her final demise far away from her family and people” (Natarajan, 2015c). This was an issue very close to the audience members, as many sabha-goers have relatives that have emigrated to the US for school, work, or marriage. One of the actresses of the MLDG I met in 2003 had two children in the US herself, and clearly had a lot of thoughts on the subject. The fears expressed in the play were very present, especially for those sending their daughters abroad without strong networks for them to join. They worried about their daughters’ happiness and safety, but also about the values of grandchildren raised abroad and the possible loss of tradition. Natarajan recalls that “one gentleman in the audience started a huge argument that was very aggressive. He claimed that we were projecting a false image and that many families had flourished with the migration to greener shores” (Natarajan, 2015d). Clearly

the subject touched a lot of people and unearthed some very deep feelings about an issue that many affluent Tamil Brahmin families grapple with.

While topics concerning female health and reproduction are central to several plays, Gnanam's female characters are not flirtatious or inappropriate (according to Tamil values) in any way. While she may challenge what she sees as problematic traditions or attitudes that oppress women, she is herself quite socially conservative, and this is reflected in her theatrical work. She says that "I too feel that we should not let go tradition in certain issues. My plays are all centred round women, but they do not blindly project the woman's point of view. *Paasathin Parimanam* ("The Dynamics of Affection") was in support of men" (Santhanam, 2003). This play questioned the widely held idea that daughters are more emotionally attached to their parents than sons by focusing on the love of a son for his parents. She also criticizes women in her 2011 play *Saswatham* ("The Eternal Values"), which "aims to take a sharp critical look at the economically independent, career minded women of today . . . those who consider themselves liberated but whose obsession with being successful and independent makes them highly arrogant" (Santhanam, 2011). Elsewhere, she criticizes young women who "misuse the freedom they have" by not adjusting for the sake of their marriages (Santhanam, 2003) as well as women depicted in reality television and serials that rely on "skimpy dresses, double entendres and villainy" (Vijayakumar, 2008). So although she says "I am bothered about the atrocities against women and girls. I want to work among village people and empower them" (Vijayakumar, 2008) and "I would like to stage plays which would throw light on the domestic problems of rural women and educate them about their rights" (Lalithasai, 2012), she also has a very clear idea about how women should behave in order to earn the respect of both other women and men. The politics of normal female behavior in Tamil society clash in this case with female agency and ideas about modernity.

Women Performing on the Public Stage

While the Tamil stage is more open to women than it was twenty-six years ago, it is still difficult for women of the caste and class of the majority of the MLDG members to perform on stage with men without some risk to their reputation. Gnanam said in 2012 "Three decades ago, it was not easy for women to act in plays. The family members, however, did not mind the women acting with their own gender. This is the reason why my troupe members are only women" (Lalithasai). Things have changed over the years, but not substantially, which is partly why so many women want to be involved with this group,

and stay involved for extended periods of time. An article from the UCA News, a Catholic news source in Asia, responded to the 1994 MLDG performances in Chennai that “A ‘woman only’ drama troupe is the latest move by some Bombay women to assert their equality in a male-dominated society. A few decades ago, drama troupes were composed of only men. Even the female characters were represented by men” (Women Stage Plays in Former Male Theatric Domain, 1994). This isn’t true in the case of sabha theatre. The genre started in the early 1950s and many of the earliest troupes, most notably the United Amateur Artists started by Y. Gee. Parthasarathy in 1952, involved female actresses from the very beginning. This is the group with which a young J. Jayalalitha, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, got her start in acting. A few troupes did use all male artistes, though. R. Neelakanthan, who has acted with Cho Ramasamy’s viveka Fine Arts since its founding in 1954, told me that when they started the troupe, some of the boys’ families protested because they did not want their sons to be “spoiled” by working with lady artistes. So they were the only sabha troupe that didn’t have women up through the late 1960s, instead using “the two best-looking men”(very often Cho himself) for the female roles in the plays. Neelakanthan says that this made it difficult for them to get bookings with sabhas that primarily staged plays in North Madras, where actresses were expected. Women acting on stage with men for audiences that included men was an issue even as late as the early 1980s for the especially orthodox. S. ve. Shekher shared an anecdote about a performance at that time, when “*Kumudam*, a Tamil weekly, wanted us to perform at their campus for their employees. It was on a big condition that no lady should participate in the play. We agreed. We asked one of our boys in the group to do the lady’s role. The play went off very well” (Gopalie, 2002, 220-221). Because of the stigma associated with women acting on stage, it is still a challenge to find actresses for sabha theatre, and plays tend to range between zero and three female characters. Sometimes Cho Ramasamy would play a female character if there were not enough actresses available to stage the play otherwise. There are several actresses who work with a few different sabha troupes, and they command rates that are three times those of the male actors. Other troupes now have family members or friends who will act the female characters, but only for that particular troupe where they are guaranteed the safety of both their bodies and their reputations.

The Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group has continued for twenty-six years as an all-female amateur troupe, with women playing all the male roles in their plays, and this novelty is clearly one of the reasons that audiences are so fascinated by their work. Marjorie Garber talks about how “passing [as a different gender] has both its secret pleasure and its cultural effect” (Garber, 1992, 9). In this case, however, like with the cross-dressing males of Shakespeare’s time, although there is a discussion of the veracity of the performances,

there is never a question about passing, because audiences *already know* that all members of the MLDG are women. There is pleasure as well as humor involved in watching women dressed as and acting like men, which I argue offsets some of the possible controversy of the topics of the plays. Before most reviewers, bloggers, or other artistes talk about the content of the MLDG plays, they remark on the fact that the group is all women, and there is an indulgent and patronizing attitude that this is more interesting than anything the women could actually have to say. This likely gives the troupe a little more leeway to push boundaries on sensitive topics than if the group actually included male actors. Because of the gender of the actors, the MLDG plays are generally the opposite of the normal sabha play, with most of the characters being women. Bombay Gnanam's 2011 play *Saswatham* (about surrogacy, abortion, and the need for male heirs) didn't have *any* male characters, just referred to them in the dialogue and brought in perspectives generally perceived as male through the voices of women speaking for them. Her more recent devotional plays have nearly all male characters, which has presented new challenges that I will discuss shortly. One of the advantages of an all-female troupe is that it made it much easier to find actresses than if there had also been male members in the group. While there are still six original members, a lot of women have come and gone for various reasons, and to date around two hundred different women "from a newborn baby to a 90 year old lady" (Natarajan, 2015b) have been involved in the Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group in some capacity. This is both an amazing resource, with a huge pool of talent to choose from, and a struggle, as it means that there is always someone who needs training. Another issue has been getting people to take them seriously and be willing to sponsor performances. "As a women's group, Gnanam says they had to face many challenges. 'We could not approach anyone easily. Initially, there were even a few who asked what a group of ladies can possibly do?' she says" (vijayan, 2014). They used their club connections to get their start in Mumbai, then popular male theatre artist S. ve. Shekher paved their way in Chennai. Now the reputation and success of Gnanam and the troupe speak for themselves. Gnanam has been honored with a number of prestigious theatre awards over the years, including the Nataka Choodamani award from the Krishna Gana Sabha, Mylapore Academy awards, the Kalamamani award, the vani Kala Sudhakara by vani Mahal, and the Nataka Padmam by Brahma Gana Sabha. Even R. S. Manohar, who had earlier commented that women couldn't be totally involved in theatre and inspired the start of the MLDG, congratulated her on her work, which she counts among her proudest moments (vijayakumar, 2008).

The main struggle, however, is in the nature of working exclusively with housewives, because it can be difficult for them to control their own schedules enough to commit to make it to all the rehearsals. So this dedication is one of the main criteria for actresses

looking to join the group. Gnanam says that “It is tough to consistently produce plays featuring only women. Most of my actors are housewives and there are great demands on their time. In-laws can also be quite hostile to the idea of their appearing on stage and spending so much time away from the family” (Santhanam, 2003). In some cases, their “husbands manage their homes in their wives absence” (*Women Stage Plays in Former Male Theatric Domain*, 1994), which means that the actresses need a lot of cooperation and flexibility from their husbands and in-laws. On the other hand, “Our members are educated and talented homemakers. This is a creative outlet for talented homemakers” (vijayakumar, 2008). In this sense, it is clearly a pleasure to work with women who are excited for the rare opportunity and prepared to work hard to perform well. Natarajan is still astounded by the loyalty and dedication of the troupe members, saying “I mean, imagine a woman’s organization and we don’t get paid. We don’t get paid a penny. It’s completely voluntary. People come for rehearsal, people spend money, come from great distances, spend time coming for rehearsals” (Natarajan, 2015b). I had the opportunity to see the second ever performance of the 2003 play *Nallathor Veenai Seithey* (*The Beautifully Made Veena*), which addresses the issue of divorce and its effects on children. My field notes specifically mention how impressed I was by how well they knew it and how evident the amount of rehearsal time was.

With such a wide variety of women being involved, most of whom having little to no acting training or experience despite possessing some classical music or dance training, which is common for women from the Tamil Brahmin community, there is little consistency, in terms of actors, for Bombay Gnanam to work with. She says, “Also for a lady, doing a male role on stage is not easy. We manage the costume and I teach them the mannerism, but we cannot do anything about the voice” (vijayan, 2014). Seeing women in drag is clearly part of the pleasure audiences take in watching the plays, as much of the conversation amongst the audience afterwards will concern the veracity of their performances. Gnanam used to look for a particular body type for her male roles, saying that “To play the role of a man, one needs to be tall, have broad shoulders and a masculine walk” (Lalithasai, 2012). Three years later, she had changed her mind about the importance of body type, saying earlier this year that “The action will speak for the character; stature does not matter much. I am also open to anyone who has a passion to act. There is no discrimination. I am confident of molding anyone who shows involvement” (Rajini, 2015). The voice, however, remained a problem, becoming more so with the troupe’s first devotional play in 2014.

The Move to Devotional Plays

The last two plays of the Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Troupe have diverged significantly from their previous work in three major ways. 2014's *Sri Bodendhral* and 2015's *Bhaja Govindam* both have spiritual themes instead of dealing with women's issues, involve the dubbing of dialogue, and are not ticketed. Rather than selling tickets for these plays with religious subjects, the troupe presents them for free and solicits donations from viewers. "Gnanam said at the curtain call . . . that though city sabhas funded the first few runs of the shows, people who watch it must do two things— spread the word even using Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp and donate their mite" (Bombay Gnanam's New Play). The actors stand near the door with boxes in which people can drop their donations. People have been very generous with their donations, and the grand scale of the plays with their expensive custom sets, costumes, and studio recordings has been manageable. The understanding of the importance of technology in advertising is ironic because Gnanam herself does not use any of these platforms; she doesn't even text message or email regularly.

MLDG's most recent play, *Bhaja Govindam* (2015) is "about the teachings of Adi Sankara as conveyed by Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswati Swamigal" (venkataramanan, 2015). The troupe came up with the idea of *Sri Bodendhral*, partly thanks to the influence of Gnanam's husband, as a way to mark their Silver Jubilee (twenty-five year anniversary of their founding in 1989), then were given the directive by Sri Jayendra Sarawati to produce a play about Adi Shankara. Gnanam puts it like this:

We had planned *Sri Bodendhral* and wanted to get the blessing of the Acharyas of the Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam. But trepidation that the idea might not be received well prevented us from going to Kanchipuram. After mentally making the offering we went ahead with the play. On learning about it through Mutt sources, the Acharyas sent their blessings through a devotee (Venkataramanan, 2015).

After that, the troupe did go to the Mutt, where Sri Jayendra Sarawati gave Bombay Gnanam a book and told her, "Let this be your next subject." She says that "the title was hidden by the kumkum and when I gently pushed it to the side I realised it was Adi Sankara. We decided to enact the subject on a grand scale, costs notwithstanding. It is a privilege to showcase the life and teachings of one of the greatest Hindu savants" (Venkataramanan, 2015). The new religious plays are receiving a lot of press and attention, all of it positive, and from the reviews both in newspapers and on individuals' blogs, it seems that the auditoriums are packed with viewers. *Sri Bodendhral* has been performed well over fifty times to date. The 2015 review of *Bhaja Govindam* in the *Mylapore Times* suggests that

the subject matter of the play is one with which the audience is already familiar, confirming that the audience mostly consists of members of the conservative Hindu Brahmin community commonly associated with *sabhas*.



Image 1. Climax scene from Bhaja Govindam. Courtesy of Padmini Natarajan

These recent religious plays are right on trend with what has been happening in the sabhas over the last few years, where there has been a resurgence of religious and historical plays. Often the religious plays involve some humor (such as those staged by United Amateur Artists and Dummies Drama), but the MLDG plays don't seem to be very funny, with audience members commenting things like "The huge hall [Narada Gana Sabha] was full and had in it, devotees of this saint [Nama Bodendral] who were kept in their reverential mode throughout the event" (Aarvalan, 2014). And (of *Bhaja Govindam*) "I must say I was transported to a world of piety, prayers, mantras, swamijis, philosophy, so much so, my evening was filled with a meaning and a purpose" (Rajaram, 2015). However, Gnanam has not neglected her roots and still includes a social aspect by weaving in the story of a modern day couple with the past narrative of the saint's life story. The idea is to take "the deep philosophy of Advaita" (Natarajan, 2015c) and make it easy for ordinary people to understand and thus demonstrate its relevance to those living today.

The most revolutionary aspect of the two religious plays, however, is the pre-recording of dialogue, sound effects, and music. Blogger Aarvalan wrote a review of *Bodhendral* for *Sabhash!* in which he states

Another noteworthy element was this – the resorting to the method of a path-breaking synchronization in the delivery of dialogue. The actors never actually uttered a single word while they were on stage. Instead, their miming of words occurred in unison with a taped version that kept running in the background. They matched word for word, perfectly. And this, as Gnanam rightly pointed out, demanded the understanding and commitment of all

the performers. And these were a good 45 odd in number. No mean achievement this! (Aarvalan, 2014).

Although he exaggerates the number of actresses (Naveena Vijayan of the *Indian Express* put the number at thirty), the point is still valid. Gnanam has done a few films and acts regularly on television⁴ so she is familiar with the processes of playback singing and dubbing from those media. I have heard a number of different reasons for the move to dub the soundtrack for these two plays in particular. When I spoke with Divakar Subramanian at the School for Indian Film Music in Chennai, who has done all the recording and even supplied some of the voices for Gnanam's recent plays, he mentioned the importance of clarity and consistency, especially with the music in these plays (Subramanian, 2015). However, when I spoke with Padmini Natarajan, I heard a different story: "She [Gnanam] brought in the male voices. Again, kowtowing to the larger good. Because it's Veda. The Vedas, the religious texts that are being chanted. That are being taught. In both of these plays there is a lot of this. So she did not want the criticism that women are doing this. Women were not supposed to do it, women are not doing it now, and women are fighting to do it. Okay. But she said that the intention of the play is to carry the message of the play." (Natarajan, 2015b) So even though she acknowledges that women are "fighting" to speak the Vedas in their own voices, Gnanam did not wish to distract audiences from the message of the plays by giving them the opportunity to focus on that debate and her overturning of tradition by allowing the women to do so in her production. To have the women speak the Vedas would be a huge political statement and invite a lot of criticism. The MLDG's history has been, in part, about pushing norms about both what women can do and what women can talk about, especially in public. They have deliberately tackled controversial topics and that has been a core component of the group's identity. However, while they have broached these subjects in public, they have circumvented some of the more difficult politics by presenting the hegemonic position and making sure to never completely undermine it. That isn't possible in this case, where the very presence of a woman's voice would undermine tradition and make a statement that couldn't be retracted or even mitigated.

The Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group is right now at a crossroads. Will they choose to follow this more conservative path they are on at the moment, or go back to being controversial and provocative? Today, the MLDG is synonymous with Bombay Gnanam. If she chooses to stay with the religious themes, which seems likely, it wouldn't surprise me if another amateur women's theatre group started to pick up where the MLDG left off with addressing social issues. There are clearly a lot of middle-class Brahmin women

interested in acting and in talking about the issues that concern them most, and they will be left without a venue if the MLDG discontinues producing plays on women's issues. It will, however, require someone (or a group of someones) who can turn those conversations and issues into compelling plays and also have the connections to get a chance from the sabhas.

Part of the novelty here is that voices are being dubbed, but for this group, it is also about *whose* voices are being heard by audiences, and from whose bodies they are perceived to come. So much of this has to do with notions of power, as speaking typically connotes power. In talking about women's voices in Karnatic music, Amanda Weidman writes that "The dichotomy often drawn between 'having a voice' and being silent or silenced, however, leaves us with little way to interpret voices that are highly audible and public yet not agentic in a classic sense, such as voices that have musical instead of referential content or voices that circulate through technologies of sound reproduction" (148). Are the members of the MLDG being silenced? Or are they agentic, since they are the ones scripting and directing the audible and public speech, which is not coming from their voices, but is attached to their bodies and minds. I suggest that in this case, it is possible to be simultaneously silenced and agentic. These plays are written by a woman who has told men exactly what to say and how to say it, so that she can capture their voices in a recording and use them any way she likes, and there is certainly some power inherent in that. This particular case is even more complicated, however, as some of the words are her own, part of this original play script, and some are not. The Vedic chants and songs that thread throughout the play are lifted in their entirety from sacred texts that Bombay Gnanam did not write, although she is using them within her text to serve specific ends involved with telling the stories of these saints in her own way and with her own spin.

Unpacking this new development of recording the soundtrack for a live stage performance has two major components. First, what does it do to the live acting and stage shows to have all the sound pre-recorded? And second, what is the effect of using male voices for an all-women theatre troupe? As a performance strategy, it sounds like it has been very effective in that the sound quality and consistency are excellent and the actors have been able to perform seamlessly with the recording. Natarajan told me that the actresses "don't find it [lip synching all their dialogues] odd at all . . . It's a total experience" (Natarajan, 2015b). I have unfortunately not had the opportunity to see either production, however, I wonder what the costs are of this innovation. Without live voices and without any forgiveness on a pre-recorded and paced soundtrack, there isn't room for improvisation or mistakes, no one can forget her lines, and there is little scope for variation from performance to

performance. If an actress sneezes or forgets to enter the stage on cue, the soundtrack will go on as planned. This type of performance involves a different skill than stage actors usually need for success. In my interviews with sabha actors over the years, many of whom also act for television and film, they usually say that their first love is theatre, and they do the mass media work for the money. Part of the reason they prefer theatre is precisely because of the different skill set it requires. They need to learn all their lines and be able to perform them for two hours straight with no second takes, interacting with others who are doing the same thing. They also take pride if they have good voice projection, which is unnecessary if the dialogue will be dubbed in later. These plays, according to Natarajan, are now even being performed by school children, using the same soundtrack as the MLDG actresses. In 2003, Bombay Gnanam mentioned to critic Kausalya Santhanam on that “while some [of her artistes] are born actors, a few just don’t have it in them. So it is quite a job to make them perform” (Santanam, 2003). Being able to concentrate only on body movement and not voice projection or dialogue is one way to make training easier, and the line between film/television acting and stage acting is clearly being blurred in these performances.

Sri Bodendral and *Bhaja Govindam* overlap with the practice of playback singing on film, where recorded voices are dissociated from the bodies that produce them and associated with other bodies. The transgression in film was often about class and caste, with the female voice (singing a song that was likely written by a man) moving from the respectable body of the singer to the immodest body of the dancer. In Bombay Gnanam’s plays, the transgression is about gender, and the authoritative, respectable male voice is being associated with the respectable, middle-class Brahmin woman’s body—in the transparent guise of a man—though she is transgressive within this community by the very fact that she is acting on a public stage. The place of performance is also likely a factor in the public acceptability of these plays within the Brahmin community, as the large concert halls used by the sabhas for theatrical performances “ensure a respectable distance between the performer and the audience, not only physically but also psychologically” (Weidman, 2006, 138-139). The practice of putting male voices into these actresses’ mouths and bodies plays with voice in the opposite way of Tamil *bhakti* poetry, which saw male poets writing from the perspective of women. Here, we have teachings that flourished in a patriarchal society and are claimed as their own by men, presented by male voices and expressed through female bodies dressed as (though not disguised as) men. The women wrote the plays using the words and teachings of men, but the actresses on stage have very little autonomy, needing to lip synch the dialogue pre-recorded by men, and their voices are limited to what can be expressed through their words and bodies yet still fit within the

constraints of society. In earlier plays, Padmini Natarajan mentioned how the acting could actually change the story; for example, she talked about a villain character that became sympathetic to the audience because of the work of a particular actress. This would be more difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish with a pre-recorded soundtrack.

In some ways, we are seeing the opposite of the situation Weidman observed with the rise of gramophone records and that technology's effect on women's performance. Female singers in that era used sound recording as a way to "escape association with their bodies" (Weidman, 2006, 122). Brahmin women, in particular, recorded their voices so that they could "sing for the public without appearing in public and jeopardizing their respectability" (Weidman, 2006, 122). The members of the MLDG appear in public without effacing their female bodies in this way, though the costumes and cross-dressing do provide them with a strategy for detaching their bodies from themselves by attaching them to their characters, which may be male or female. The entire focus of the MLDG seems to be on learning the teachings of these saints and being able to present them simply and effectively for audiences, without audiences being distracted by the traditional proscription against women speaking the Vedas. Technically, because of the recorded male voices, women are *not* speaking the Vedas, but they are hearing them, learning them, and acting them on stage, which seems a minor distinction, but actually makes all the difference in terms of the discourse that surrounds these plays. The Brahmin community in Chennai is very conservative and most take their Hindu religiosity very seriously. There is less social backlash involved for the MLDG in the criticism of women than in the criticism of men, with all the power they have over these performers, who are nearly entirely dependent on their husbands and in-laws for everything from money and social status to time and even the permission to perform with this ladies drama group. While it may be okay to question social issues and even suggest reforms, it doesn't follow that it would also be okay to question religious norms. The Tamil Brahmin community has a long history of questioning social mores that comes from its close association with the British during the colonial period. But when Hindu religious traditions were questioned and attacked in Tamilnadu, Brahmins were attacked along with them.⁵ Religion and the rituals that go along with it are part of Tamil Brahmin identity, and much of that is left to the women to uphold (see Hancock, 1999). There is a very fine line between social conscience and religious practice, and the Tamil Brahmin community in Chennai must negotiate a balance between their modernity, characterized by high levels of education, ties to the West, and social progressiveness and reform tendencies with their tradition, characterized by religion, ritual, and social conservatism within their own families. This successful negotiation is

demonstrated beautifully by the women of the Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group along with their families, friends, and fans.

Conclusion

The developments of the last two years have seen a lot of changes in the Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group, which Padmini Natarajan attributes simply to Gnanam's evolution as an artist and a person. "This is the path that we are trained to follow in our community in our religious, spiritual, social background. You had your family . . . and then the progression is toward the spiritual part . . . Nothing has been planned ... It just evolved. In terms of age, in terms of experiences, in terms of her [Gnanam's] own personal life" (Natarajan, 2015b). What has remained constant, however, is that this drama troupe provides both a space for women to talk about their issues with other women and a creative outlet through which they can act on stage and share their thoughts with other women as well as with men. They have developed strategies over the years that range from limiting the background of the troupe members to educated, affluent Brahmin women and the basic cross-dressing they are known for to criticizing the actions and attitudes of other women, presenting all perspectives to an issue, leaving the plays open and without resolution so that audiences can insert their own values, and now allowing male voices onto the stage. These strategies have gained them acceptance as well as praise from female and male critics alike and have meant that they can address whatever topics they choose, be they controversial or even perceived to be an exclusively male domain, such as the Vedas. The visible support of respected Hindu religious leaders such as Jayendra Sarawati has helped to solidify the acceptance of these women and their theatrical productions amongst the exceedingly conservative Tamil Brahmin community that is their primary audience within the sabha system in Chennai, as well as amongst their family members, on whom they rely in order to continue this work.

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NOTES

¹ *Sabha* Theatre is a genre of Tamil-language theatre in Chennai sponsored by voluntary cultural organizations called *sabhas* that developed in the early 1950s. I have identified the major traits of the genre as the following: “patronage by *sabhas*, with their middle-class, usually Brahmin, audience base; a central theme concerning marriage alliances and/or married life; scripted witty dialogue with a thin plot and one-liner jokes, often including language jokes that code-switch between Tamil and English; a socially conservative message; and an ‘amateur aesthetic’ that involves minimal sets, costumes, lighting, and two-hour evening or weekend matinee performances” (Rudisill, 2012).

² I don’t have exact dates for all the plays. Padmini Natarajan sent me a list with titles and summaries, and dates when she had them, but the inauguration dates are missing for many plays.

³ There are too many to give a comprehensive list, but a few scholars who have addressed this topic include Partha Chatterjee (1993), Mrinhalini Sinha (1996), Sumanta Banerjee (1989), Purnima Mankekar (1999), Mary Hancock (1999), Amanda Weidman (2006), and Daves Soneji (2011).

⁴ Bombay Gnanam has acted in more than twenty serials (including *Kudumbam*, *Chellamma*, *Vaarisu*, *Kolangal*, and *Ippadikku Thendral*) as well as a few films (including *Aahaa*, *Yai Nee Romba Azhaga Irukey*, *Nala Damayanthi*, *Oru Naal Oru Kanavu*, and *Jigarthanda*), mostly as the mother character. She got her start in television serials because of director K. Balachander (for *Premi*), who started out on the stage, but later moved into working primarily with film and television.

⁵ There is a large body of literature on the anti-Brahmin movement as well as the Self-Respect Movement in Tamilnadu. A few authors I suggest on this topic include V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, Eugene Irschick, Narendra Subramanian, Marguerite Ross Barnett, and Sumathi Ramaswamy.

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PRECARIOUS CITIZENSHIP: SOCIAL ABSENCE VERSUS PERFORMATIVE PRESENCE OF NACHNI

URMIMALA SARKAR MUNSI

Abstract: “Nachni” women from the eastern part of India, are popularly known in parts of Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand as marginal performers who earn their living through a performing partnership with the Rasik (the male partner) while remaining in a fragile, yet domestic quasi- conjugal alliance with him. In research and popular writings, these women have been seen as the exploited, marginalised, and socially maligned practitioners. In the current research the signification of the social/cultural presence of the Nachni woman is sought in her performance and the communications that she creates through with her accompanists, audience and the larger society. This paper focuses on the social and the performative spaces that the Nachni inhabits, and the duality of the reception of her social self vis a vis her body. This duality of reception also brings to the fore, the need to theorise commoditisation of the woman’s body where the body, so long as it is seen as a product, and therefore a consumable, is not a threat, unlike the threatening polluting capability of a social presence of the owner of that very same body.

Keywords: nachni women, women dancer/performer, women’s marginalisation, women’s body

By way of introduction

Nachni (literally meaning the female dancer) women from the whole of the Chota Nagpur plateau in India are popularly known in parts of Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand as marginal professional performers who earn their living through a performing partnership with the male partner, known as *Rasik*, (usually accepted as a connoisseur of poetry, dance and music), while remaining in a fragile yet domestic quasi- conjugal alliance with him. The word *Rasik* comes from *Rasa*. In context of the Nachni performance, the term implies an unequal and exploitative partnership. The regional history mentions several famous poets

and singers, who were well known as Rasiks of specific Nachni women. Most such men also trained Nachni women to dance and sing and also accompanied them in performances, as connoisseurs of the arts with specialised skills for singing, playing musical instruments as well as dancing. Currently, many of the Rasiks do not accompany the Nachnis in their performances. In fact they act just as the managers and agents for the Nachni, claiming the rights to control the payments received by the Nachni, and handling the performance and travel plans.

Authors like Chatterji (2009),¹ Sarkar Munsu (1998, 2010),² Chatterjea (2009),³ Chakravarti (2001)⁴ have looked at Nachni as the much maligned and exploited woman performer whose validation comes from being a paramour as well as a performing partner to her Rasik. The known Nachni women from Purulia and Singhbhum, who are the focus of this research, have a range of personal stories to narrate about their becoming professional dancing women. They also speak about being severely socially ostracised in the process, and being labelled fallen women of questionable virtues. One of the common threads in their stories is about running away from parental or conjugal home to live with male performers, who then took charge of training them as professional performers. The social implications have been talked about in popular journalistic stories as well as a few scholarly writings. It is by now well known that the family of a Nachni is expected to perform their last rites, going through the ritual processes – taking her as dead. The societal pressure and stigma force many of the families to act in the similar manner even today, even though there have been marginal improvements in the overall structure of women's positions in the region. Hence, in most cases, as the doors for any possible return to the family of origin closes permanently, the woman becomes more vulnerable to exploitations of social, sexual and performative structures. For her, the only way is to move on, as a Nachni – a professional woman performer. She acquires a new status as a performer-partner-quasi wife through a ceremony, in which she is formally accepted by the Rasik as his Nachni. The partnership has several social implications. The Nachni is known by her relationship with her Rasik – but neither is it a fully accepted performing partnership, providing an agency and a social space to her, and nor is it a marriage, through which she gets the security of a social network, such as family. She remains curiously as a bread-earner, and a paramour, while being prohibited from sharing socially accepted conjugal spaces, like the kitchen, the ritual occasions within the family or the actual domestic shared spaces that become the wife's space within the families.

In the world's so called largest 'democracy', the marginal existence of Nachni, the denial of her rights to call her partnership a 'conjugal' one, the denial of inheritance rights to her

children and even the negation of her entitlement to cremation or burial, are just some landmarks to understand her precarious existence. This structured and socially accepted ‘tradition’ necessitates a research on her status as a representative of the exploited, marginalised, and socially maligned women practitioners in the performance tradition of India.

The principle research questions in this paper centre around the epistemological, performative and social aspects of the Nachni performance – working within a larger rubric of feminist studies on dance. Epistemologically, it relies on existing and accepted normative positions that the society designates for the Nachni performers, while trying to understand the ways in which they themselves understand their position of precarity. From a socio-political perspective, the paper looks at the same precarity of the Nachni, while trying to define the concept of ‘social absence’ through the invisibility that the society assigns to her. This is where it becomes imperative for the paper to analyse the two oppositional and yet inter-dependent spaces off and on stage, where, even while acknowledging the woman dancer’s existence on the proscenium, the society cannot guarantee her a legitimate and rightful space and presence within its fold. While dealing with these questions, this paper constantly probes ways of uncovering gender implications of a woman’s body specifically in performative practices, visible freely in public spaces. It also analyses the differential readings that such performing bodies of women encounter, vis a vis disciplined and controlled female bodies, in “concealed, private sanctum of domestic spaces” (Howson, 2013, 90). Lastly, the paper tries to establish a sense of agency and power within this overarching and overwhelmingly exploitative narrative around the woman performer. It argues for a reading of a strong sense of subversion and agency in the pleasure and control that woman dancer creates, and holds on to, through the tools from within the performance, as she holds the gaze of male audience and compels them to look at the body that they refuse to acknowledge as part of their social co-habitant.

“I Exist in The Feet of the Guru”: Seeking Approval For Being Present

*Shuno shuno shabha jon,
shabha majhe kori nibedano hey.
Shukhen Babur nimontrone, hoey anondito mone,
amra ekhane korechhi agomon.
Ek dikey ma bohin, ek dikey bhai jon,
bal o briddho aaro shishu gon o hey. Shuno shuno dia mon.
Dui haath jor kori, aar doshes choron dhor, bhul truti koribe marjon hey.*

*Bidya buddhi kichhui nai, ache gurur kripa tai,
Rajobala guru podey praano hey.*

Meaning:

Listen all the people in the audience, as I humbly start my song as an offering.

We are extremely happy to be invited to perform here by Sukhen Babu.

While mothers and sisters are seated on one side, the brothers occupy the other side. There are also the elderly and the children present.

Please listen to my songs attentively.

I put my hands together and also touch the feet of the guests, to request you to please pardon me for any mistake I make here.

I am uneducated, and am not intelligent. I only have the blessings of my Guru. I submit my life to the feet of my Guru. (My translation).

The Jhumur⁵ songs that are particularly associated with the Nachni performance are known as *Nachni Shaliya Jhumur* or *Bai Nacher Jhumur* in Purulia. Some of those songs create an introductory space for the Nachni to introduce herself, giving her the freedom to put her name as the singer (not proclaiming to be the author) in the beginning of the last line. The song becomes a signature piece and also a way of thanking the patron for the invitation to perform. Through the song the Nachni claims a temporary space of signification – even though she provides a relatively more acceptable lens through the reference to the God/traditional religious teachers and thereby proclaiming a socially acceptable space as a devotee/ learner. This particular song translated above, actually gives her a way to legitimise and normalise the viewing of her performance by referring to the audience as mothers, sisters and brothers, neutralising the deep discomfort about according any place of significance to the ‘fallen’ woman, and at the same time, claiming her space in the society, as one of them. Generated within a strong patriarchal tradition, many of these popularly used songs of Nachni performance, were originally not written by women and hence presumes a certain form of female subservient subjectivity.⁶

The feet of the ‘Guru’ signifies a space that the Nachni claims for herself, even if for a little while during the performance, in ways similar to many performances related to Bhakti tradition, in Bengal. Here the ‘Guru’ signifies either the god or the religious teachers or

both, and a space at the feet of such an entity, is a reference to a temporary legitimacy for the Nachni's presence in the public space.

A historical survey of the Nachni is outside of the purview of this particular paper, but a reference to its past may be important for setting up the connections between the performance and the lived realities that the performance and the performer is placed in. Surajit Sinha (1995) has written about the feudal aristocracy, who claimed the ritual status of the Rajput Kshatriyas that developed in Purulia turning a few families from the Bhumij tribe into local zamindars (landlords), during the colonial times. He also discussed the complex relationship of the Bhumij landlords with the development of court culture in the region. Chakravarti (2001) mentions the roles the Bhumij landlords played in promoting and preserving the Nachni tradition – by employing local performers, as a more affordable option - in place of patronising *Baiji* (the trained courtesans performers from the mainstream royal court traditions). The performance of the Nachni, according to Chatterji “emerged within a feudal system and they thus share in the popular representation of the courtesan as ‘*patita nari*’ or ‘fallen woman’” (2009, 65). Since the 19th century, this form flourished under the patronage of local landlords and rural gentry and the regional feudal lords. Following the tradition of patronising art in feudal courts, these not so powerful patrons generated their own art practices through the patronage of the Rasik. Hence the woman performer has since been framed as an entertainer and an objectified body within the structure of the male gaze and appreciation. This constant evaluation of her bodily attributes as well as her abilities to please the audience visually through her dance, forces her to remain vulnerable and dependent on the approvals of her patrons. Besides she needs to be a constantly available as a domestic help, a sexual partner, and also one of the labouring bodies for work in the fields, during the agricultural seasons. All the while her principal responsibility is of course to maintain her skill as a profitable performing partner for the Rasik.

Making a living through Performance – validating the Precarious Existence within Family

The Nachni women I have interviewed over the last twenty eight years, belong to the lowest economic strata of the society and are usually from the scheduled caste⁷ groups such as Kurmi, Mahato or tribes like the Bhumij, Munda, Oraon, who make up a sizable amount of the local population. Lack of education, early marriage and generally oppressive patriarchal structures of the family are reasons for the young girls growing up in such families. They are often married off by the family at a very young age, far before the legal

age for marriage in India. Women whom I spoke with reiterate similar experiences commonly endured by most young women in the lowest economic strata in the rural parts of India. Abuse in the conjugal set up, neglect and lack of understanding in part of the husband or the new family, and incompatibility are common reasons for the women to either be sent back to their paternal homes or to run away from their marital homes to save themselves. Some of them also mention running away from their own homes to avoid forced marriage. Some of the Nachni women I interviewed also mentioned their alleged extra-marital relationships with the Rasiks as reasons for their decision to break the marriages. As in most families, in such circumstances, these women almost never find any support from their family of origin. There is even less support for the woman who wants to train to sing and dance - as a trainee/apprentice, under an experienced Nachni or a Rasik. Most of the times the reason for the family disowning the daughter is due to her wanting to become a performing partner in a relationship with a male performer.

Once the young woman leaves her family as a Nachni, there is no turning back for her, in most cases. As stated above, the declaration of her 'death' by her family, many a times, comes from the need of protecting family honour, whereas the Rasik continues to have a space within his family.

It must be understood that when the Nachni shifts out of her family home and into the Rasik's house as his lover/partner, she is already homeless, as well as without any support system replacing her family. The implication of such a partnership is economic, professional as well as social and deeply gendered. Given the form's history, the Rasik acquires and trains a Nachni, as an entertainer, who will be at his beck and call to perform, to entertain and to earn money for the Rasik and his family to survive on, and for the Rasik to get fame from. The Nachni's vulnerability or her absence in the society, also makes her more available, more exploited within the patriarchal set up of her surroundings. Whatever be the structure of accommodating her within the quasi conjugal set up, she continues to be the bread earner for the whole family, particularly in the 'lean' seasons, when the food is scarce at the end of one agricultural calendar and the next harvest is not yet ready.

The Rasik formalises the relationship with a short ceremony of putting vermilion powder⁸ on the Nachni's head. Henceforth she wears this sign of a married woman, but is not considered married and therefore no conjugal rights are there for her as protection. She lives under a constant threat of being replaced, if she refuses to perform, or if she is unable to do so due to illness, age or some other circumstance. The children of Nachni are not entitled to use their father's name, nor are they entitled to inherit any property from him.

The more well-known of the Nachni- Rasik performance duos, are invited to perform in local fairs and festivities during the ‘season’. They travel with their musical accompanists to these locations, reaching sometime during the day, performing whole night and again taking off for another performance destination in the morning. Sometimes very young children of the Nachni may accompany their mother. Traditionally, men who became Rasiks were famous in the locality as poets or singers or musicians, and accorded special place in the local courts, for his love and appreciation of art. His ‘keeping’, training and performing with the Nachni is seen as his engagement and investment in artistic endeavours. The Nachni, even when she is reluctantly acknowledged as a presence in the society - as someone’s sister, neighbour or even mother - remains the symbol of undisciplined, uncontrollable, self-indulgence – a figure outside all structures of control. She herself recognises her own precarious existence, knowing fully well her marginal status as a polluting / polluted body. She also remains a threat to the village and the community social structure because of her so-called disregard of the traditional conjugal and family values.

The Nachni may perform in open or domestic performance venues. More often Nachni women are invited to large local fairs, where one arena is reserved for this particular performance genre, out of three or four such arenas created for different performances like *Chhau*, *Baul* and other varieties. The arena is a raised platform, with audience seated on all sides. It is accessible easily from audience space, facilitating the members of the audience to go up on the platform to pin money on the Nachni’s clothes – as a show of appreciation for her art. This becomes an additional income, a tip, but at the same time makes a statement about the easy availability and accessibility of the body of the Nachni. In recent times such acts have attracted public criticism, and a few non-governmental organisations working for the welfare of the Nachnis, have raised their voice to start a campaign to stop such acts. The performers are sharply divided in their opinions. Some feel that, while performance itself is not considered as sex work, the stigma around female bodies being available for public gaze and for visual and resultant sensual consumption, creates a sense of availability around these bodies. Hence, while the woman in the domestic conjugal space is protected as a part of family property, the ‘public’ body of the Nachni does not have any protector, as she does not belong to any familial space.⁹ However despicable and demeaning an act, the pinning of money on the Nachni’s garments meant that there was an income that belonged to the woman specifically, as her body becomes the site where the transaction literally took place. Some Nachnis continue to say that this act is singled out as demeaning, as it involves and benefits only the woman in the partnership. All other much more violent

acts, like forcing a Nachni to perform night after night, without asking for her consent before signing a contract for an outside performance or accepting an advance for such performances, go on, as those benefit the male partner. Rasik, as mentioned before, acts as her manager and her master and treats the Nachni with all the arrogance born out of such a position of power as well as all the sanctioned control that the patriarchal society allocates as rights, to the husbands. This arrangement continues without being frowned upon by the society, and are normalised within the accepted framework of ‘artistic’ partnership of the Nachni- Rasik duo.

Traditionally, a Nachni did not have any right to what she earned through night after night of hard labour. The Rasik was her master and therefore the rightful owner of everything she earned. Of course now there are exceptions. Some women are vocal enough to state bluntly “Nobody will look after me when I am infirm, I have to take care of myself”.¹⁰ But there are still so many others, who fear that they will soon be replaced by another Nachni, ‘just as one would replace a cow which has stopped giving milk’.¹¹

The society denies Nachni’s presence in many ways. She is socially ostracised, stopped from attending many social functions of the community, and of course not allowed free access to either her own family home or the Rasik’s house. The only place and time that belongs to her, and she can claim as her own, are the proscenium or the demarcated space for her performance, and that too only for the duration of the performance. Hence, the Nachni exists between the excitement of coming alive by being present as a performer and by controlling the gaze of her audience and the anxiety of becoming absent the moment she is not visible. She fears that she would not have a presence, and would cease to exist – if and when she stops performing. She has seen this happening to most of her predecessors. She learns soon, to make the most of the temporary live-ness that the proscenium offers her, and then to retreat into her restricted space where shrouds of social marginality puts her in the same category of an absent being. In other words she dies every time her performance ends.

In this context, the social existence of Nachni needs to be discussed in order to understand the complexity of her absence. Unlike locally famous performers of Chhau and Baul traditions of the locality, the Nachni tradition exists in the margins. Every member of the community knows that she exists, many make up the regular audience for her performances, but no one talks about her. A Nachni woman may stay within the boundaries of her Rasik’s house, in the same or a different room separately built for her. She may also

seek to move to a separate hut, if she is economically self-sufficient. In case the Rasik is married, the space for the Nachni is more strictly segregated and restricted.

The significance of agency and ownership of the body become central at this point, in relation to the absence that is forced on the woman. The ‘commoditised body’ vis a vis the ‘regulated body’ (Lupton, 1994), need to be understood in the context of ‘being’ and ‘having’ a body (Howson, 2013) whereby control and rights to what that body is or does, can become a part of the feminist debate. Here the central focus must then be on the duality of reception and the criticality of the commoditisation of the woman’s body where the body, so long as it is seen as a product, and therefore a consumable, is not a threat, unlike the threatening / polluting capability of a social presence of the owner of that very same body.

Alexandra Howson (2013, 10) talks about a duality of understanding the existence of the body as an entity, independent of processes of social constitution, or as existing only in relation to the practices and processes that produce them. On the question of rights over the earnings of the Nachni, these above discussions point towards a convenient legitimisation of acceptance of the Nachni as a socially absent but conveniently available tool for making a living, so far as her capacity to support the family of the Rasik is concerned.

Living Through / for Performance and Becoming Absent/ ‘Dying’ as soon as the Performance Finishes

Chatterji writes:

Most scholars would agree that the cultures of the local courts in regions like Purulia in which the institutions of the *nachni* and the *rasika* flourished was crucial for the development of the *jhumur*. yet even though they consider *jhumur* as part of the folk music of Purulia they find it more difficult to include the institution of the *nachni* or even the *nachni nach* as part of its folk culture (2009, 86).

The night-long Nachni performance consists of *Jhumur gaan* (the songs) and *Nachni nach* (the dances). They are never solo acts. Usually, there are a number of Nachnis invited for each of these performance events, and they take turn in performing a segment of half an hour each, in a cyclic order. The stage is shared by Nachni women, the Rasiks, and the musicians of two or three women scheduled to perform through the night. Each Nachni gets a slot of about an hour, and then sits down to rest while the others get their turns. For

each of them, the performance begins with a devotional song with introductory movements, and progressing through the night with more rhythmic songs and dance movements. The Nachni *Shaliya* Jhumur songs are known for their varied themes of devotion, love, sensuousness, latent or blatant eroticism and most often gendered metaphors and sexualised lyrics. The movements correspond to the type of songs foregrounding the eroticised and sexualised body of the woman dancer - playing on creating a sexualised presence that play on the male imagination on one hand, and becoming a popular and much sought after performance for the region. *Prem / priti* (profound love), *bhakti* (devotion), *biraho* (despair due to separation), *nirasha* (hopelessness) and *kamona* (sensual cravings) remain the popular themes. The performance starts with an introduction and then moves into devotional renditions. Slowly as the night progresses the rhythms become more vigorous and the dances become more sensual with the use of suggestive movements signifying enticing glances, jerks of the breasts and the pelvis and exaggerated hip movements. Much of the repertoire has changed in recent times. Audience demands for renditions of popular Bollywood movie songs are resisted still, but a few of the younger Nachni women give in to the public demands and include such songs to increase their own popularity, after performing the introductory song.

The Nachni dance principally is based on two rhythmic structures, that of *mota tala*, or the slow rhythmic part which generally starts each of the presentations, often acting as the introduction to them and the *tin tala*, or the faster sixteen beat rhythm structure, with which she performs simple steps, circular movements, and jumps. The body movements can be located in four zones in her dance. She uses the head and face largely for facial expressions and isolating neck movements that are integral part of Indian dance movements. The upper body is used to create exaggerated front - back thrusts and movements of the bust, activating the torso as well as highlighting and generating attention to the breasts. The hands take a major role to extend, enhance and enlarge movements of the upper body as well as help in expressing emotive words of the songs. The third area of emphasis is around the hips. Jerking forward - backward movements of the pelvis as well side swings of the hips are used with rhythmic foot steps to draw attention to the lower middle part of the body, creating a sensual as well as a sexual reference point of directing the audience gaze. The feet movements are mainly made up of repeated right and left foot steps with one of them flat and the other with the toes touching the ground, with the heel lifted, ensuring mobility of the dancer in linear or circular pattern on the stage or simply for keeping rhythm, with hand and body movements, especially in the more rhythmic and rigorous parts of the dance.

Ramsay Burt talks about live theatrical performance, where the “meanings are produced through a collective and reflexive awareness, shared between performers and an audience, of nuances of interpretation within intersections of a number of over determined discourses” (2004, 34). The participatory process of meaning making in case of Nachni performances involves the Nachni, her Rasik, the musician who accompany and respond to nuances of the gestures, by closely following and communicating with the woman performer who continues to address them as her principle and immediate audience, and last but not the least the surrounding crowd –which is largely dominated by male members of the community. The social unease and the deep rooted prejudice against the “professional” dancing woman of loose moral virtue, does not become a hindrance in the process of watching and appreciating the performances – thereby granting and allowing a presence to the body in the state of dancing, if not beyond.

Even though Nachni women have carried on the tradition of singing a particular form of Jhumur, they are considered only to be the performers who learn and then reproduce the form. Traditionally women do not write Jhumur songs. Except for the Nachni, women also do not sing Jhumur publicly. The Jhumurs sung by the Nachni are written by male poets, which usually carry signatures of the poet in the last line. Only at times one finds some of the older and more well-known Nachni adding her own name as a signature to a song while presenting it. In the context of performance and its connection to creating a sense of power and status, Morcom writes that dance and music can be seen as potentially feminising in terms of emotion and aesthetics and also with respect to the dynamics, audience, status and power (2013, 102). Nobody can deny the Nachni women their presence in the performance arena. That is a space where she holds attention, and also becomes undeniably present through the performance which draws attention to her historically and socially inscribed body and the embodied practice. Discussing dance and presence MacKendrick mentions that “the dancer’s body is indistinguishable from the dance but only while the dance lasts” (2004, 145). The audience, during a Nachni performance, remains visibly engaged and captive through the night, setting aside their uneasiness about the woman, and only seeing the performer. In other words, the only time that a Nachni is taken to be a member of the community she entertains, is while she is dancing. The moment the dance is over, and the Nachni is seen resting in a quiet place in the festival ground, she has to retreat into the shadows of the margins. The same audience which witnessed and appreciated her dance, will not cross her shadows or be ‘caught dead talking to her’.¹² The largely male dominated audience comes to enjoy the Nachni performance and sits appreciatively through the whole night, enjoying the sensual qualities of the songs, the innuendos made through carefully worded lines of the songs sung by the Nachni and her Rasik and / or accompanists, and the

dance – which is often structured in a sexually enticing manner. The very same audience is afraid to cross her shadows during the day, if their paths cross accidentally. Hence presence and absence need to be put in conjunction as well as opposition where the Nachni, her presence and her performance are concerned. The precarity for Nachni, lies in the very fact that, she needs to constantly work on her capacity to maximise the effect of her presence only by means of her appearance, appeal and performance – because, as soon as she ceases to be able to generate and control her power to ‘hold’ the audience, she is redundant in the eyes of the society – and even in the eyes of her only so called social connection, that is the Rasik.

Presence, aliveness and the issues of ‘Pleasure’ Countering ‘Precarity’

Butler writes

So it is, I would suggest, on the basis of this question, who counts as a subject and who does not, that performativity becomes linked with precarity. The performativity of gender has everything to do with who counts as a life, who can be read or understood as a living being, and who lives, or tries to live, on the far side of established modes of intelligibility. (Butler, 2009, iv)

The Nachni performances need to be read as continuous struggles to count as living beings, through their songs, their dances, and all their performative communications that refer to patterns of lived lives – in the society that denies her recognition. Though the Nachni is no ‘a life’, of the society in which she is present and absent at the same time, references of every day, love, devotion, conjugality, make up her musical, and embodied repertoire. Her songs often mention so-called normal human relationships, and also are commentaries on conversations between married couples, in the changing social scenario. It is ironic that she refers to and draws on a societal structure of which she is no longer a part, enhancing her space as the outsider, looking in through a window that only allows her a glimpse of the world within, but never lets her become a part of it. A Jhumur song composed as a conversation between a wife and a husband - sung by Sombari Mahato and Rabi Singh (recorded during my interview of them in 1988¹³) highlights the precarity of the Nachni as it sets her condition in a stark comparison to a socially accepted wife.

The wife says:’

*Orey biha kartey saadh lagey aar aant lagey akhan,
Aaro bujhbey chhele pulley hobe re jokhon.
Baro loker jamai holi, bish hajar taka peli,
Man kata gur chira khey.
Bhobishyot shukher ashaay, dhaak dhol bajnai,
Rijhey rijhey dhukey jel-khanai.
Jato ache nari jati ki bolibo hai,
Santaan bananor machine nari re banai.*

Translation:

You were so keen to marry me and now you have changed soon
after we are finally married.
You will understand what marriage is about even more clearly
when we have children
You have become the son in law of a wealthy man, and have
accepted twenty thousand rupees from him.
Now be satisfied with jaggery and pressed rice.
I had hopes for a happy life, but have ended up in this jail.
I lament the fate of the women, as the society has turned us all
into the child bearing machine. [My translation]

The Husband says:

*Jato achhe nari jati ki bolibo hai,
Kathai kathai purush ke aag thengey tey nachai.
Aar amar upai nai, parlee dada chayera dekhai,
Doshbar khopa ta ke bandhey.
Jora jora makak shaban, ghontai ghonai mukhey paan,
Tin tin din Ra pawa bhaar.
Kajer kono aarh nai, Raajar beti khawa porai,
New fashion er juta jama chai.
Maartey gele ultey maare, baaper ghorer gorob Korey,
Omon boukey pawa hoilo daai.
Shahsur ghorer lagan bujhan je kore baaper ghorey,
Emon bou ke charai bhalo amar bichaare.*

Translation:

What can I say about the women,
They do not let go of any opportunity to make the men dance to their tune.
I have no option now, otherwise I would have opted to leave the wife,
She is always adjusting her hair, and needing two soaps every few days,
She chews on the betal leaves constantly,
Sometimes three days pass before one can speak to her.
She is not interested in doing any work and yet acts like a princess in terms of her habits,
And is always interested in fashionable clothes and shoes.
She hits back if she is hit, and always refers to the great life she had in her father's house.
It is tough to live with her.
It is far better separate from a wife who reports about her life in the in-laws' house to her family. [My translation]

The song is about conjugality, adjustments, expectations, dowry, and social constructs around marriage and family life. It mentions the wife's frequent visits to the *baaper ghar* (her father's house) time and again as a refuge, referring to an ordinary married woman's life, even though a common condition in case of the Nachni women is the insecure position that they have in society and their inability to go back to their fathers' places, once they have left to become professional dancers. Through such songs and others on themes of illicit or unrequited love, memories of childhood, siblings and parents, devotional love songs between Radha and Krishna - the devotional and the sensual, the traditional and the contemporary, the regular and the irregular relationships, are put in opposition as well as in reference to each other, just as the Nachni traverses her social as well as professional worlds within and through the marginal scape of her performance.

The marginality of the Nachni woman is enforced through the society's refusal to grant her a social space, as a daughter or wife. Her economic vulnerability stems from the nature of her profession, whereby she is dependent on her bodily attributes and her ability to continue to dance and sing. The fear is further enhanced because of the exploitative nature of her partnership with her Rasik – whereby she is consistently used to bring in cash payment against her public performances. Her psychological vulnerability is rooted in the constant assertion of an aggressive social structure, which continues to punish her and her children, as a result of her having chosen to be a professional entertainer. But the Nachni encounters all these marginalities which categorise her as un-disciplinable, and therefore unacceptable member of the community. She negotiates and occupies space with her performance. Her tools are her body and her dance - the very same ones that make her socially dangerous and

therefore unacceptable, in the first place. It, therefore, becomes important to create a register or marker of the commitment, the excitement, the catharsis, the empathy and the pure subjective engagement and kinaesthetic acknowledgement of pleasure that a dancer creates for herself and others through her performance. From a feminist perspective on discourses around precarity (Butler, 2009), it is important for this current research to ensure that, while talking about the precarity¹⁴ of the Nachni's social existence, the analysis does not create yet another story of exploitative disenfranchisement. It is true that the form of subjectivity that is born out of precarity of the living conditions and consistent social exploitations is out of one's own control. But it is important to acknowledge that precarity is also a condition in which subversions and resistance against on-going structures of hegemonic dominations are often produced. Hence it is imperative that this paper provides a space to discursively foreground the embodied empowerment that becomes available to the Nachni women through their dance and the sensory engagement. Such a sense of control exerted over the gazes of the audience, lends a performative presence to the Nachni, even if only during the duration of the performance.

Dance in itself – regardless of the audience, the impacts, or the socio-economic implications - is a source of tremendous kinaesthetic involvement and a resultant “Narcissistic pleasure” (Rainer, 1999). In her Interview to Lyn Blumenthal¹⁵ Rainer talks about her first performance:

It was as good as an orgasm. I knew that was where I lived, that was where I belonged, doing that work and presenting myself physically to an audience. And that, of course, was part of the charisma. That is the urgency, and that pleasure in exhibiting oneself, is part of the seduction of an audience. The performer has to experience that in order for the audience to get a sense of this presence or to be taken in by it (1999, 63).

The Nachni learns the art of being hyper- feminine. She is taught to sing while dancing and emoting. The hyper-emphasising of different parts of the body to highlight sensuous eroticism and excessive use of specific invitations with the eye movements, as well as an on-going conversation through the songs with the Rasik and the musicians are enhanced and encouraged by the active responses from them.

Hips and Breasts are two important parts that are given special attention while the training is on for the Nachni. The exaggerated thrusting of the breast signifies a way of creating a very clear presence of a sexualised female body for a gendered gaze as well as reading. For people trained in some of the classical dances like *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi* (where side-wise movements of torso shifts the reference to the body carefully away from the

materiality of the feminine body in general and the breasts in particular, to the sculpted postures of the temple architecture), the use of the torso and the bust is very carefully monitored through the grammars of those dances - reconstructed in the post-colonial restructuring of the dances.

While one may be struck by the fact that Nachni has little or no agency about how long and where she would perform and even how many performances she would like to do, one must acknowledge the fact that she is the centre of attention, holding the audience with her power, presence and dance – of course with the help of the accompanists, but not because of them. Her pleasure and involvement – almost never acknowledged by herself, her Rasik, or her accompanists, and even her audience - is what makes her performance come alive – and of course she experiences a tremendous amount of power and pleasure which makes precariousness of her existence recede to the background during the performance.

The body of the Nachni becomes a tool here, honed and used to fight the social erasure on the very ground where it is created, and where it is forced on the woman performer. The movements are specific to the genre, and are learned through training and processed through subjective kinaesthetics whereby the personal experience of meaning making through communicative movements of dance, are performed within the socially structured viewing possibilities. The dance is also generated by the need to maximise visual and sensual appeal. On the one hand it can be lamented that the woman as a practitioner is hardly in control of what she dances on the proscenium. But on the other hand, there is a tremendous amount of power and agency in the final execution of the movements. The vulnerability of the viewed body of the Nachni, is countered by or at times exists in tandem with the dancer's experience of pleasure and power. This draws us into a discussion on the conceptualisation of those bodies and embodied acts which do not or cannot generate a 'sympathetic response' that Foster (2011, 142) explains to be generated as a result of the imagination of the viewers about 'why and how the person was experiencing the feeling he or she was feeling'. Such a communication is often impossible, in case of the Nachni performance, simply because the socially structured pre-constructed evaluation restricts and regulates the viewers' opinions about the dance and the dancer. Hence, there are a number of questions that need to be asked. How does one register what those dancers receive or perceive as reception from the audience? Why does this profession continue to attract young women to leave their families (before or after marriage)? Why does she dare to dance when it means 'social death' for her? The ideal and utopic answer one would like to believe in, is the tremendous power of dance in generating pleasure. But maybe a realistic answer would point towards reasons like economic and social vulnerabilities.

Summing Up

The paper must be brought to a close describing the end of a Nachni's life and framing her within the layers of vulnerabilities discussed above. Some Rasiks are known to have had more than one Nachnis, in the patriarchal structure that exists within such a marginal practice. The reason given is that he was attracted to, or was wanting to replace the aging Nachni with a younger performer as his partner. Instances of Nachnis keeping more than one Rasik at the same time, are not known. It is known, however, that in a few cases, a Nachni has left one Rasik and moved in with another. The death of a Rasik – has seen the Nachni mourning in the socially acceptable ways by eating vegetarian food and wearing white sarees for a period, in the same way as a widow is expected to do. However, this does not ensure any social support from the family of the Rasik. In case of the Nachni's death, even now, the body is dragged to the jungle and left there to rot or be eaten by wild animals, as the society still refuses to acknowledge the Nachni's dead body as a body of one of its own member. Recent interventions of some non-governmental agencies have started a debate, and have seen some exceptions to the rules. But her fate depends entirely on the decisions made by the community that has enjoyed her performances over the years. The idea of absence and vulnerability becomes reinstated, thus, through this act of ultimate rejection, whereby even in death her 'presence' cannot be acknowledged. In her death she passes on the precarity to the next generation of Nachni women.

NOTES

1 Chatterji's work on folklore and performative arts of Purulia, gives a detailed historical perspective of the *Jhumur* songs extensively used in the Nachni performances, analysing the different genres of this form, considered to be the representative form from Purulia. In that context she mentions the Nachni performance and the aesthetics of eroticism and enticement.

2 My Ph.D. research on performance traditions and their socio cultural contexts, looked at the Nachni from both performative and social angles. Extensive analysis of songs and a detailed ethnographic account that became a large part of my Ph.D. thesis, also helped me in formulating a feminist reading of professional women dancers. In my later work on women professional and semi-professional dancers, I have looked at the economic implications of this profession, whereby the Nachni remains exploited and marginalised,

even though she remains the principle bread earner throughout the lean season in the agricultural calender.

3 Chatterjea looks at Nachni, as one of the much exploited women dancers from Bengal in her article on women dancers in Bengal.

4 Chakravarti's book is the only one solely dedicated to the Nachni performers, creating a historical as well as ethnographic perspective for the tradition.

5 *Jhumur* is a particular musical form from the south western uplands of West Bengal and its neighbouring areas within Jharkhand. The *Jhumur* songs are classified according to the variety of ways it is sung, the themes and the occasions per performances they are used in. They are commonly sung all through the year for different occasions and festivities, and have been claimed as the folk tradition of the region. This particular Nachni *Shaliya Jhumur* song was recorded by me during my Ph.D. fieldwork in 1988. The singer Rajobala is no more. She was one of the better known performers in Purulia trained in dance as well as singing, and was popular for her performances with her Rasik Koka Tanti.

6 The Bhakti movement, with its particular aesthetic principles of personal devotion to god, which have been mentioned as the origin of such poetic traditions, also posited the artist, poet, devotee as a ever-eager student initiated in the path of devotion.

7 According to the constitution of India, the official schedule of certain disadvantaged and economically deprived castes – include certain caste groups who are protected by the Government of India by certain special reservations and concessions.

8 Applying vermillion powder on the bride's head is a standard procedure and a part of the traditional marriages ceremony among many communities in eastern and central parts of India. The symbolic partnership is given a form of acceptability, by following parts of the Hindu marriage ceremonies, without going through the whole structure of the elaborate acts, which are essential for Hindu social marriages.

9 Time and again the reference to the status of the Nachni as the 'outcast' is encountered in the context of social position of these women, whereas the conceptual understanding of her presence is always in terms of her 'impure' body' – implying her easy availability, even though she is actually not into prostitution.

10 Sandhya Rani, in her interview (in Purulia, on 12/04/2008) to author, clarified that she knew that she had to take care of herself, and she made provisions to save for her future.

11 Ibid.

12 Ramnath Mahato of Purulia, during his conversation with the author, (in Balarampur, on 17/09/2008) had asserted that most people in the village ‘would not be caught dead’, talking to Nachni during the day at all. In fact traditionally it was a practice to avoid even their shadows.

13 Sombari Mahato and Rabi Singh in their interview (in Purulia, on 17/09/1988), described the different contents of the songs commonly sung by the Nachni- Rasik duo, who were famous within the district of Purulia in West Bengal and far beyond in the neighbouring state of Jharkhand (then Bihar).

14 ‘Precarity’, according to Butler ‘characterises that politically induced condition of maximised vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection’.

15 Rainer, in her book *A Woman Who.... : Essays, Interviews, Scripts*, included her interview by Lyn Blumenthal, in a chapter “Profile”, where she talked about her first performance experience (pp. 63).

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HEREDITY ABANDONED, AND KANNAGI'S COURAGEOUS DECISION TO ACT IN SPECIAL DRAMA

SUSAN SEIZER

Abstract : Women artists have performed in the Tamil theatre genre known as Special Drama since the early twentieth century, though they have been highly stigmatized for their participation. Based on ethnographic fieldwork with Special Drama artists in the early 1990s, I returned in 2014- 2015 to conduct a follow- up study on the subsequent generations of drama family lineages. I became increasingly concerned – largely because this proved a primary concern of the artists themselves – with problems posed by the lack of any established route for the cultural transmission of knowledge of this field. In this essay I document one hereditary acting family lineage in which the stigma on stage actresses has resulted in a silencing of family history. I discuss Special Drama artists' ideas for how to encourage subsequent generations to take up this profession, and how my own presence and support contributed to their efforts to repatriate the artistic tradition. I focus specifically on the courageous decision of one young woman, a member of the fifth generation in the hereditary acting lineage I document, to buck the trend of her generation and become a dramatic Heroine even in the face of the globalizing social and economic climate of contemporary India.

Keywords: Kannagi, hereditary acting lineage, special drama actress, special drama community, fifth generation family, Tamil stage ethnography, Indian cultural anthropology

A chaste woman with only one breast
Stood in the thick shade of the kino
Tree, incandescent in its golden flowers.
— Ilango Adigal, *The Cilappatikaram*

[They] were the ones who had what to lose, the respectable, successful segments of their community that didn't have in its families such a reputable past. In quieter times it had been enough to ignore and deny. When the last of the generation [. . .] had gone silent, when all the plots on their side were full, the descendants waited what they thought was a decent amount of time for an indecent bunch and sealed up the graveyard for good.

— Nathan Englander, *The Ministry of Special Cases*

Return

“Let this line end with me.” A generation ago, this was a repeated refrain in interviews I conducted with *Special Drama* actresses in Tamilnadu, India. Visiting these same women again a full generation later, I see that their wishes have come true: fewer than 5% of those entering this professional theater today are hereditary drama artists, compared with a roughly 60% figure a generation ago.¹ What has made such a dramatic change possible?

The precipitous drop-off in the cultural transmission of this popular vernacular art has multiple causes and many consequences. In this essay I repopulate the statistical-historical record with some of the very real people whose lives are affected by these changes. I focus on professional actresses in Tamil stage drama, as it is the women in this field (as is the case in so many fields, in so many places) who have borne the brunt of a demeaning social gaze. The stigma that attaches to women in this profession figures centrally in their decision NOT to pass their experience on to their children, a decision that in turn shapes the current state of the art of Tamil popular theatre.

I focus here on the courageous decision of one young woman from a hereditary acting family to become a Special Drama actress in twenty-first century India. I call her Kannagi, a pseudonym. As a member of the fifth generation of the family charted in Figure 1, Kannagi played children's roles in Special Drama when young. She is thus already part of what is interchangeably referred to by artists as the *naadaka kudumbam* (the “drama family”), the *naadaka jaathi* (the “drama caste”) and the *naadaka ulakam* (the “drama world”).

Kannagi is, however, the only member of her generation in this lineage to enter the drama field professionally, as an adult, to play adult roles.

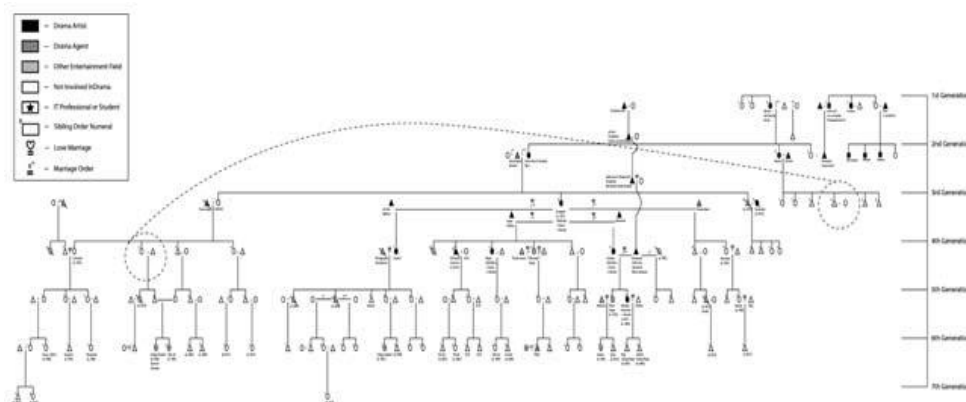


Image 1. Kinship chart spanning seven generations of Kannagi's family (see also appendix - I)

By choosing the name “Kannagi” for the heroine of my story, I mean to invoke the heroine of the ancient Tamil epic poem the *Cilappatikaram* (*The Story of an Anklet*), composed probably in the fifth century CE by Ilango Adigal.² In Adigal's epic poem, chaste wife Kannagi becomes incensed at the unjust sentence meted out to her innocent husband by the King of Madurai. The King believes his corrupt minister when told that Kannagi's husband, Kovalan – now a poor man, having recently reformed after years of debauchery (spending all his money on keeping a dancer as his mistress!), headed out to market to pawn his wife's bejeweled anklet — is the thief who stole the Queen's anklet. Without an investigation, the king orders his soldiers to execute Kovalan. In vengeful, righteous rage at this injustice, Kannagi rips off her right breast and flings it at the city of Madurai, causing it to burst into flame.

My heroine Kannagi's act of taking up the unjustly stigmatized role of stage actress similarly has something of this fiery flair of desperation. Her decision to act again as an adult, at the age of thirty- five, comes after years of financial and marital difficulty. In choosing to act, Kannagi has dared to buck the trend of her generation. The liberalization policies enacted by the Narasimha Rao government in 1991 changed the economic landscape of urban India, and with it the aspirations of a generation of young people. Born between 1980-2000, this generation is made up of those who came of age in, and are now seeking (or are soon to seek) employment in, a nation open to foreign investment and privatization as never before in independent India (Lukose, 2009).

A Note on Pseudonyms

All personal names in this essay and on the accompanying family tree are pseudonyms, and this is the first publication in which I am using pseudonyms. Why now? the reader may well ask, since Kannagi is an actress, and thus a public personage. When I first wrote about Special Drama artists, their lives as public performers was indeed my focus. I was primarily concerned with how artists managed the stigma that accrued to them as stage performers, whether they were onstage or off. Everyone I interviewed and wrote about in that first study was a public personage who expected me to use their real names in retelling their stories. For the most part, I kept private lives out of my published writing, including anything artists shared with me “off the record.” Until now I have treated the everyday interactions and conversations about which I did not write quite differently from events of public record. Staged performance existed in the limelight, while everyday life only in its shadows. Now that I have begun to write about the more personal aspects of being a Special Drama actress, however, and the repercussions Kannagi’s decision has had on relations with her extended family, it seems only fitting to use pseudonyms.

I have chosen to use the names of famous fictional characters from literature, plays, myths and epics — both Eastern and Western in origin — to name those whose tale I tell here. I do this in the hope that these names will, in a century where films, plot lines, archetypes (and other types) flow back-and-forth with ease between cultural origins and cultural destinations, carry with them their auras of either dastardly villainous-ness or valorous heroism. I borrow said auras from wherever I find them, as long as they resonate with me. Is this the right way to judge either their affect or their effect? If not, how else should a contemporary writer, steeped in such broadly circulating cultural stories, proceed?

I’ve drawn from an ancient epic in Tamil poetry for naming my heroine *Kannagi*. I’ve used the names Shakespeare gave to Lear’s two ungrateful daughters, *Goneril* and *Regan*, to name the evil step-sisters of my Kannagi’s mother. This is a woman I think of as a combination of *Cordelia* . . . and Cinderella: kind to everyone, somewhat naïve, and sorely mistreated by her cruel stepsisters. Here I call her Cordelia. I also took the names *Edgar* and *Edmund*, again from *King Lear*, to name another complicated pair of good and evil alit in the branches of Kannagi’s family tree. Edgar, the honest son of Shakespeare’s loyal Gloucester, names here too a son who has worked hard to escape trouble in the land, while I have feminized the name of Gloucester’s bastard son to name this honest boy’s grandmother, *Edmunda*, as she has proven most two-faced of all. And I used the playfully palindromic name *Cimmada* to refer to she who took on the *Adamic* role of naming all her aunt’s children.

This polyandrous aunt herself I've called *Draupadi*, hoping to call to mind the heroine of the *Mahabharat*. My Draupadi had four husbands (as she referred to them) and nine children. Cordelia is her seventh child. Cordelia has a husband, the good *Kent*, and two daughters, viduri and our heroine Kannagi. I call her elder daughter *Viduri* to summon to mind vidura, third son of vyasa and narrator of the *Mahabharat*. In this feminized form, viduri narrated to me many of the tales I here shape into this ethnographic text.

Finally, my trust in the aptness of these pseudonyms warrants reflection: to what extent do the stories we already know inform those we think to tell? To a very great extent, I suspect. Indeed, using pseudonyms has helped me not only to shape but also to grasp the contours of the epic drama I see playing out at present over seven generations of this one artistic family. My confidence in their selection is buttressed by the peals of delighted laughter with which my choices have been met by Viduri, my competent confidante, as we cackle on Skype over this wicked brew of east-west-north and an increasingly global south.

A Family Tree and a Theatrical Genre

Born in 1980, Kannagi first entered the field of Special Drama as a child in pre-liberalization India. This was 1989. At nine she played children's roles, just as her parents and her forebears on both her maternal and paternal sides had done in preceding generations.³ But she stopped acting at the onset of puberty, which just happened to coincide with big changes in the surrounding economic terrain of the nation. Madurai, Kannagi's birthplace, is an ancient city that is nevertheless also frequently described as an overgrown village; not nearly as cosmopolitan as the state capital Chennai, Madurai is a fascinating blend of contemporary sensibility and proudly-held traditi on. In Madurai in 2015, Kannagi chose to return to the Special Drama stage as a Heroine. For reasons I hope to make clear in the following pages, her return to the stage was simultaneously a radical move for her generation and a victory for a community that embraced her re- entrance as evidence of the potential for renewal and revitalization of their artistic tradition.

Returning briefly to Figure 1, note that not only is Kannagi the lone stage artist in the fifth generation of her lineage but also that no child in the sixth generation has so far taken up the art either. In prior generations, children of the ages represented here would have begun playing children's roles, as did Kannagi. What are they doing instead? As the little stars inside the outlines of circles and triangles on the chart show, six members of the sixth generation are following the upwardly- mobile career path of "studies" (*padippu*) in

computer science and engineering. I chose a star as the symbol I would use to identify these children to reflect how they are perceived by their families: the stars indicate ascendancy beyond the morass of their hereditary profession, up into an “India rising” in a globalized world where the goal is to land an information technology job, preferably with a foreign company like Google or Amazon.⁴ Instead of a star, a darkened circle indicates that Kannagi is a Special Drama actress. And while some – including many in her extended family – would find this dark spot a fittingly symbolic blemish, and see it as a condemning mark, to me as well as to her village audiences, and to the Special Drama community that has warmly welcomed her on her return to the stage as a Heroine, Kannagi’s entrance deserves celebration: this is her star turn. She comes back in 2015 after nearly 20 years of absence from the stage. A chosen family, her drama family, the community of artists she has now re-joined, rallied around Kannagi at her debut performance in ways that bespoke a unified effort to respond, productively and positively, to an otherwise overwhelming tide of hereditary abandonment.

This essay is thus also an effort to map the circumstances that paved way for Kannagi’s re-entry into Tamil Special Drama. These are circumstances in which I am heavily involved, not only as an anthropologist and cultural historian, but also, in a fictive- become- real kin network that has held me close and proven central to my understanding of the Tamil *naadaka ulakam* over the past twenty-five years, as a sister.⁵ The contemporary history of Kannagi’s return to the Special Drama stage is thus partly mine too. I have been a spectator and an actor (a *spectactor*, to use Augusto Boal’s apt coinage for an observer who also engages actively in creating outcomes she desires), a researcher and a patron of this art, and much more participant than quiescent observer in this second round of ‘deep hanging out’ that characterizes my own and well as so many others’ experience of anthropological fieldwork (Boal, 2002).⁶

The Tamil theatrical genre known as “Special Drama” (*Speshal Naadakam* is the hybrid English-Tamil term for this hybridized form of theatre, a specified subset of *Icai Naadakam*, or “Music Drama”) is *speshal* in that it brings individual artists together “specially” for each and every performance. That is, once trained in its repertory of plays, artists are booked individually for any given Special Drama performance: there are no troupes, no directors, and no group rehearsals. Individual artists join together onstage for a full night of performance. A community made up of Special Drama artists has grown up in and through this unusual theatrical practice. The community supports all that is involved in maintaining Special Drama as a profession.

Spread across the south-central region of Tamilnadu, there are nineteen Drama Actors' *Sangams* (associations) throughout the state. Special Drama has been an active part of the theatre world in south India for well over a century, beginning in the 1890s. Women have been a part of this tradition for the majority of that time, though they have been highly stigmatized for their participation. Indeed, the entrance of women onto the popular puranic stage is usually held responsible for the stigma that now clings to the whole theatrical genre (Seizer, 2005).

I carried out my first ethnographic fieldwork with Special Drama artists in the early 1990s (preliminary research in 1989-90 led to a sustained two years from 1991-1993). In 2014-2015 I returned to conduct a follow-up study focused on the subsequent generations in hereditary acting family lineages. In this essay, when I use the phrase "hereditary acting lineage," I am referring to families that contain two or more generations of Special Drama artists. I present here the trajectory of one such multi-generational hereditary acting lineage. The experiences from which I learned in researching this lineage provide a view of the combined forces of stigma and silence that are exerted — even within hereditary acting families — on subsequent generations.

Silence

Silence. Not telling anyone who doesn't already know that you are, or were, an actress. Or that your kin — your mother, your aunt, your grandmother or your great-grandmother — is, or was, an actress. The first time I encountered silence about their hereditary profession in this family was when I learned of the love marriage of Kannagi's cousin Amalya in 2011. Amalya is also a member of the fifth generation of this family lineage. After graduating college, Amalya worked for a brief time at the new department store that had recently opened in the centre of town. This big, bustling department store, open 365 days a year, ushered into the legendary ancient city of Madurai a whole new style of shopping. During her brief employment at the department store, Amalya met a handsome young manager. He was a recent MBA from a wealthy Chettiyar family. She soon left the job at the department store to pursue an MBA correspondence course. She and the manager, however, had begun texting each other . . . and six months later they eloped, much to the chagrin of their families. Family opposition notwithstanding, just three weeks later they had a big wedding reception in Madurai, financed largely by the owner of the department store and attended by many department store co-workers. Here were rituals in the new public sphere standing in for traditions abandoned in the private sphere. The bride's side of the family — Amalya's parents, her aunts and uncles, and her cousins, including

Kannagi– did attend, though only two members of the groom’s family came, his mother and brother. All his other relatives were too angry and disappointed that their smart young man had married a woman so beneath their own class and caste status to attend the reception.

I met the newlyweds just a few weeks after their wedding. They proudly showed me their wedding photo album and we sat and chatted all afternoon, drinking tea. That evening as Amalya, Kannagi and I travelled together in an auto-rickshaw past the very department store where this love story began, Amalya leaned over and whispered to Kannagi “She knows not to tell him, right?” My ears pricked up: not tell him what? I asked what it was I shouldn’t tell. “He doesn’t know anything about drama and all that” came the reply. I was confused; what could they mean by “he doesn’t know?” I had just seen pictures of Kannagi’s mother, Cordelia, and her Aunt Regan in the wedding album, both of whom were quite high-profile Special Drama actresses in Madurai. “Just don’t say anything, ok?”

My mind was going a kilometer a minute in the small back seat of that three-wheeler. I could have blurted out anything at any time earlier that day! Why didn’t anyone tell me this was a secret? And how was it a secret anyway, since the actresses in the family were at the wedding reception; what did the groom make of them? “They’re just my aunts,” said Amalya. Indeed. Meaning, what more is there to say? Nothing. Nothing more is required, unless one were to make the unwise choice of actually telling about them being actresses. Aunts will simply be assumed to be “normal” Tamil women, doing the things that “normal” Tamil women do: cooking, raising a family, sending their kids to school, being a homemaker. Silence is the safer strategy here; why court trouble in a climate already rife with disapproval?

This experience in the back seat of that rickshaw with Kannagi and Amalya started me on this follow-up research. The invisibility it bespoke shook me. I already knew that actresses were concerned to not let the local public in the town or city where they lived know that they performed on stages just beyond the city’s perimeter, and that they belonged to this stigmatized profession; most actresses refuse to perform in any drama that takes place within a ten kilometer radius of where they live. But this was not a matter of keeping one’s professional life from the local public. This, instead, was a matter of keeping one’s family lineage and hereditary profession secret from one’s spouse. I have seen such things on Tv (*The Sopranos*) and in the movies (*The Godfather*): Italian mafia dons whose wives don’t know a thing. But is acting in Special Drama tantamount to being involved in a criminal underworld? For some women it is clearly just as tainting. And not only for the actress

herself, but for her kin too: relatives want to hide the shameful secret of familial involvement with the drama world from outsiders, even those outsiders who are insiders through marriage, one's affines. After encountering Amalya's erasure of her family history I was eager to find out: is silence, as a strategy for managing the stigma on stage artists, used by others?⁷ And if so, by whom and in what contexts?

Stigma

Stage actresses in Tamilnadu have long suffered from the assumption that they are loose women. Such notoriety is written into the Tamil language itself: many of the Tamil terms for actress are also common terms for denoting whore or prostitute. All three Tamil dictionaries of record recognize the words *kooti*, *kootiyaal*, *taasi*, and *deevadiyaal* as having the dual meaning of "dancing girl or prostitute" (Fabricius, 1971, 505), "dancing girl devoted to temple service, commonly a prostitute; harlot, whore" (University of Madras, 1982, 1825), and "mistress; concubine" (Cre-A, 2008, 469). Women who act in Special Drama are, of course, highly aware of the low regard in which their profession is held, and they try to counter assumptions about their being "characterless ladies" with a range of strategies both onstage and off (Seizer, 2000; Weidman, 2003, 198-201).

The fact that the stigma on actresses is most closely associated with the role of "dancing girl" sheds light on the strategic nature of Kannagi's decision to re-enter the Special Drama stage in the role of a Heroine rather than that of a dancer. *Thaansu* ("Dance") is a comedic role in which the actress plays a flirtatious, naïve, sixteen-year-old girl opposite a male comedic counterpart in the role of *bafoon* ("buffoon"), often played by a much older actor. The *bafoon-thaansu duet*, as artists refer to the scene that opens every Special Drama, has an overall tone that is generally degrading to the girl. Such degradation bleeds over to taint the actress who plays the role (Seizer, 2008). In the duet, the bafoon shows an overt interest in taking advantage of the girl's naïvete. To further appeal to the overwhelmingly male audience present for these opening scenes, the bafoon often affects a conspiratory male-to-male address, replete with repeated verbal asides to the supporting male musicians, to draw the male audience in as his ally (Sedgwick, 1985; Freud, 1960; Seizer, 1997).

The usual career trajectory of a Special Drama actress involves a progression that begins with pre-pubescent "child" roles and moves onto the comedic thaansu role only after a girl has matured. Then, after some years spent learning the repertory ropes as a dancer, actresses capable of holding their own in a leading role graduate to playing queens and goddesses as a *Stri Part* ("Heroine"). This was indeed the trajectory followed by her

forbears preceding Kannagi in Special Drama. Kannagi broke precedent by returning to the stage, after her earlier debut in child's roles, only to play the more prestigious role of dramatic heroine rather than comedic dancer. Skipping past the thaansu role was a canny move, given how closely stigma clings to female dancers in particular, as noted above.

Furthermore, this move gave Kannagi the opportunity to realize one of her stated goals, one she often offered as justification for her return to those who chastised her: to "raise the status of the art" by doing it properly, i.e., by singing the songs and speaking the dialogues that Sankaradas Swamigal wrote. I expand on the renewal of this discourse of raising the status of the art through proper speech acts and proper training below, while addressing the Special Drama community's embrace of Kannagi's return. Kannagi's decision to re-enter as a Heroine also helped her husband, Kovalan, ultimately agree not to hold her back any longer from acting, something she had wanted to do for years.

Having known her since her childhood, I always thought Kannagi's verbal quickness and bold temperament made her well-suited to being a Special Drama actress; there is a good deal of extemporaneous speaking and quick-witted repartee in debate scenes between the Hero and Heroine in Special Drama. Kannagi finally decided to return to the stage in 2015 when I was present, *in situ*, to have a hand in helping her make this happen. My role was one of providing moral support and financial backing. Without these, her re-entry would not have been possible. Even Kannagi's characteristic fearlessness and carefree nature would not have been able to withstand the double-whammy of censure by family members and the financial debt she would have had to incur had she to do this on her own. A Stri part requires four separate custom-made royal-fancy costumes, a palette of stage make-up, hair-extending wigs, costume jewelry galore, a heavy-duty suitcase, travel money, and the means to engage a chaperone to accompany her to dramas. A chaperone both assists her material transformations backstage, and helps an actress stave off unwanted moral advances from her public.

Over the years, and usually in the context of a conversation in which she told me of her troubles, financial or marital or both, I had often asked Kannagi why she didn't entertain a return to the Special Drama stage as a solution. She always replied that her husband would not allow it. Once when I asked her what would happen if she were to act against his will, she informed me that he had threatened to commit suicide if she did. Such threats are all too real; suicide is used in the Indian context as a sign of protest against conditions large – as in political movements for linguistic or national independence (Mitchell, 2009;

Ramaswamy, 1997) – and small, such as domestic troubles — including arguments over whether a wife should work outside the home or not.

Kannagi had begun on her hereditary path to the life of a stage artist as a child, but life intervened. She discontinued school at tenth standard due to illness. She married at nineteen, a love marriage that was not really out of love, but more out of spite: to prove that she wouldn't tolerate untrue gossip about her and a boy she did not know, she married him. He was from another state, and after marriage, he took her to his family home. His was a poor fishing family, and she worked, under the watchful and judgmental eyes of his older sisters, cleaning fish in the pre-dawn hours. For five years she raised her two boys there. Eventually, exhausted and again unwell, she returned to Madurai. Her husband followed shortly thereafter, having landed a low-skilled job that did not pay well. He was again surrounded by Tamil, which he does not enjoy or speak with fluency. Communication being one of her joys, they are a truly mismatched pair. He was unfaithful; she was lonely. She talks on the phone a lot to friends; in 2014 she converted to Christianity for hope. She tried to earn additional money for the family by doing jobs close to home: sewing, pitching in at a nursery school run by a friend, finally clerking at a small health food store in the neighborhood. It was at this point that I arrived, needing assistance.

Kannagi, her mother Cordelia, her sister viduri and their father Kentasami all stayed with me as much as possible in my rented flat. It was our chance to live together again after twenty- odd years. The two sisters had grown up with parents who were often out all night performing. Now that their parents were retired and both girls had families of their own, my research brought the family together again on a daily basis, making up in some small way for that long lost time. I had entered this family's life when the girls were young, and their mother was a leading Special Drama Stri part. Kannagi had seen then, and saw again now, that I appreciated the art form and valued its performers. And my appreciation was valued by others, in other places, in an increasingly globalized world that seemed nevertheless to care about what we did here together.

I began interviewing for the new project. The family resumed their role of assisting me in contacting interviewees and carrying out interviews. Kannagi participated in eight of eleven interviews I conducted in late 2014, occasionally wielding a camera but mostly joining the conversations. Over the course of these interviews, I repeatedly asked artists, "Why haven't you brought your children into this field?" only to hear that they "wanted a better life for their children." Kannagi heard this too, and she grew frustrated. She argued that the general opinion of Special Drama and Special Drama artists was wrong, because

“there is corruption in every field, from police to politicians (especially politicians!). So why should only drama people have a bad name? There are good people and bad people in every profession.” By the fourth interview, Kannagi had begun asserting that the best way to raise the status of popular drama was for artists to respect themselves, and to respect the dialogues and songs of Sankaradas Swamigal by adhering to them more closely. If they did this, stage artists would be respected in turn.

Shortly thereafter Kannagi accompanied me to an academic conference in Delhi. During our week together, I made up my mind to focus my new research project primarily on her family lineage, realizing that I could tell their story as a microcosm of larger generational change. Meanwhile Kannagi made up her mind to start acting again, this time as a Stri part. Neither of us were under any illusion that any of this would be easy.

Two Responses to Me

With both the stigma on actresses and Kannagi’s determination to return to Special Drama very much in mind, I became increasingly aware of there being two different responses to her and to me. These responses came from within acting lineages. One kind of response came from those who had never had acting careers, and a second from those who had. What follows is a meditation on how members of these different groups contend with and manage social stigma, as well as on how their management strategies directly affected their relationships with me (Goffman, 1963).

These two groups responded in diametrically opposed ways to my continued interest in, and willingness to speak of, the lives of Special Drama artists. And not only did these opposite responses affect me, they implicated me. The first group, the non-artists, responded to my celebration of what they consider a shameful profession with suspicion, jealousy (as in, “Why do you care only about them?”), and eventually, the cold shoulder of silence. This reaction to me and my scholarly endeavors has been clearest (or at least most evident to me) coming from Kannagi’s extended family to the artists themselves, however, I was valued as a herald.

I spoke, for the most part in laudatory terms, of the artists and their art to outsiders — including journalists and scholars in India and abroad — to make the history of Special Drama and the existence of its contemporary artists part of the conversation about Indian theatre history. In my published writings on the art and artists of Special Drama, I value

and celebrate their work; I have always felt the same attitude from artists towards me, and that our pride in each other is mutual.

The response from Non-artists in the Extended Family

From non-artist members of Kannagi's extended family, the response to my open-ended but direct questioning of their attitudes towards Special Drama, and particularly towards their family involvement in it, went from tentative curiosity and frank responses in the first interviews I conducted with members of this group in 2014, to an eventual freeze on all communication with me, beginning in 2015. Individual members of the extended family expressed their negative responses to my curiosity in various ways, all of which reflected the same dominant stigmatizing attitude towards stage actresses that can be found everywhere in Tamilnadu.

Kannagi and I both experienced a withdrawal of good will from her extended family in the form of exclusion. Once it became clear that she was going ahead with her plan to enter the field of Special Drama, a plan realizable largely through my moral and financial support, we were both effectively ex -communicated. Kannagi was no longer invited to any extended family life-stage ritual events, such as the wedding of a cousin that took place in Chennai towards the very end of my stay.⁸ Kannagi's non-actress sister, viduri, was invited while Kannagi was not. In my case, it took the form of cancelled interviews and the discontinuation of casual visits from those extended family members who had previously visited me freely.

All this came about as a result of two things. First, Kannagi and I went together to Chennai. We flew directly there from the conference in Delhi, armed with new resolve about our respective roles in breaking through the stigma and silence that has historically plagued Special Drama. On our first day, I would give a paper about my new research at an academic conference on "Everyday Life in Contemporary India" at the University of Madras. The following day, we would visit and interview the matriarch of the non-acting wing of her extended family, Cimmada. Cimmada (b. 1934), elegant and vibrant at eighty, is a retired schoolteacher. Her aunt (her mother's younger sister) Draupadi (b. 1925-d. 2000), elder to Cimmada by just nine years, was, as noted above, Kannagi's maternal grandmother. While in Cimmada's home, Kannagi and I openly shared our opinions about what we both felt was an unjust stigma on Special Drama and its artists. That is, we began to speak — in a household where silence about the very things we had newly resolved to

do, to speak of, and to write about — had, unbeknownst to us, covered up family history for generations.

Secondly, we passed around a copy of my book on Special Drama. Entitled *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage* (2005), the book chronicles the history of the stigmatization of Special Drama and its artists. I date this stigma from the early introduction of women onto the Tamil professional stage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, precisely when Kannagi's forebears entered the field. In addition to its written text in English, the book contains ten large color Plates of photographs from the early 1990s and fifty-two black & white Figures. These include photographs of artists onstage and off, as well as diagrams of the use of stage space in Special Drama, kinship charts of hereditary acting lineages (not Kannagi's), and a map showing the location of actors' *sangams* across the state. Of most relevance here, the book also contains reproductions of twenty drama *notices* (playbills) from the century 1891 to 1992.⁹ These notices are in Tamil, and contain artists' images and names, making them the most legible pages of the book to the lay Tamil reader.

Both the notices and the plates contain photographs of Kannagi's mother and grandmother in the roles of Thaansu and Stri part. The combination of our talk and this text — which passed from hand-to-hand, its plates closely scrutinized by the multiple generations of family members who had gathered for our visit — burst a bubble of silence that had lasted for several generations in that wing of the family.

In order to properly introduce the scenario of this meeting, I turn again to the kinship chart in Figure One. Above Kannagi in the fourth generation is her mother, Cordelia. Cordelia has had a lifelong involvement with Special Drama. She performed for fifty years, from age seven to fifty-seven. Above Cordelia, in the third generation, is her mother Draupadi, Kannagi's grandmother.

Draupadi was the bold, charismatic and proud matriarch of the Madurai wing of the family until her death in 2000. On the far left of the chart in the fourth generation is Cimmada. I first met Cimmada at the wedding of Draupadi's great-grandson Edgar. This wedding took place in Madurai just after I arrived in 2014. Edgar is this family's "zippie generation" success story: a graduate of the best IT college program in Madurai, he immediately landed a job with Amazon International (Lukose, 2009)¹⁰. His bride studied the same course as he; they met in college. She now works at an IT startup in Chennai, while he spends half his time in Chennai and the other half in the U.S.

The day we visited, Cimmada and her family were graciously hospitable. I enjoyed talking with Cimmada and learning about her early life. Though never an actress herself, Cimmada was close to her aunt Draupadi. As an adolescent student of world literature, Cimmada took on the Adamic role of naming all Draupadi's children, her first cousins. Thirty years separate Cimmada and her youngest cousin, Draupadi's last child: this youngest cousin is now Amalya's mother. I mapped out all these relations and stories under Cimmada's patient direction. What began as an interview quickly became a multi-generational discussion, during which *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage* passed from hand to hand throughout the afternoon.



Image 2. Sivakami, the actress pictured on the cover of the U.S. edition of *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*, receiving a copy of the book from the author in 2015.



Image 3. Grand-niece Narmada, age nine, perusing the book while her mother inspects Kannagi's *arangetram* costumes.

In the course of this long afternoon of conversation, I learned that apart from Cimmada herself, no one in the Chennai wing of this family knew anything about Special Drama.

Most of the twenty or so family members present - Cimmada's sisters and brothers-in-law, their children, her own children, and all their grandchildren - told me that they had never heard of Special Drama, let alone that their family had anything to do with it. No one but Cimmada had ever seen it performed.

I was astounded.

While Special Drama is not regularly performed anymore in or around Chennai, I nevertheless still expected the family to have known of it. Instead, these nieces and nephews and cousins, these grand-nieces grand-nephews and grand-cousins, knew nothing of their relatives' lives in Madurai. They knew them only as kin who attended their family functions. Here was Amalya's strategy with her husband writ large: in Chennai, whole generations had no knowledge of their own family history.

During the course of the afternoon, one of Cimmada's great- grand-nieces, a college girl fluent in English, picked up the book and started looking at photos. She turned to Cordelia, whom she knew as her cousin-aunt from countless family functions, exclaiming: "Auntie! Why is there a picture of you in this book?"¹¹ Cordelia replied, "Because I am an actress." Pause. Uncomprehending stare. Eyes shift back to the book. "And why have they put the name 'Cordelia' under your photo?" "Because that is my name." Everyone in the Chennai branch of the family called Cordelia *Kuli* ("short one"). But though she stands just four foot nine inches, audiences across the state know her as a songbird of remarkable range.

This visit to Cimmada's household in Chennai gave me a first- hand glimpse of how a whole extended family can live in a cocoon of denial. Over the generations, silence here led to the loss of knowledge of any familial connection to the drama field. Such silences are the handmaidens of shame (Sedgwick, 1995). In this family, silence has led to generations of children who now answer my questions about their not entering the drama field with the words, "We know nothing about this."

Responses from Within the Special Drama Community

Beyond Kannagi's family, the people with whom I interacted most productively while conducting follow-up research were those in the broader community of Special Drama artists, many of whom I had met and worked with in the early 1990s. This community responded enthusiastically to my ongoing interest in their lives and their art. To my profound delight, they used my return as an opportunity to consider - in a series of

meetings, interviews, news articles, conversations and public speaking engagements, both with and without me - how my presence might help feed into their own goal of revitalizing the art form of Special Drama to gain greater social respect for its artists.

It began like this. Upon realizing that hereditary children had largely stopped coming into the field of Special Drama, I travelled to the town of Karaikudi to visit some of the artists I knew from my earlier fieldwork. To these people with whom I felt so comfortable, I posed the direct question: “Why haven’t you brought any of your own children into this field?” My direst question was met with sincere self- interrogation.

We talked about how the decline of Special Drama could only be halted if artists themselves first changed their own attitudes. Learning to value something one had previously thought shameful is more a matter of unlearning than learning. We agreed that involvement in this art - “when done properly and with respect,” a necessary caveat for the artists - is something to celebrate and promote. Onstage, in Special Drama, artists speak Puranic words of wisdom and inhabit characters that include Hindu gods and goddesses as well as historic queens and kings who fought nobly for independence from the British.¹² Why not be as noble and morally confident offstage? Why bow to the stigmatizing gaze with which Tamil society views professional stage artists, when we know that Sankaradas Swamigal’s plays, dialogues and songs are things of beauty, to be revered? Those to whom I had posed my initial question stayed up all night to discuss why they felt shame, rather than pride, about their own profession.

We continued this conversation in a big group the following day. Out of this 24-hour love fest came a double recognition. First, that Special Drama artists from the pre-liberalization period genuinely like each other. They enjoyed acting together then, and they enjoy being together now. And second, the same is not the case in Special Drama today. Here these sentiments are voiced in their own words by several of the artists who spoke with me that day (12/2/14). They remain anonymous here to avoid fomenting unnecessary tensions between previous and current generations of artists.

Senior artist 1: “We respected each other. We went to our elders and sought to learn from them. We trained. But when that practice is abandoned we can’t cope. These people come in without any training and it spoils the whole scene. They just think, “Huh, why do we need all that?” and they just do it, carefree. The way I was brought up was different, there was discipline. It is not there now. That “grip” is not there now.

Senior artist 2: Within our drama caste (“*naadaka jaathi*”) we used to be like a family. But the outsider will look for the original caste of the actor and want that. It’s become “teams.” I don’t like this kind of thing. In the art field I should not be judged by my caste, but by my acting talent. I can’t accept or even digest this fact in the current generation, and it leads to many problems. We can’t digest the culture of today (“*jeernechu poha mudiyillai*”). As these people are just mushrooming/sprouting up without any proper training, this reduces the quality of the drama.

We agreed that only if artists could recognize their own experience as *valuable* might they begin to feel, and then speak, differently about it. Doing this first for themselves, they could then educate others. I was amazed at how readily artists were onboard with this effort, even to the point of imagining bringing their own children into the field as students. What made this seem possible was the idea of founding a drama training school. This school would not attempt to replace regular schooling but to supplement it. It would be a place to learn the cultural history of Tamil drama and to receive training in *Iyal Isai Nadakam* (“Prose, Music, Drama”) from experts in these fields, generally retired artists. By successfully completing a one-year course of study at the school, a student would earn a certificate that offers its own reward: the sanction and support of the Sangam in entering the drama field, which in practical terms means the booking of performance dates for the trainee.

Senior artist 3: Any professional occupation requires a minimal training period. But here, people just come in and whatever they do is seen as ok. This degrades the quality of the whole enterprise. And those of us who have had training? We find it difficult as we have been set aside. So the first problem is, there is no training school. No *gurukulam*. Second, whoever wants to can come in and do whatever he wants. The newcomers are not familiar with the quality (*tanmai*) of the discipline involved in this. A committee should be established. If someone wants to become a Sangam member, he needs formal training and to earn a certificate. If he doesn’t have these he should be told to get them. All this should happen. So for people like us, who did properly train from our elders, we cannot accept the new low standards. The present day artists don’t have that kind of emotional bond; they just come, act and collect the money, and when they come offstage it’s “*ni yaro naan yaro*,” (“you are whoever you are, I am whoever I am”): we don’t know each other.

The larger aim of the school would be to raise the status of the art by teaching a fresh crop of artists to perform the plays of the Special Drama repertory as Swamigal had intended: singing his songs, speaking his dialogues, and remaining true to his creative syncretic vision. Of course, what the playwright had actually written would be only one or two hours’ worth of material if they were simply read through (his written scripts range from a sparse

sixty to one hundred pages). To extend a Swamigal drama to fill the eight hours from ten p.m. to dawn as Special Drama is now performed requires that the text be stretched and padded with additional songs and dialogues. What becomes most important then is that the content of this necessary padding not be vulgar, and that Swamigal's original songs and dialogues be performed. By unanimous consensus of those engaged in this conversation, such strictures would certainly raise the status of the art. Artists' own changed attitudes would then reflect their confidence in Tamil theatre as a site for the transmission of social and cultural knowledge.

While we spoke, a member of the "liberalization's children" generation - the son of the retired actress hosting this daytime get-together — called up a friend who wrote for the local newspaper. The reporter came and talked with me and several artists briefly, and took a group photo. Even though the resultant short article that appeared in print got everything I said ridiculously wrong and proved more fiction than fact (the title reads "Compared to the West, Tamil is Best"[!]), the image captures something of the closeness and familiarity that characterized that group, that day, and our conversation. That's the thing: being with the Special Drama community feels like family, chosen family. The artists feel this too, and acknowledge it often.

Beside me in the foreground of this family photo (image 4.) are six Special Drama actresses I adore. Backing us up are the men who support and make possible this work: drama agents, husbands, brothers, sons, and Sangam administrators.



காரைக்குடி:

அழிந்து வரும் நாடகக்களையைய மீளப்படுத்தவும், அவர்களின் வாசிக தினை குறித்தும், அமெரிக்காவை சேர்ந்த சூசன் னச்சா, 20 ஆண்டுகளாக ஆராய்ச்சியில் ஈடுபட்டு, அவர்களின் தினைவைய அறியச் செய்து வருகிறார். அமெரிக்காவிலுள்ள இத்தியானா பல்கலை, மனிதவியல் துறை பேராசிரியர் சூசன் னச்சா, 55, 1991-ம் ஆண்டு இத்தியானாவில் கற்று வந்தவர்களை பாரம்பரிய நடிகைகள், மதுரையில் தங்கியிருந்த போது, தமிழக பாரம்பரிய நாடகங்களை கண்டுள்ளார். பாதநாட்டியத்தின் பாரம்பரியத்தையும், நடன அளர்வுகளையும் கண்டு விவந்து தமிழக கலாசாத்தில்தான் தன்னை மறத்தார். அன்று முதல் 20 ஆண்டுகளும் மேலாக தமிழக நாடக கலை குறித்த ஆராய்ச்சியை மேற்கொண்டு வருகிறார். "ஒதுக்கப்பட்ட நாடக மேடை நடிப்புகள்" என்ற தலைப்பில் ஆராய்ச்சி மேற்கொண்டு, "ஸ்டிக்மான் ஆப் தி தமிழ் ஸ்டேஜ்" என்ற புத்தகத்தை வெளியிட்டார். தற்போது நாடக துறையில், கலைஞர்களின் வாசிகளை ஏன்

ஈடுபட்டவிலைவை, என்ற ஆராய்ச்சியில் ஈடுபட்டுள்ளார்.

காரைக்குடி கழனிவாசலில், நாடக கலைஞர்களின் வாசிகளை சந்தித்த பின் அவர் கூறியதாவது. நாடகம் என்பது நடிப்பு, ஒப்பனை, இசை, ஒலியம், அரங்கமைப்பு, இலக்கியம், ஒலி, ஒளி முதலான கலைகளின் மொத்த வடிவம். தமிழா மரபில் தோன்றி தினவெற்று நிற்கும் கலைகளில் நாடகத்துக்கு தனி இடம் உண்டு. தமிழர்களின் குழந்தைகளையும், கதைகளையும், அழகியல், கலை நுட்பத்தை வெளிப்படுத்த கூடியது.

நாடக நடிப்புகள் மக்களை மகிழ்விக்க மேளத்தில் டப்வேறு வேறுபாடுகளில் நடிக்கின்றனர். ஆனால் உணர்வை வாழ்க்கைகளில் அவர்களுக்கு மரியாதை இல்லை. இதனால் அவர்களின் எதிர்காலம் கேள்விகுறியாகி உள்ளது. நாடக நடிப்புகளின் வாசிகளை 2 சதவீதம் போட்டுமே நடிக்க வருகின்றனர். தமிழக கலாசாரத்துக்கு தமிழர்கள் மதிப்பு கொடுத்தால் தான், அனைத்து கலாசாரத்துக்கு இடம் செல்ல முடியும். வெவ்வேறு கலாசாரத்தை விட தமிழக கலாசாரம் மேலானது, என்றார்.

Image 4. Dinamalar newspaper, Madurai edition, Jan. 2015: this short article includes a photo of the author surrounded by her chosen family of the Karaikudi Special Drama community.

The inauguration of the first-ever public *Isai Naadakam Payarchi Palliyam* ("Music Drama Training School") in Tamilnadu, located in the town of Karaikudi, took place at the 2015 annual *guru puja* ("worship of the teacher") in celebration of playwright Sankaradas Swamigal's life and work. These annual events conducted by the larger actors' sangams always involve supportive speeches in praise of the art. In November 2014 I had given one

such speech at the Madurai Sangam guru puja, in which I called for greater respect for Swamigal's work. To build further on this theme, I was invited to speak at the Karaikudi guru puja in February 2015 and inaugurate the Drama Training School. I accepted this honor in the name of victory for the progress and revitalization of Special Drama.

The following month, Kannagi made her debut entrance as a heroine of the Special Drama stage. Her entrance received the resounding support of the community she thereby joined. The performance event was thus itself a classic Austinian performative, in which *saying it makes it so* (Austin, 1962). In this case, speaking and singing the part of a Heroine onstage, before an audience of experienced artists, effectively *made* Kannagi a Special Drama Heroine. But the event itself was more than this: it was a celebration by the community to rejuvenate itself.

Conclusion

Kannagi's debut was a joyous affair. It took place on the temple grounds of a sacred mountain in Madurai, *Tirupalankundram*. Kannagi played Valli in the popular drama "*Valli's Wedding*." After nearly every song she sang, another member of the acting community would come up on stage to bless her. This, I realized, was the real purpose of the *arangetram* ("debut") event: to receive the blessings of those in the community she would join by virtue of her success in this performative performance event.

Senior Artist 4: My father used to say that this is *asirvaatha tozhil*, "blessing work." Receiving the blessings of people in this field, that's when you start growing. your growth depends entirely on the amount of blessings you receive from those elders around you, my father would say.

Kannagi received the blessings of senior artists all night long, as members of the community came on stage one after another to present her with gifts and to shower her with love in the form of flower garlands strung round her neck, new saris draped over her shoulders, and cash overflowing her hands. She beamed, taking it all in. Indeed everyone present basked in the joy of it all.

At the same time, Kannagi does not make light of the tensions present for her in re-entering this field at the contemporary moment, especially as the mother of two athletic, hungry teenage boys. She recognizes that "both pressures exist: to make money and to bring the good values." She is meeting the challenge, working towards victory even as I type these words.

Senior Artist 5: I have faith that this will come full circle, that it will come back to the old values. The audiences are very clear. The audience sees that the drama is no good these days. But if they start to see good artists coming in, they will recognize it. They will avoid those poor performers, and support the good ones, and in this way the art will flourish again.

Kannagi's example is more down to earth and easier to digest:

Kannagi: It's like this: fast foods came in. Now traditional foods are being re-introduced, but in a new way. So the fast foods are going out of fashion. In the same way Special Drama will return to its original values. We just have to make an effort to present the old things in a new way.

Epilogue

In her first adult drama season, from February through September 2015, Kannagi took things slow and let herself get used to the rhythm of Special Drama life again: the long hours standing on stage, being confronted with co-performers who may at any time say unexpected things and make unexpected points to which she, in character, must respond. And the travel: long rides on buses or in vans to out-of-the-way places, and villagers one meets in the night only to take leave of them at dawn. Kannagi spent this first season developing her Heroine chops on small village stages mainly in the Karaikudi district, where her efforts met with praise and acclaim as well as with advice from senior artists on how she might tinker with dialogues, songs, and costumes for her return the following season. A promising beginning, begun.

Meanwhile back in the States I spent those same summer months revisiting all that happened from October 2014 to March 2015, all the transformations I witnessed and the interactions in which I participated. I wrote in English but thought in Tamil, and found my way into uncovering the various logics of the events recounted here. Many things I've left out while others I've drawn in sharp focus. Many more and many different stories might be told of these events, with different arcs and different foci. I have chosen here to tell the story whose arc spans the tensions I experienced between two poles of response to my presence, and to my influence on the family I know best. One pole is silence: omissions that bury, over generations, all past involvement in a stigmatized profession. The other pole is the noisy, eager present. Through speech, song, and other acts of devotion, the drama community creates and recreates itself. My own voice is there in the mix, but much more

prominent are the strong, excited and experienced voices of the drama community. It is their incandescence this essay aspires to reflect.

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There are too many people in the Special Drama community to whom I am grateful and with whom I am enamored to name them individually. I will however single out Mr. P. L. Gandhi for his commitment to the art of special drama, and Mrs. R. M. Tamil Selvi and family for hosting me in the most gracious manner. Finally, to my two Tamil tangaichigal, my Annan and dearest Anni: all is possible through love.

NOTES

1 I derived these percentages from the following data: of the 351 members of the *Tamilnadu Nadaka Nadikar Sangam* (“Tamilnadu Drama Actors Association”), Madurai, in 1992, the descendents of only seventeen members continue to participate in Special Drama. As of July 2015 the Sangam had 430 members. Seventeen hereditary artists in a total 430 members means a less than 4% involvement of hereditary artists in the Special

Drama field in Madurai today. I unfortunately do not have directly comparable statistical data for how many of the 351 members of the Madurai Sangam in 1992 were themselves hereditary artists. Instead what I do have from that period are data concerning the percentage of artists who came from hereditary acting families among seventy artists with whom I conducted interviews between 1991-1993. These seventy artists worked out of Madurai as well as out of other cities across the state, including Dindigal, Karur, Tanjavur, Pudukkottai, Karaikudi and Chennai. They ranged in age from eleven to seventy-eight, and included members of every Hindu caste, from Adi Dravida to Brahmin, and three religions, Hindu, Christian and Muslim. Their levels of formal education ranged from second standard to completion of SSLC (10th Standard). Among this varied sample of Special Drama artists, 62% were hereditary drama artists and 38% were first generation newcomers. Based on these data I conclude that the field of Special Drama was largely populated by hereditary artists in the early 1990s while this was not the case in 2015.

2 By thus dating the text I am following R. Parthasarathy (1993), who writes in his introduction to his translation that “The Cilappatikaram is a poem . . . composed probably in the 5th century C. E. “ To which a footnote offers the following clarification: “No objective evidence in the form of archaeological or epigraphical records has survived on the basis of which to establish the dates. All dates are, therefore, only conjectural. In dating the texts, I have followed Zvelebil, Tamil Literature (1975).”

3 The Child roles of the boy prince Pulandiran in “Pavalakkodi Naadakam” (“The Play of the Coral Queen”), and Logidasan, the son of an honest king tried by a malicious sage in “Arichandra Naadakam” (“The Drama of Harischandra”), are the most famous works of playwright Sankaradas Swamigal containing child roles frequently performed in the Special Drama repertory. These roles are played equally by girls and boys.

4 For more on the twenty-first century discourse of “India rising,” see Lukose, 2009 and Parameswaran, 2015. There are so many examples of South Asian men who have made this move successfully. A Ny Times article names the chain of South Asian men who helped hire each other and all worked together for Google: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/10/technology/reinventing-google-for-a-mobile-world.html?_r=0].

5 A newspaper article that appeared in *The Hindu* December 14, 2014, describes my relations with this family as *Amerikka Akka* (American Older Sister) (K. K. Magesh, 2014).

6 The phrase “deep hanging out” was first used to describe the *modus operandi* of ethnographic fieldwork by Renato Rosaldo in a presentation given at the 1994 *Anthropology and the Field* conference at Stanford University organized by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson. The phrase was subsequently made familiar by James Clifford (1997, 56, 351).

7 The history of the view that stage art is an inherently perverse profession has been well documented for the Western world by Jonas Barish in his masterful study, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (Barish, 1981). In the South Asian context any such historical tracing would involve close attention to ideological shifts ferried on waves of colonial occupation.

8 The kinds of life-stage ceremonies I refer to here include births, ear-piercing ceremonies, coming-of-age rituals, marriages, sixtieth anniversaries, and deaths.

9 The older drama notice are reprinted courtesy of the Roja Muttiah Research Library collection in Chennai, India.

10 Anthropologist Ritty Lukose argues in *Liberalization's Children* (2009), her astute study of college students in Kerala at the turn of the twenty-first century, that among the changes brought on by liberalization for this generation are their awareness of a global consumer marketplace for goods and services, and the concomitant middle-class desires and aspirations that have arisen with it. Lukose shows us that these changes in south Indian youth's outlook on and experience of the public sphere now affect even those young people who reside on the margins of globalization's dominant articulations. *Generation Z* (as defined by *Outlook Magazine*, and as cited by Lukose 2009, 2-3) is the “Zippie” generation that has succeeded Gens X & Y: having grown up in post-liberalization India, their goal is to get an education in computer science or engineering and land a career in IT, preferably in a foreign company such as Amazon, Google, or Microsoft. “Liberalization's children” are thus a generation that see themselves as part of global flows of information technology. In this essay I argue that unfortunately this gain in global sensibility too often comes at the expense of local knowledge, affecting local expressive traditions such as Special Drama that are effectively hidden from the consciousness of this generation, buried in the rush towards newness that fuels their lives in contemporary India.

11 In American kinship we call this relation cousin, but in Dravidian kinship a cousin of one's own mother would also be an aunt.

12 The repertory of Special Drama includes thirty-three plays, many of which are no longer in active rotation, a result of the problem I speak of here: that newcomers are not receiving thorough training in the art. The majority of plays in the Special Drama repertoire were written by Sankaradas Swamigal, whom the artists revere as their guru. The most popular play in the Madurai district, *Valli Tirumanam* (valli's Wedding), retells the story of Lord Murugan's marriage to the goddess-disguised-as-huntress valli. Other popular dramas retell historic stories such as that of *Veerapandiya Kattabomman* ("Brave Chieftain Kattabomman" b. 1760- d. 1799), who fought the British and was executed by them in 1799.

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STAGING GENDER IN *RAMLILA* OF RAMNAGAR

ANITA SINGH

Abstract: Interrogation of gendered representations proves particularly salient in Ramlila, (literally “Rama’s play”) which is a performance of the Ramayana epic in a series of scenes that include song, narration, recital and dialogue. This paper will look at gender in performance and gender as performance in the context of Ramlila. The most recent emphasis in feminist literary theory has been upon the concept of "performativity" to analyze the processes of the formation of gender identity. This essay is informed by a series of issues raised by the current gender theories in understanding the largely conservative and preservation-oriented practice of the Varanasi/ Ramnagar Ramlila.

Keywords: Ramlila Ramnagar, gender performance, personal communication, gender identity, Ramayana performance, gendered representation, narration recital, oral tradition, gender discourse, male/female characters, diversity narrative

Introduction

Ramlila (literally ‘Rama’s play’) is a popular living traditional performance based on the epic *Ramayana*. The *Ramayana* embodies the social, cultural, historical imperatives, which set standards for an idyllic and accepted behavior template. It exists partly as a cultural legacy, a window to another time and place, a conscious conservation of pre-Independence traditions and inheres a politics of culture, issues concerning power, authority, authenticity, tradition, nationality and identity – questions that are currently at the heart of anthropological inquiry (Sax, 1990, 129-153). The *Ramayana* (despite the definite article) is not a ‘single book but a story and a tradition of storytelling’ (Lutgendorf, “The Oral Tradition and the Many *Ramayanas*”) its many retellings reflect the sheer variety of versions spurning its canonical status. Although the primary tale of the tribulations of Rama and Sita remain quite the same in most tellings, bards and storytellers have inserted their own perception in their rendering of the tale. Anyone studying contemporary Indian society, politics and religion has a basic knowledge of the *Ramayana*, its place in popular

imagination and the ideological alteration it has undergone at the hands of the nationalists during the freedom movement and by the resurgence of right wing politics in recent years.

The paper proposes to look at Ramlila, a non-mimetic, symbolic and strictly codified form (Kapur, 2006, 5) both as a signifying and a phenomenological medium. It will seek to involve the spectators' response, the director's approach and the performers' outlook. Interrogation of gendered representations proves particularly salient in Ramlila. This paper will look at gender *in* performance and gender *as* performance in the context of Ramlila. Implicitly, it will analyze the formation of gender within the enactments on the Ramlila stage. In current theorisation of gender, body is taken to be a historical idea and not a natural fact and gender is thought of in terms of learned performances (de Beauvoir, 1974; Merleau – Ponty, 1962; Butler, 1990). Butler makes this argument about the idea of gender: “to be a woman is to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of women, to induce the body to become a cultural sign” (Butler, 1990, 272). So I will engage with the notion of performativity or the being performed by gender discourses, and how the performance of gender roles variously conforms to or challenges this pressure towards the norm.

Some questions that form the crux of my research revolve around:

- What does it mean to be a woman for the audience, *Vyasa* (director) and the actors?
- How do the characters and the audience respond to role-playing?
- How do the actors learn the gestures, the movement, and the body language of the female roles they are portraying? What role models do they look up to while learning to perform these roles?
- How does such sacred role-playing affect their everyday life?
- Do cross-gender performance impact on the adolescent actors' lives?
- What are the views of the spectators and actors about other female/ male characters in Ramlila?

The interpretation of such practices has become increasingly indicative not just as an attempt at cultural revival, but also as a basis of proliferation of cultural and gender stereotypes. For the vast number of people in north India, Ramlila also serves as a sort of ‘sentimental education’ (Kapur, 2006, 5). Feminist scholars (Richman, 1991; Vanita, 2005; McLain, 2001; Kishwar, 1997; Sen, 1998; Imhasly-Gandhy, 2001; Kumar, 1984; Dimmitt, 1982) question how certain ideologies are promoted, represented and endorsed by the text and are indeed appalled by *Ramayana*’s overt masculinity.

Rama's Play in Rama's Town

The *Ramayana* and its performance practice Ramlila has been popular for almost two epochs and can be seen as elements in the continuing formation of cultures across the vast ethnically, culturally, linguistically, politically, religiously and geographically diverse continent of South Asia. As a “participatory environmental theatre (Site-specific theatre)” (Schechner and Hess, 1977, 51-82), it is a performance of the epic *Ramayana* (Rama's journey), in a succession of scenes that include song, narration, recital and dialogue.

The *Dussehra* (literally *Dus* means ten and *hara* means annihilated, destruction of ten facets of evil) festival that takes place during the month of *Ashvin* (around September or October) celebrates the victory of Rama over Ravana, and Ramlila, a dramatic folk play is enacted during this festival. During the Dussehra festival, there are many thousands of Ramlila productions enacted throughout northern India. The most popular Ramlila's are those of Ramnagar, Varanasi, Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Sattna, Almora, and Madhubani.

The performance tradition of Ramlila that forms my case study spans specific geographic region, that is, Ramnagar (literally Rama-town) a small semi-urban expanse across the Ganges river from the city of Varanasi (also referred to as Kashi) in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Ramnagar has been the base of the king of Benares since 1752 even though the Princely State of Benares was dissolved into the Union of India in 1949. However, the king continued to rule, not in political fact but by virtue of his sustained sponsorship of Ramlila. The *Kashi Naresh* (King of Kashi) Udit Narayan Singh started the theatrical-religious cycle of Ramlila in 1830. Ramlila of northern India is based on the sixteenth century Hindi version of the epic *Ramcharitmanas* (Lake of the Deeds of Rama) composed by Tulsidas.

At Ramnagar, the Ramlila is an unsophisticated, semi rural theatre on a grand scale. The world of Ramlila is a sacred world of ritual drama, religious devotion, mask, festive fair, political action, pilgrimage and transformed geography. “Its non naturalistic form acknowledges that theatre is created by actors and spectators” (Kapur, 1988, 7). It is sponsored by the King during the Dussehra festival and is performed every evening for thirty-one days. It features the king of Benares as patron, director and player. Audience strength almost reaches 25,000 on most days of the performance; highly popular episodes are the *nakkatiya* (hacking the nose of Surpanakha) and the final day of Ravana's defeat and Rama's victory. What makes this unique is that various locations in Ramnagar (Ashok

vatika, Panchavati, Kishkinda, Janakpuri or Lanka) are named after the places from the epic itself, and the action takes place in multiple stages spread over several square kilometers. The audience and the players physically move to different locations and the very act of movement is a kind of pilgrimage, worship-in-action, counted as *punya* (the earning of merit) that will earn *phal* (reward). Kashi Naresh arrives seated on an elephant and inaugurates the play in the presence of the vyasa and other Ramlila functionaries. He is welcomed with resonating cries of ‘*HarharMahadev!*’ (‘Glory of the Lord’s name’) since he is understood to be a manifestation of Shiva, the Hindu god, considered to be the destroyer or transformer. Young Rama's entry follows closely, and he arrives on an elder's shoulder. The initial ritual of paying obeisance to Ram, Sita, Hanuman is impersonated by the King of Ramnagar, and it is followed by the actual performance which is three layered:

1. The recital of *Ramcharitmanas*: Within fifty feet off the stage, often on the same ground, the crowd is seated, the *ramayanis*, a group of twelve men of varying ages, chant verses each night from the entire *Manas*, seated in a ring close to the Maharaja. The chanting of the *Manas* punctuates the acting out of the story. The audience also carries a copy of the *Ramcharitmanas*, and follows it along with its recital by the *ramayanis*.
2. *Samvad* (Dialogue): In a makeshift stage, amateur actors in ornate costumes play out their assigned roles. In the past, the performers mimed the action. However, now the dialogue is spoken or rather shouted with great vigour by the actors. It is necessary to shout because Ramlila uses no microphones. Ishwari Prasad Narayan Singh (1835-1889) a king in the mid-19th century, appointed an assemblage of poets and scholars to write dialogues in spoken Hindi for Ramlila. Each episode is a confluence of *lila* and *mela* (fair & festivity) ‘Lila ground is a place for worship and the mela is a place to socialise’ (Bonnemaison and Source, 1990, 2-23)
3. *Jhanki* (Tableaux): Literally, 'a view, a glance.' Norvin Hein defined *jhanki* as a specific form of traditional religious drama, “a tableau of living deities exhibited for worship, the "actors" in which are always, as in the Ramnagar Ramlila, Brahman boy(s) under the age of puberty” (1972, 13-17). A *jhanki* performance does not enact any narrative. “The situation presented is always the same: Sita and Rama enthroned, holding, as it were, their *darbar*” (Hein, 1972, 13-17).

The sound of chanting, drums, and cymbals mark the performance. Bright colored masks and huge, glossily painted papier-mâché effigies depicting the frozen iconic moments from the *manas* enliven the performances. Invocations of *Har Har Mahadev* and *Raja*

Ramchandra ki Jai (victory to Lord Rama) rends the air at the completion of each lila, and *arati* (Hindu religious ritual of worship). On most days, Ramlila starts at five in the evening and carries on until ten at night. The staging is symbolic and simple. The costumes are elaborately woven silks in glittering gold and bright shades. The actors are decked with spangled ornaments. Ramlila uses archaic methods of lighting up the performance, and sound amplifications; electricity and microphone are not put to use. This adherence to an earlier technology — kerosene lanterns and flares providing the lighting — is a major aspect of the production. Not only the techniques, but also the underlying socio-religious structures of Ramlila are extremely conservative. The preservation of the style, thematic content, character role-playing, caste hierarchy, gender restrictions, archaic staging techniques, all attest to the fact that there is a tenacious desire to fix and freeze the performance practice at a time when we are discussing the proliferation and the textual explosion of the *Ramayana* and questioning its canonical authority in the Indian sub-continent (Lutgendorf, 1991; Richman, 1991).

Archetypal Story as Quest Narrative and the National Imaginary

The Ramlila is an enactment of an epic story, of a righteous prince who weds a devoted princess, but through foul play is unfairly exiled to the forest. While living in the forest the dutiful princess is abducted by the devious designs of a demon. The prince then embarks on a mission to recover his wife, assisted by monkeys. He ultimately emerges triumphant, decapitating the demon and rescuing his wife. He reclaims his rightful throne at the end of his exile. Central to the plot typology of this mythical textual mechanics is the concept of quest-based model discussed by Vladimir Propp, Roland Barthes, A. J. Griemas, and Yuri Lotman who argued for the possibility of an underlying structural grammar of narratives. The object position of the female subject in such a model has been critiqued by (Rubin, 1975; Mulvey, 1975; de Lauretis, 1984; Silverman, 1983) the feminist intervention in the field of narration. Teresa de Lauretis engages with formalist and structuralist approaches to show how narrative strategies are engendered and how the male initiates the quest whereas the female can only be the object of the quest, and not a subject or an initiator (1984, 118-119). Nabneeta Sen in “Lady Sings the Blues” (1998, 108) shows how epic poets across the world are men, singing the glory of other men, armed men, to be precise. In the context of Ramlila, Rama becomes the active principle of culture and in the morphology of the narrative, Sita becomes an element of plot- space, a topos, a matrix and matter.

This archetypal story of Rama as part of the cultural subconscious of India serves as a mainstay to assert the principles of a culture flouted as ancient and spiritual. It is a source of inspiration, moral orientation, and an aspect of their fashioning of identity. It functions as an idiom for articulating national self-identity, its ideals for a wholesome nation, in short a *ram rajya* (Rama's kingdom or Divine Rule).

Ram as *Maryada Purushottama*: Conceptualising Indian Masculinity

The process of colonisation can be seen as a process of feminisation wherein the Orient (non-western colonies in South Asia and the Middle East) was crafted as the weak, irrational, non-martial 'other' in juxtaposition to a rational, strong, martial European 'self' (Said, 1978, 207). Several nationalist identity movements throughout the world have seen the reconstruction of gender discourse upholding new models of manhood, assigning women's roles as a common response (see Gerami, 2003; Lewis, 2007; Jeffords, 1989). Indian masculinity was redefined in a bid to challenge British colonial rule and its cultural influence (see, for example, Banerjee, 2003; Sinha, 1995; Hansen, 1996).

Nationalist sentiments during independence used Ramlila as a tool for assertion of sovereignty and identity. Since the early nineteenth century, the Ramlila has been deployed as a project for self-definition by the kings of Benares. Crammed between a declining Mughal rule and a nascent British authority, funding Ramlila was the way for the kings of Benares to prop up their religious and cultural clout at a time when they were attenuated in both military command and economic self-sufficiency. Performance of Ramlila presented a model of *ram rajya* and leadership standards; the concept of *maryada purushottama* (interpreted as one who follows rules ideally or Lord of Self-Control or the Perfect Man or Lord of Virtue). Rama's exile and forest journey are transformative: they are the means to his defeat of Ravana, and the consequent transformation of a demon-ravaged world into *ram rajya*, the righteous rule of King Rama. Without him, its center will not hold (Schechner, 1993, 169). After defeating his enemies, Rama must return to Ayodhya because he embodies both *dharma* (path of righteousness) and kingdom; he is the paradigmatic Hindu King of Kings, the noble ruler of divine origin and the source of strength and steadiness within the kingdom.

This nationalist discourse included the invocation of motherhood as a privileged form of femininity as seen in the use of the term "motherland" (Roy, 1995, 10-28). Sita was invoked as a role model, ideal wife and mother. "Mobilisation of women in the nationalist movement was made repeatedly along these lines: unless the Sita principle of *Shakti*

(female principle of divine energy) imprisoned in women is released, the great act of sacrifice will not be complete” (Sarkar, 1989, 238). Images of Rama and Sita were mobilised for political ends as symbols in traditional gender discourses that emphasise masculine valor, vigor and power in the service of protecting the pure, passive femininity (Mostov, 2000, 89- 110) for ushering in an idealistic society. They became a sign of moral superiority and civilisational achievement. The valorisation of Rama during pre-independence period with nationalist rhetoric of nation capable of self-rule and its resurgence in 1990s with a core craving to convert India as a Hindu state, espoused Ram rajya as an ideal. Clearly, Ramlila can no longer be seen merely as a performance practice, religious, spiritual or literary project in India; it is political.

Svarups: Gender, Language and Role-playing in Ramlila

All the characters in the Ramlila performance are represented by local artistes who are chosen through auditions held in the king’s palace at Ramnagar. Certain roles are passed down in families and are usually played by the same actors year after year.

Local actors play a variety of characters. Historically, all of the Ramlila actors had been Brahmin men and boys, the highest Indian caste. The only characters who do not belong to the upper caste are the small boys who play the monkey, the demon armies and the female playing Surpnakha’s role.

Gender is manifested in the ways that the characters ‘speak and move’ (Butler, 2004, 10). In Ramlila, there is a longstanding convention of only males performing all the parts, including that of Sita and other female roles. In the year 2012, when I visited the month long Ramlila performances at Ramnagar, the role of Rama was played by Pranav Tripathi, a class seven student from nearby semi urban town of Chakia in the district of Chandauli and Rama’s brothers, Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrughna were played by Atul Dubey, a class eight student, from Ghazipur, Suryansh Dubey, class nine student from Ghazipur and Atul Kumar Pathak, a class four student from Mirzapur respectively. Nand Kishore vyas from Gujarat performed the role of Sita. It was believed that these boys between the ages of eight and thirteen whose voices had not yet changed and with no facial hair were the only ones fit to embody Rama, his brothers, Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrughna and Sita. Raghunath vyas at Dharmshala, a fort near Kali Mandir, trained these five boys where they underwent a disciplined schedule. For a month, while they are rehearsing the play, the children are referred to by the mythical names of the characters they are impersonating. Interestingly, the boy performing Sita willingly accepts his newly bestowed upon gender

identity and is referred to as Sita during the month long training. Child actors who enact the part of the chief characters are called *svarup* (forms, likenesses), living gods with a status similar to the stone deities of gods in the Hindu temples. During the annual Ramlila cycle the boys and men who play the roles of Ram, Sita and Hanuman are worshipped as manifestations of deities. The actors are transposed as the divine incarnate for the audience. The audience enters into an imaginative reality and gains a direct access to the divine world. The children who play Ram and his brothers act out scenes from the story with stylised movements and speech patterns. The boys who enact the five most sacred roles of Rama, Sita and Rama's three brothers are treated as gods for a month, and people literally worship them by touching their feet, singing hymns in their praise, or simply, 'taking *darshan*' (looking at images of god is thought to be auspicious) of these 'divine' beings. The devotees function not merely as spectators but they bow down and pay obeisance to the actors and by doing so the spectators turn into actors themselves. When the Ramlila is over, the *svarups* become boys again.

Series of connotations like script, costume, makeup, props and set are available to mark femaleness and maleness in Ramlila. Language (Hindi in the case of Ramlila performers) may be considered as an ongoing means by which gender differences are circumscribed and perpetuated. Different dialects are prescribed for the male and female voices. It has been argued for some time that some consistent differences exist between male and female language use in speech (for example, Trudgill, 1972; Holmes, 1990; Labov, 1990; Eckert, 1997). Female role players use an invented repertoire of language that endorses the hegemonic ideology of civil notion of the norms by referring to husbands with superior titles as *prannath* (Lord of life, husband), *swami* (master) or maharaja and referring to her own female self as *dasi* (servant). The Ramlila at Ramnagar attests the traditional understanding of gender specific linguistic expressions compliant to that soft, gracious and so called 'feminine' comportment conforming to the androcentric biases in language (Cixous, 1976; Wittig, 1985, 1992; Irigaray, 1997; Kristeva, 1984).

Gender is not only produced by particular bodies but is also located within particular activities such as speech, mannerisms and behavioral practices. It is through the 'stylised repetition' of these gendered practices (e.g., body gestures, mannerisms, linguistic practices) that gender is performed (Butler, 1990, 2004). Furthermore, as Lyons explains, "Through engagement in these behaviours or practices, gender becomes accountable and assessed by others, and aspects of gendered identity become legitimated" (2009, 395). By addressing male characters as *prannath* (Lord of life, husband), *swami* (master) or

maharaja, and referring to one's female self as *dasi* (servant), language becomes gender embodied and gender becomes a linguistic performance.

Goddess and Demonised Female Form

Codified within the *Ramayana* performance is the goddess and demonised female form. The bad woman is seen as the rule breaker, disobedient, immoral and hence is appropriately punished for her misdemeanor. Rules of behavior for women are unambiguously etched. We have archetypes for the woman as Sita – a deferential daughter, virtuous wife, self-sacrificing mother, and antithetically, we have the bad woman as Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana in *Ramayana*, as dangerous and the sexually insatiable who threatens to destabilise patriarchal social order of sexuality and sexual normativity with her seductive power. 'Nakkatiya', which falls on the day of Dusshera, reenacts the particular incident of hacking Surpanakha's nose to tell the masses how goodness (Rama) prevails over evil (Surpanakha). The story goes that Surpanakha was smitten by the looks of Rama and Lakshmana and she makes advances towards them. Rama spurned her advances and following his order, Lakshmana hacked off Surpanakha's nose, ears and breasts. The anger and disgust of Rama for Surpanakha appears more intense than for Ravana who kidnapped his wife. The punishment he devised for Ravana for abducting his wife was to slaughter him at the battlefield, and not mutilating his sexual organs. As Kathleen M. Erndl asserts, "Disfigurement of the woman is the most common punishment for crimes of a sexual nature . . . Interestingly, such incidents are often presented in a humorous light" (1991, 65-85). One can see a lot of fun and frolic when this scene is enacted. When finally the nose is chopped off, it is accompanied with clapping and applause.

Interesting information that I gathered at Ramanagar was that no one wants to perform the role of Surpanakha, not even the young boys, because she is characterised as the eternal fallen woman in the epic. Therefore, a nautch (dance or dancing for the pleasure of men) girl of Ramnagar, the only female performer in the troupe, plays her role and contradictorily, is the highest paid performer. A dancing girl performing Surpanakha gets paid 500 rupees for her performance each day, whereas others, including Rama and Sita, get a meager eight rupees per diem. Seen from modern day lens Surpanakha may have rightly exercised her choice but the epic and the Ramlila represents her as fallen woman/bad woman consumed by lust. I could summarily deduce that in the small town of Ramnagar who would want to play her part except the dancing girl who is always already carrying the cross and dwells outside the periphery of the self-styled moral society that privileges domesticity, virtuosity, chastity and modesty in women. In this envisaged ideal

society, sexual desire should exist only between a lawfully wedded man and his lawfully wedded spouse. The dancing women fall beyond the pale of the normative familial and social frameworks of traditional Indian society and hence is considered as a morally dubious character, therefore being fit for the purpose of performing Surpanakha. Mythical characters are like goblets into which society pours its ideas – Sita has turned out to be an emblem of womanhood, the perfect role model as spouse and mother. Through her constant and protracted separation from her husband, her image is desexualised and sanitised like the Virgin Mary, belonging to a superior and chaste order.

In several performances across the world, men enacted the female characters as in the case of Ramlila at Ramnagar. Needless to say, the most effeminate and beautiful boy is hand picked to enact the role of Sita. ‘Women can’t play Sita’s role’, explained Raghunath, one of the organisers of the performance (2012). According to Raghunath, ‘Nor can a married man enact the roles of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata, so young boys enact the roles of epical characters as they are innocent and retain elements of God-like qualities in their innocence; it is their innocence that makes them more malleable for the roles’ (2012). When I asked the young boy if he felt uncomfortable to perform the role of Sita, he was very candid about his experience, “it was funny to wear women’s clothes and be Sita initially. But I was awed by the role [and] I had heard so much about her since childhood. Staying in this ashram has been a learning experience; all my friends here call me Sita. So slowly, I feel that the character has entered me. Here I learnt how courageous and pious Sita was”, said the actor (vyas, N. K., 2012). He described the scene at length when Sita resolves to follow Rama to the forest foregoing the comforts of the kingdom, “It is this decision, this faithfulness, and this devotion to her husband that people love to see – this scene is very popular, imagine one can embrace sufferings and trials so happily, such a person is hard to find, we learnt all this, heard stories about the characters, this helped us to play the roles better” (vyas, N. K., 2012), recounted the Sita impersonate.

When I asked why a girl might not play Sita, I was told by the Hanuman impersonate that “any female onstage would be considered by villagers to be sexually compromised. They also said that any girl who portrayed Sita would never find a husband because the action in Ramlila is considered real, including the wedding rites for Sita and Rama. Thus, no one will marry a girl who has already been married” (Pandey, 2012). When asked why the boy playing Sita does not face the same problem, my informant laughed: “He is a boy. He can’t be married to another boy” (Pandey, 2012), conforming to the heteronormativity holding high among rural village settings of India. The contradiction — that what is true for a girl-

as-god is not true for a boy-as-god — did not seem an issue. As for Rama, no problem: a king can have more than one wife.

For the brothers Ram Narayan Pandey and Sant Narayan Pandey the *Ramayana* and its performance practice of Ramlila was an enactment of *Dharma shastra* (textbook of religious duties) for the literate and illiterate folks of Ramnagar (2012). I debated with them why Rama conducted himself like a common man who mistrusts his virtuous wife and demands her to prove her chastity; their slipshod and compromising response can scarcely serve the requirements of today's socio-political issues vis-à-vis religion and women's subservience. Why it was Sita and not Rama who was subjected to trial by fire? Why wasn't Rama required to prove his chastity? Why was it that Sita had to be exiled even after she proved her innocence? Answers that advocated Sita's Dharma, Rama's strength, pointed out the fact that Rama was never happy after he was separated from Sita, and that he had installed a replica of Sita in gold for rituals that required the presence of his wife. Countless clarifications were offered to me to justify Sita's trial by fire and endorsing Rama's love for his wife. The question that they failed to address was that if Rama was attentive to *raj dharma* (kingly duties) what about his *dharma* to his wife? Can he be exonerated from the guilt of committing lapse in meeting his dharma as a husband? And the ultimate justification for all of Rama's actions and misdemeanors was surely because of the fact that 'he was her *pati parameshwar* (husband as god) and god after all' (vyas, LaxmiNarayan, 2012). Such deep-seated patriarchal values and female subjectivity still dictates the gender roles in Ramlila. Female viewers 'adopt and accept the male gaze and succumb to the conventional, societal expectation' (Williams, 1984, 83-99). They were disempowered by the lack of subject position to the discourses of theatre and functioned as a drag mirror held up to life in the male hands (Dolan, 1992, 3-13), ventriloquising patriarchal ideals of a good woman.

Ramlila as Metanarrative

The folk performance practice at Ramnagar is permeated with asymmetrical gender relations. This popular performance practice ends with *Uttara-Kanda* with Rama having killed Ravana and the establishment of Ram rajya amidst loud shouts of triumph celebrating the occasion; the narrative has carefully elided the story of Sita. Her story and trials do not culminate with the triumph of Rama over Ravana and his ascendancy of the throne at Ayodhya, she undergoes her chastity test and ultimately leads a secluded life in the forest giving birth to her two sons and finally enters the womb of the earth, her mother's abode. The performance inheres an effective social absence of women as subjects and the

unstated shared understanding to perform, produce, and support separate and binary gender norms as cultural narratives.

This folk version tends to contemporise the action at various points - “when authors contemporise the story, their characters speak in the colloquial dialect and slang of the time, and they act in ways that the audience would find familiar” (Lutgendorf, 1991, 213)- thereby being easily accessible to a huge audience and the values expressed therein are perpetuated and permeated among the spectators. Thapar’s assessment of the television serialised *Ramayana* show as possessing “a dangerous and unprecedented authority” (1989, 71-75) can be extended to understand Ramlila as well. This month long performance of Ramlila year after year, has become the popular version that seeps into the collective unconscious of a community privileging paradigms and sets of values for a moral society. Rama myth has been exploited by the patriarchal Brahmanical system to construct an ideal Hindu male. Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female to help serve the system (Sen, 1998). The epic story functions as a legitimization of the existing power relations, customs and cultural values. Overall, the traits sought in every Indian man/woman are foregrounded in the epical characters. We can clearly see the politics behind gender idealisation. Sita sets the concept of the ideal wife, her beauty, decorum of a wife, daughter-in-law, her virtue, anxiety for her husband, her chastity occupies the maximum space. Rama is seen as an *avatar*, beyond every question.

Ramlila based on the *Ramayana* text can be seen as a metanarrative, which functions as institutional and ideological forms of knowledge. This metanarrative’s (or ‘grand narratives’, typically characterised by some form of ‘transcendent and universal truth’) totalising nature of reality and experience acts as a shaping medium, a legitimization of the norms of the society and what Lyotard called the ‘emancipation narrative’ (1979). In a postmodernist environment, gender identity and sexuality cannot be ordered into hierarchies and binaries as the Ramlila stage demonstrates but must be understood as a constant becoming or a ‘thousand tiny sexes’. (Grosz, 1994, 199)

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