

Performing Spaces: Staging Resistance, Gendered Cartographies and Self

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Abstract: The paper aims to explore the self in different performative spaces, which includes theatre, dance, music, and posters. In doing so it tends to analyze how the “spaces” are being refilled by defining the “hidden narratives” of the self through performances. The performances are not just for entertainment rather the aim is to expose the hidden spaces of the society where bodies with pride are produced. The spaces are liberating and empowering in nature through which multiple narratives are perceived, conceived and lived. Considering performative space as a space where gender binaries can be unsettled, the work reveals how certain performances bolster one to rethink about the social conventions of gender. The performative body becomes a medium through which the idea of self, sexuality, space, gender, and culture can be looked upon. The body experiencing the sense of ‘homelessness’ within its own being goes into the quest for the discovery of the self, which is underlined with an expression of anger against the pseudo codifications of systems, thus authenticating change. The paper provides discourse on how performative spaces have become a product of change. To this end, the paper unravels how performances “fill in the blanks” and explores the wider dynamics of space including public, private, and mental spaces and how the outer spaces influence inner spaces.

Keywords: Performance, Space, Self, Dance, Music, Theatre, Visual arts, Gender

The contemporary feminine discourse expressing discontent with the autonomous masculine discourse as the dominant one has raised pertinent questions in the context of self, selfhood,

identity, and consciousness. Women, dismantling the gendered concepts of self, which has portrayed the self of a woman as diseased or defected are creating alternative narratives where they define themselves. Space and Self, in this context, becomes an important arena of analysis as it gives place to women to feminize their self and identity. To account for the feminine self that has been relegated to selflessness, invisibility, and passivity one needs to look beyond the already constructed masculine notions of self. It is imperative to redefine self not on the frameworks created by society or men but through one's own individuation and selfhood. As Elaine Showalter in *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* asserts, "the feminist obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanizing, or even attacking male critical theory keeps us dependent upon it and retards our progress in solving our own theoretical problems." She further adds that "In the process of redefining androcentric models we are learning nothing new." (Showalter, 183). Even in the performative space, the notions behind women's self and identity have been blurred, reducing them to a cultural product, embodied with ornaments for male gaze and pleasure. Thus, it becomes imperative to desexualize spaces and unlearn the gender binaries in performative spaces so as to give space to the feminine self.

According to many theoreticians, the self, as well as identities in women's performances, are not fixed but fluid and continuously in flux. In order to break the definitional propositions and established boundaries, it becomes indispensable to stretch the boundaries by women performers and acclaim spaces. The notions around identity and self are to be contextualized differently. Identity, like gender, is a social construction and the fluidity depends upon the changing social frameworks. The dual consciousness that a woman inherits in the dominant culture forms her self and identity. Thus one can allude that the duality is the result of one's own consciousness built from patriarchal prescriptions and from one's own resistance to such prescriptions. As Sheila Rowbotham says- "But always we were split into two, straddling in silence.....From this dislocation, comes the experience of one part of ourselves as strong, foreign and cut off from the other which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity." (Rowbotham, p. 29). The self as culturally defined and the self as different from culture germinates from the society and has to erupt in the society, thus giving rise to "new self".

Reclaiming the self and space through performances "projects an image of a WOMAN, a category which is supposed to define an individual woman's identity." (Rowbotham, p. 29). Until now, even the mirror reflection of women was not her own individual 'self' but was rather

a product of cultural and social categories. Women have now started reclaiming the spaces and expressing multiple selves as compared to the earlier times when they were always seen jostling for space and articulation. The difficulty that women faced in performing or speaking about one's own self is well expressed by Mary Eagleton in *Working with Feminist Criticism* (1996) (Eagleton, 146):

The difficulty of saying 'I'

Finding the courage to say 'I'

The intimacy of 'We' Saying 'We'

when really mean 'I'

The False unity of 'We'.

The impulse to speak opened ways for women and initiated them to take the 'U' turn; to speak from their marginalized position; to speak from their bodies about their vulnerabilities and desires. This initiated an end to the advocacy of 'anti-men' feeling and focus on 'women-centered' feelings.

The social movements through the act of solidarity and oneness aims to end the hegemonic discourse and power structures. It motivates women to create an alternative self, which is disconnected from the social, cultural or to say patriarchal referentiality. The "alternate self" is the collective self of women, which tends to shatter the mirror of expected silence through performative spaces and movements. As Rowbotham says:

"In order to create an alternative, an oppressed group must at once shatter the self reflecting world which encircles it and, at the same time, project its own image onto history. In order to discover its own identity as distinct from that of the oppressor, it has to become visible to itself..... People who are without names, who do not know themselves, who have no culture, experience a kind of paralysis of consciousness. The first step is to connect and learn to trust one another..... Solidarity has to be collective consciousness which at once comes through individual self- consciousness and transforms it." (Rowbotham, Sheila, 27)

The (un)codified visual performative vocabulary records the intimate thoughts and ideologies, the elatedness and conflicts, and the anger and silence. Art in representing reality

and self through the creative vision of one's mind tends to reconstruct a world with some sense of distortion. This distortion is a mark of protest against the envisioned reality and artist through one's immense fecundity uses art as a rebellion. As Alber Camus asserts, "Art is an impossible demand given expression and form. When the most agonizing protest finds its most resolute form of expression, rebellion satisfies its real aspirations and derives creative energy from this fidelity to itself. Despite the fact that this runs counter to the prejudices of the times, the greatest style in art is the expression of the most passionate rebellion."¹ It is this passionate rebellion that finds voice in different performative forms (theatre, dance, music, painting) that creates a space public and private space of one's own.

Formation of Theatrical Space by Blurring the Gender Boundaries

Social protest theatre is different from the political theatre in its approach to criticize and awake the individuals for neglecting the taboos prevailing in society. Social theatre aims to raise the individual consciousness so that collective action can be initiated. The attack on political authority and power structures that operate outside the society are secondary sources of targets. The primary concern is to attack the inner demons prevailing in society such as patriarchy, class and caste biases and gender inequality. Women were no less affected by the changing scenario. Even after Gandhi's self feminization, women were considered ancillary in a society that was constructed on the pseudo ideologies of male beliefs and dominations. The situation worsened as the rights assured by the constitution were far fetched from reality. Social monstrosity in the garb of Child Marriage, Sati, Female Infanticide and Dowry deaths still prevailed.² The question that left women perplexed was who would come for their savior when the so-called saviors of the nation (men) were the one stripping their humanity away? This resulted in women's joining hands in revolution and occupying the streets in order to protest.

The women's movement of the 1970s and 80s centered on the disillusionment with the world; exposing the injustice, exploitation, and violence against women through street protests, campaigns, slogans, and songs. The cry for helplessness and vulnerability gave birth to a new woman who is fierce and equally emotional. The realization of one's vulnerability became a

¹ Camus, Albert. "Rebellion and Art (excerpts)." *The Rebel*. 1956. p. 7.

² Kang, Neelu. "Using theatre for Consciousness Raising." *The Tribune*. February 10, 2002.

tool to raise consciousness through an active protest against deadening issues. The mobilization which began with custodial rape cases to dowry deaths brought women onto the streets displaying great creativity, activism and revolutionary fervor of change. The question pertaining to the politics of social change questioned the culture for its patriarchal practices, as Uma Chakravarti maintains, “It was impossible to pretend that culture and tradition did not have a role to play in sanctioning the extraordinary violence to which these women were subjected. Culture itself has to be subjected to scrutiny with an urgency not felt since the nineteenth century’s social reforms.”³

Women organizations such as Progressive Organisation of Women in Hyderabad(1975), Stree Sangharsh(1979), Mahila Samiti chafed against the atrocities and defilement of women through social, economic, cultural and political principles. They protested against dowry deaths, rape cases in their street plays, *Om Swaha* (against dowry deaths), *Mulgi Zali Ho*(A girl is born) and used posters depicting gravity of the issues faced. Some of the posters read: ‘From the darkness of the womb to the silence of the grave’, ‘Down with dowry’, ‘Women are not for burning and ‘Break the silence.’⁴ Women occupying spaces and performing was the only medium to put into question the silent fate of women sufferers. In the play *Om Swaha*, a woman is seen roaming in streets carrying matrimonial advertisements. Through humor and taunts, she restates the marriage mantras that are predominant in the Hindu marriage ceremony and tells the audience what ‘glorious state of marriage means’ for a woman. Thus the ‘Swaha’ in the title is a sharp critique of culture where marriage is not full of bliss and happiness(as culture espouses it to be) but is rather a state of self-denial, suffocation, sacrifice, drudgery, and victimization.⁵

Victim blaming has been a common parlance in a country where women are stuffed with a patriarchal dictionary containing do’s and don’ts. A satirical play, *Mahaul Badalna Hai*, by Saheli, addresses the issue of sexual harassment while talking about stereotypes attached to it and how women are blamed for their own harassment. While talking about popular stereotypes- what women should do, how they should walk, dress and talk and what would happen if a woman turns out to be careless in a so-called careful society, the play initiates a

³ Chakravarti, Uma. “The Women’s Movement as Performance.” 2012. p. 62.

⁴ Kumar, Radha. “The Campaign Against Dowry.” *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women’s Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990*. 1993. p. 122.

⁵ Chakravarti, Uma. “The Women’s Movement as Performance.” 2012. p. 63.

parallel story of a man who has lost his wallet in a bus. The moment the man makes a noise, he is piled up with criticism for keeping the wallet in an inappropriate position to a 'deliberate invitation' to the pickpocket (tyrant). The play thus delivers a message of putting the blame on the victim (mostly women) by placing men at the position of being robbed. Thus, it is "turning the allegation of provocative behaviour, voice mostly by men, on its head."⁶

Protest theatre as a whole includes characteristics of political as well as social theatre. Apart from similarities that coincide with social and political theatres, the protest theatre differs from them on one ground that it does not stop only at the exploration and questioning the social and political inequalities but it tends to bring a change in the mindsets, beliefs, and opinions of the audience. It creates a link between theatre and audience where the performer is the medium through which consciousness is raised. Once the consciousness is raised through theatrical performances, it paves the way towards political and social action based on the demands. For instance, the play *Om Swaha* raised the social consciousness of people and they began to understand the gravity of the situation. Soon, the social theatre along with other protest mediums turned into raising political demand, which compelled the government to consider the matter with utmost importance. Thus, the social pressure changed legal attitudes with passing laws such as the Criminal Law Act. The introduction of section 498A and Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code and section 113A of the Evidence Act proved to be stepping stones in the history of social protests.⁷

In the present scenario, theatrical groups such as Asmita Theatre headed by Arvind Gaur, Sukmanch Theatre by Shilpi Marwaha and street play organizations in various universities and colleges are being the active agents in raising social consciousness through theatrical means. Considering protest as a voice that can put an end to socio-political injustice prevailing in society, theatrical artists raise their voice in order to reclaim the lost or never gained spaces. Arvind Gaur blatantly asserts that his theatre will stand up against social injustice and protest on themes like caste, rape, violence, and corruption without inclining towards any political party or ideology. The theatrical space and boundary tend to break the

⁶ Ibid. p. 66.

⁷ Kumar, Radha. "The Campaign Against Dowry." *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990*. 1993. p.124.

fourth wall of intolerance, as he says; Asmita is about checking the system, not becoming a part of it."⁸

The protest songs used in theatres express their desire to change the world. As the song goes⁹

*ruke na jo jhuke na jo
mite na jo dabe na jo
hum wo inkalab hai
hum wo inkalab hai
julm ka jawab hai
julm ka jawab hai
har garib har shahid
ka hum hi to khwab hai
ruke na jo*

The dream of a casteless, unbiased and borderless society is articulated through the song in the protest, such as-

*hum mita ke hi rahenge majhabo ke raaj ko
takht aur taaj ko kal ke liye aaj ko
kal ke liye aaj ko
kal ke liye aaj ko
jisme unch nich ho aise har samaj ko
hum badalte hi rahe hai waqt ke mijaj ko
waqt ke mijaj ko
waqt ke mijaj ko
kranti ke
kranti ke raag hai junglo ki aag hai
samne jo aayega jalayenge mitayenge
ruke na jo*

It also sings about humanity and oneness-

⁸ Sukant, Deepak. "Arwind Gaur explains how Asmita checks the system by not becoming a part of it". *India Today*. September 08, 2017.

⁹ Kapoor Mahendra. "Jai Bangladesh." Hindi geet mala. 1971.

*jante nahi hai fark hindu musalman ka
mante hai rishta hum insaan se insaan ka*

To end pathetic conditions of poor one can go against anyone and anything:

*garib ko jagayenge garibi ko hatayenge
ekta ke jor pe kisi se bhi lad jayenge*

Art as an act of portent subversion, eminent theatre artist and activist, Shilpi Marwaha uses her voice to the outcry against the injustice done to the disadvantaged sections of the society. An ardent practitioner of Brechtian theatre, she has been an active agent in dismantling the system through her theatrical performances. The activism in theatre implied more energetic intervention of people as it engages with different segments of a society in order to raise consciousness and their own voice per se. Theatre, considered as the form of expression which has the power to blend and have a dialogue between drama and activism so as to propagate the change has been used to put an end to the legacy of silence and suppression of voices. In her theatrical performances like “A Woman Alone”, “The Death of an Anarchist”, “Ramkali” and protest during Nirbhaya rape case and any another issue, which are affecting society, she has also used her activism to break the fourth wall of barriers and hypocrisy. Through the belief in the power of art and her own voice, she has left no stone untouched when it comes to raging a fight against injustice and atrocities. Performing street plays in colleges to theatre performances in auditoriums, she has raised issues such as homosexuality, caste biases, women's emancipation, and illiteracy.

Shilpi Marwaha in her street theatre raises voice against issues such as corruption, illiteracy, homosexuality, and violence against women. The expressive behaviours in the plays such as *Purity*, *Kaash*, *Rangmanch*, *Bebak Ismat*, *Lakdi Ki Kathi* (showcasing dynamic human emotions and intolerant abuses prevailing in society), and street plays such as *Dastak*, *Wajood* (based on working women's struggle in society) reflects her intensity and desire to bring a change in society.¹⁰ After Nirbhaya rape case, she performed a street play wherein she questioned; who were responsible for such behaviours? Police? Government? Or an individual? The question left the public to critically scrutinize one's own place and

¹⁰ Bhati, Vini. “Theatre with Shilpi Marwah.” *Litgleam*. July 2018

responsibility in society. A social theatre raises issues and leaves the audience to think and rethink about the society one is creating and the heinous crimes taking place in that society.

What one sees in the aforementioned acts is not a performance or the performance of a performance but the expressions in the performance that records a legacy of violence, silence, anger, and injustice. These are expressed through a legitimate or fixed gesture and posture. One can also see how stereotypes and judgments created around women shape one's ideology and thus reflect the self that is created by the ideologies. In performance, these ideologies are recreated so that the absolute authority can be questioned.

The body on stage speaks through gestures and postures; it becomes an object of the gaze and desire if it is a female body. The above discussion illustrates that performance art is an expressive medium to reflect the political and social unrest creating space and opportunities for people to reflect the unreflected or express the unexpressed. In such space for free expression; nudity also becomes a medium to protest against the atrocities done against women so that the audience can encapsulate their own despotic behaviour.

India has witnessed extreme anger and shock in the wake of Nirbhaya gang rape in the form of different mediums of performance art such as music, theatre, poetry, and dance. Ranging from street protest solo (one woman) performances by Maya Krishna Rao and Mallika Taneja, theatre ushered new paths to search and represent the self. Mallika Taneja, a Delhi based theatre artiste staged a feminist satire show, *Thoda Dhyam Se* exposing India's naked truth through a naked stage performance. The performance is a burlesque of a society that people live in; beginning with the naked body looking at the audience and asking questions without uttering a word.¹¹ The naked body, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, becomes a "terrifying super object" gazing at the audience and asking them, who is responsible for sexual harassment? After minutes of silence, she starts donning clothes one over the other and talking hurriedly and carelessly about 'to-do things' for women which include careful attention to their (women's) talking, walking and looking. Towards the end of the performance, she ends up putting fifty different types of clothes over her body including jabs, and helmet on her head. Covering almost each and every part of her body she fills the atmosphere with her unasked question to what extent women are safe in this society even after veiling her full body and being careful? Thus in a single act, she raised questions on issues such as gaze, blame game,

¹¹ Parikh, Runa Mukherjee. "Thoda Dhyam Se" This Woman tears down victim blaming, Act by Act. *The Quint*. July 27, 2018.

adornment, body politics, freedom, sexual harassment, and violence. In her solo act, she becomes a 'body of evidence',¹² revealing ways in which women are visualized as the site of pleasure and lust. The performance can thus be considered as an act of reclaiming the battered body as Critic Jeanie Forte asserts "women performance artists expose their bodies to reclaim them, to assert their own pleasure and sexuality, thus denying the fetishist pursuit to the point of creating a genuine threat to male hegemonic structures of women."¹³

The performance can be analyzed as creating a public and mental space within the performative domain. In this space, one can experience, relive, recreate, retell, reconstruct and refashion our society and culture. In this way, the 'staged reality' is constructive and constitutive in nature. The reality represented through naked body compels one to question the intriguing ways in which it fits into the larger dynamics of arousing social change. The body here gives one a vision but what is problematic is the change in the mindset of the audience. What change can a naked body bring through a stage performance addressing the elite crowd? The act which tends to criticize the lecherous male gaze turns repressive in a repressive society as such acts become an "act of pleasure" in some cases. Also at some point, the performer questions one's own expressive behaviour, as Mallika Taneja says, initially one swing between the 'voyeur's gaze' and 'guilt gaze', questioning oneself: what if one is sexualizing the space(stage).¹⁴



Source: Times of India.

Picture 1: Mallika Taneja: Donning clothes during a stage performance.

¹² Striff, Erin. "Bodies of Evidence: Feminist Performance Art." *Critical Survey*. 1997. p. 2.

¹³ Jeanie, Forte. "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism." *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case Baltimore. 1990. p. 263/

¹⁴ Nair, Malini. "'I was tired of hiding': Delhi based actor Mallika Taneja turns onstage nudity into act of protest." *Scroll.in*. March 20,2017

What one sees from such outrageous acts is different kinds of reactions ranging from utter shock and disgust to being bold and revolutionary. Apart from this, it becomes imperative to analyze the state of mind and self of a performer. Performing artist in the act is trying to regain one's space and sexuality through the expression of fragmented 'self'. Nudity comes from an urge to express the self; the female body enters the performative domain of protest in order to express the 'self', which is not something given to her by society(here) rather it is her 'own' construction. The unbearable pain that the body has gone through reverberates in the performance; thus making it an act of transgression done through "speaking" and "expressing" the body. As Maurice Merleau Ponty puts in:

"Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space..... For us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. Even our most secret affective movements, those most deeply tied to the humoral infrastructure, help to shape our perception of things."¹⁵

Dance as a medium of protest

The protest to claim the public spaces through public dancing cannot be unnumbered when it comes to women's movement as a performance. The discourse around the dancing body ranges from nationalist agenda of reclaiming the lost culture during the colonial period to the representation of gendered self to reclaim the lost and fragmented self in contemporary times. The fire within the self has triggered the consciousness of women, which initiated a move from light to darkness, from lies to truths and has opened wide space for change. The years of vulnerability, injustice hidden under the highly decorated clouds of patriarchy and power has been attacked by the most powerful medium of art. The body, which is the first sight of tolerance, has been used as a weapon to claim spaces. Dancing has allowed women to break the cages of dehumanization declaring the death of the gender binaries.

The contribution of acknowledged performers Mrinalini and Mallika Sarabhai cannot be sidelined while discussing art as a medium to occupy spaces for social change and distort gender binaries. The pioneer for intertwining dance for social change and to venture beyond the fixed boundaries of dance, the Sarabhai's created a space for performers; a space with a vision to look beyond the societal menaces. Dance, as a medium to break boundaries of gender,

¹⁵ Ponty, Maurice Merleau. *Maurice Merleau Ponty: Basic Writing*. Edited by Thomas Baldwin, 2004, p.36

initiated a shift from stories of exploitation to empowerment and from subjugation to liberation. Mallika Sarabhai, through her dance activism, created space for change and development by not bowing to the social norms. Dancing per se is a viable alternative for women to craft, recraft, and deconstruct their identities in the new light of liberation. The new light is not the one given to them by the so-called conceptualized society but has been crafted by one's own true selves through solidarity. Her dancing body created a space on stage and in society, which transgresses the image of a woman constructed by patriarchy.¹⁶

In a world where the notion of gender equality and gender equity are just the political and social strategy to subjugate women, transcending boundaries and subverting the patriarchal spaces reiterate the desire to recodify the constructed narratives. Mallika's journey from being an interpreter of art to the creator of art, which pines to bring change into the lives of the marginalized sections of the society, has helped expand the role of art in marking space for women's issues in India. As she believes that "the performing arts can play a vital role in reaching out to people, especially those who are deprived of social and educational privileges." Her first solo performance, *Shakti: the power of women* (1989) marked an initiation of her own contemporary dance vocabulary. Distorting the age-old belief that women are deemed to be under the shadows of patriarchy, holding an inferior status in myths and dharma's, she criticized the hegemonic discourse through her projection of "*Stri Shakti- In Search of the Goddesses*". The performance through her expressions and movements reflected a society that is socially constructed. Divulging herself and the audience into the portrayal of the goddess (who is a woman in a society) in the so-called 'goddess worshipping' society she created space for women to question the age old perpetuation and create new identity and space. From showcasing Laxmi, Saraswati, Ganga, and Kali as the all-powerful goddesses from the prism of patriarchy to the powerful portrayal of Draupadi and Sati, the performance reiterates the fact that the narratives are chains binding women to the darkness of the demon called patriarchy.¹⁷ Decoding Savitri's myth and valorizing her act, she says Savitri needs to be eulogized not for the patriarchal reasons but for her wit and intelligence as she defeated Yama, the god of death. She further added, "No where does Savitri say, 'I refuse to live if my husband dies. Instead, she says, 'I refuse to let my husband die.'"¹⁸

¹⁶ Grau, Andree. "Political Activism and South Asian Dance: The Case of Mallika Sarabhai." April 2007. p. 49.

¹⁷ Roy, Meghna. "Heels in Search of Goddess." *Wordpress*. February 11, 2016.

¹⁸ Roy, Sandip. "The importance of being Mallika Sarabhai." *FirstPost*. September 19, 2011.



Picture 2: Mallika Sarabhai performing Stri Shakti- In Search of the Goddess

The performance thus challenged the male supremacy in the mythological narratives thereby contextualizing the contemporary situation of women where mythological narratives still hold importance. The tales narrated visualized how sufferings of women are deified, which is the plot of patriarchy to defile women while adoring them. Art thus becomes a space to negotiate the gender binaries; space wherein the reality can be brought into the purview of people. Space becomes a ground for revolutionary change and if art cannot instigate or challenge the suffocating norms that are stifling lives of women then it is “as futile as the ornamentation of a naturally beautiful body.”¹⁹ The women-centric works of Mallika Sarabhai that position her as an ‘artist’ are *Draupadi*; *Sita’s Daughter*; *V is for Violence*; and *Colours of the Heart*. The *Colours of the Heart* is centered on how the lives of women overburdened by customs and traditions mark the end of innocence.²⁰

Contemporary dance, which includes public dancing as well, tends to end the dark black space of terror and disgrace. The tattered body, which refuses to accept itself after the violation through sexual harassment, is transmogrified through dancing. Bodies, which are not identified under the fixed gender binaries, also create their own vocabulary through dancing. For instance, Mandeep Raikhy used performance art to challenge the sexist anti-gay laws in India.²¹ The performance displays sexual positions and intimacy between the two male

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Grau, Andree. “Political Activism and South Asian Dance: The Case of Mallika Sarabhai.” April 2007. p. 47.

bodies in a bedroom-like setting. The idea is to make people comfortable with the discomfort or to say 'naturalize' the 'unnatural'. The sexually moving bodies in the performance powerfully convey the sexual desires of gays in India, which remain subdued under the rigid norms. The movements and expression of a performer display elements of protest against laws which 'criminalizes' one's sexuality and identity. As the performer himself believes that having one's own sexuality 'criminalized' by law plays an important role in perceiving and shaping one's self image. Performance is one such medium through which one can endeavor to bring change in the mindsets.



Source: Msn News

Picture 3: The performing body of Mandeep Raikhy depicting gay sexual positions and intimacy between gay partners.

The spaces thus claimed symbolically speak; they narrate the history of marginalization and subordination. They also tend to create new spaces by redefining the old or neglected ones. For instance, the story of Sita's marginalization is re-enacted through Sita's perspective by different women performers. Even the so-called grand narratives of Partition, which were occupied by men, are being redefined to include personal narratives of women. Women's movement from the beginning has used performance as the sole medium to speak for them. The contemporary *One Billion Rising Revolution (OBR)* has been inclined towards performances, considering it the only domain where change through celebration and solidarity can be attained. As they

believe, “Art provokes thought, stirs the heart and imagination, and has the power to incite people into action.”²²

The act to claim spaces tends one to break the gender norms even in the remotest part of the country. The fire of change has stirred the desire for change and freedom. For instance, the Dalit women from the Musahar community, Bihar deconstructed the space by breaking the age-old myth that only men can play drums. They persisted and initiated their own band named, *Nari Gunjan* band, thus acclaiming their space. Music provides them freedom and livelihood as they perform at weddings, ceremonies and during festivals and community gatherings.²³



Figure 4: Performance by the Nari Gunjan band

Source: One Billion Rising Newsletter, January 2020

The relationship between gender and space is palpable in the society; a society where gender relations are established through the different practices in order to produce a space for one's own individuality. Through art, the peripersonal spaces are expanded thus compressing the interspaces between people. The space between male and female are also transposed to a different domain through art. The performative space has the capacity to perturb the gender binaries and create space for women in public space where they can be ‘who they are’(true self). Women’s body that has long been the object of the gaze, speak in performance; the body writes, performs, discards and recreates new narratives. Thus, one can see that in order to take a move from alienated and isolated being to inclusiveness not only in the society but also towards one’s own self and identity has built up spaces where women can breathe the air of freedom, but still one cannot assert that full freedom has been achieved as there are miles to go before one sleeps.

Printing a Revolution through Posters

The anatomy of protests has lingered upon the conflicted zone prevalent in the nation, which includes grievances and curtailed freedom of expression. The protest, seen as a collective voice and conscience of the nation, questions the unequal status and biases prevailing

²² Eve Ensler. “One Billion Rising Revolution.” *webpage*.

²³ Badhwar, Natasha. “The rhythm of women who beat their own drums.” *Livemint*. October 31, 2016.

in the society. The protest movements in India have used art as a medium to articulate the collective conscience and raise the consciousness of its people. Posters are one such art form that has a voice of its own; a visualized voice representing narratives of anger, trauma, and injustice thereby critiquing the uneven ideologies. It is an “ephemeral form of art and communication”²⁴, which is used as an embodiment of solidarity, support and a tool to confront opposition. Different metaphors, symbols, and archetypes are used through posters to claim back the spaces that are highly gendered, leaving an immediate and deep impression upon the spectator. In order to re-establish a gender identity construction through posters, it becomes imperative to understand how the symbolic and metaphorical space in a poster is an effective tool to bring change and blur the highly gendered shadow lines?

Women’s movement from the beginning has campaigned for the amelioration of women’s condition through art. The malaise that the country suffers from exhibits stark reality of a society where women are considered as the disadvantaged section, the categorical ‘other’ in the society. The deconstruction of such constructed gender identity and binaries bring into purview the need to break the shackles and occupy spaces that are taken away from women under the garb of patriarchy and domination. Protest through posters is like printing a revolution on the colorful, eye-catching placards. The concern of women’s movement has been mapped through the symbolic images in the posters, which created space to locate the multilayered issues such as violence, injustice, and discrimination. What makes posters an effective tool of protest is not just the valuable and aesthetic documentation it provides but the larger problems it addresses along with the anger of the person involved in the making. It is through this act of individual or group activity that the collective voice finds graphic representation.

Women’s movement from the early days has been preoccupied with various forms of violence that are pertinent enough to put into consideration. The violence (public and private) includes different forms such as rape, dowry, widow immolation, acid attacks, wife battering, and child sexual abuse. Beginning from the Mathura rape case (1972) to the Nirbhaya rape case (2012), the vulnerable position of women in the sexist society remains intact. The battle initiated long ago has covered miles but the victory is yet to be achieved. In this swing between the fight and victory the seething anger, silence, traumas can only be minimized by talking

²⁴ *Poster Women: A visual history of Women’s Movement in India*. 2006. p. 4.

about violence and pain. Since silence allows violence, so it becomes imperative for the one being suppressed to speak about the suppression. Women, living through the trauma develop different insights, which the one who has never lived in a trauma can hardly understand.²⁵ Precisely this is the reason why different genders have different perspectives on violence and sexual harassment. Analyzing poster as a text reveals various issues that are being addressed through posters. The visual representation of some of the issues tackled in order to create space for one's gender and self includes Violence, Health, Literacy, Marginalization, Religion, Environment, and Politics. Some of the posters speaking about injustice are discussed below.²⁶

The poster covers different facets of violence that women in a society are attuned to. The violence hidden within the caged four walls of the home to the violence at public places, the poster highlights the vulnerability of women living in a patriarchal society. Ranging from the voices of domination and subordination to domestic violence and wife battering and to sexual harassment, marital rape, and police brutality the poster is a visual vocabulary narrating the story of women negotiating for her own identity. It insists one to question the universality of male domination and subsequent ways to end violence against women.

Literacy campaigns, which initiated in the nineties, saw a number of women coming forward and expressing their desire to learn. It gave them the literal and metaphorical space to articulate the self; to talk about their issues of concern and most importantly to move out of the four walls. The initiative actually helped them to talk about the violence they face at their respective homes; the mutual stories about violence in literary circles provided them space wherein different 'hidden selves' merged into one.

Along with the fight mounted by women's movement at different levels, posters served the need to articulate the self of young girls and women who expressed their need and right to learn. Posters thus added colours to their imagination and the self-efficacy, which education can furnish. Some of the posters read as "I am learning to read so that I can read my life" and "Reading and writing help to know oneself." The poster picturizes the urge of a woman who is learning to write so that she can write her own destiny. The picture shows that women who are forced to work in fields by society want to learn and in the process, she throws away the

²⁵ Rajaram, Sneha. "Understanding mental illness: When Psychology fails to politicize, socialize its understanding of trauma". *FirstPost*. November 11, 2018.

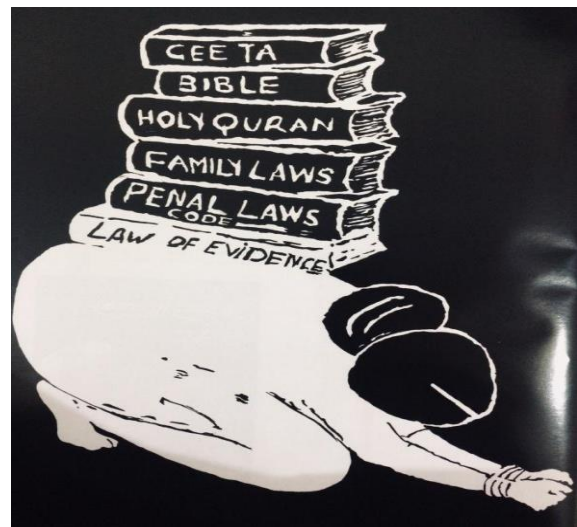
²⁶ The posters in the work have been collected from *Poster Women (2006)*, which is an archive of over 1500 posters from Indian Women's Movement. The collection covers different subjects, themes and areas that were important to the movement. The diverse collection has been sourced from over 200 groups all over the country.

axes and takes up the pen through which she can write about her victory. Nature is also seen in harmony with the women's desire to learn.



Picture 5: Poster addressing women's response to literacy.
Source: Poster Women, Zubaan

Identity politics has been one of the most important and difficult territories that the women's movement has been dealing with. The question that has spurred most of the Women's movement is the highly gendered creation of identity and roles. "Who" and "Why" behind the creation of identity has raised innumerable debates ranging from religious and cultural grounds to a moral one. The social and cultural institution defined the identity of a woman in religious terms where she is deemed to have an inferior status. Religion plays a precarious role in shaping one's social, cultural and personal identity. Thus, to deconstruct and dismantle the regressive structure became the foremost concern of women's movement. In order to defile the core belief, women's movement ventured on a journey to create their own narratives to assert that 'one is not born a woman but



all spheres of life. From public spaces such as streets and courts to the owners of public transport and working in fields and households, they question that when they are present everywhere, then why are they not given equal rights and freedom? Why do women still remain unequal?

Gender has been an analytical category that propels one towards analyzing how identities are being negotiated by claiming performative spaces such as dancing, theatre, and poster-making. It traces the journey of a performer in the making of a performance and sees how a performer transcends the boundaries of space in order to represent his/her own self.

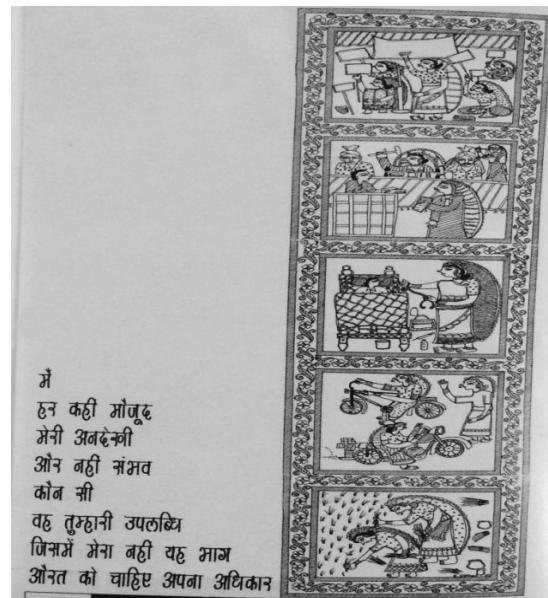


Figure 7: Posters expressing women's desire to claim spaces. Created by Mahila Jagran Kendra, Patna

The theatrical space tends to break the unprecedented norms challenging the patriarchal codes of gender and sexuality. What one sees through the subversive act of nude body on stage is the nudity of the values and norms, thus critiquing and asking for what reason women are supposed to don the clothes when the patriarchy and male gaze is buck naked. The agenda is to break the shackles of suppression and suffocation; to heal the broken wings and infuse subjectivity to women through the performance of the self. Thus the use of postmodernist deconstructive methodology, according to Jeanie Forte, “has led to the use of the body as an embodied presence, which by being the carrier of the accoutrements of signifiers and ideologies, could become a subversion of these very contexts.”²⁷

Dance as an expressive medium of protest communicate the expressions through the body and facial movements. The protesting body in a dance represents a body that is not the repertoire of religious and cultural conducts, but a body narrating stories of social and cultural injustice. The stage becomes a place of the explosion of the self of a performer producing a language which can neither be expressed through the words of mouth nor can be written. Analyzing dance from three different perspectives, which is - artistic, aesthetic and, cathartic and therapeutic brings into purview of the redefined notions of dance as a protest performance. Usually overpowered by beauty and adornment one tends to overlook the other elements of ‘*Rasas*.’ The ‘*Rasas*’ pertaining to aestheticism not only circumscribe the elements contemplating the mind through the fixed notions of beauty but also accommodates the elements arousing grotesque and ugliness within its purview. In protest performance, the body representing the ugliness in the society through the similar appearance has the tendency to evoke the senses.

The artistic creation has the propensity to present and represent ‘what’ and ‘how’ of a society and dance as an artistic medium can transcend the barriers of time and space. For instance, performances of Mrinalini Sarabhai performed decades ago still hold relevance. Thus one can allude that ‘artist and the art’ never dies. Dance is therapeutic in nature as it tends to make an individual feel one with the body and space; it has allowed breaking the cages of dehumanization declaring the death of the gender binaries.

Protest posters form an image in one’s mind that the mind cannot shake off. The use of pictures, slogans, and themes in posters express the color (self) of an individual. Posters as

²⁷ Forte, Jeanie. “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism.” *Theatre Journal*. 1988. p. 220.

symbols of protest use a visual vocabulary to convey a socially conscious message. As an art expressing different shades of the self, posters tend to reclaim spaces and open up closed minds. It can visually record campaigns, map histories and memorialize events. While visualizing a poster one is inclined to dig deep down and think about the meaning that the art is trying to convey. For instance, a poster depicting tattered shoes immersed in red blood will convey a more provocative message of the revolution than simply drawing people lamenting upon the bloodshed that revolution has brought. Thus, posters gravitate the viewer and the artist to come in terms with different perceptions and masked realities prevailing in the society.

The mode of expression of the self and opening up spaces in a performance began from people coming forward to share their personal stories of marginalization but ended up as a collective struggle. In a world where the notion of equality and equity are just the political and social strategy to subjugate people, transcending boundaries and subverting the suffocating spaces reiterate the desire to recodify the constructed narratives. The conjoint involvement of art and the society is akin to thunder and lightning. The thunder in society will always be lightened in art and vice-versa. Thus it is imperative to grasp the inextricable intertwining of the two in order to explore the self that is constructed in the society and reflected in art.

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