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revisiting the woman's question on the nation's stages: new directions in research on Indian theatre

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Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India

Nandi Bhatia; Oxford University Press, New Delhi; 2004; 206pp, ISBN 047212635 £34.52 (HbK).

Binodini Dasi: My Story and My Life as an Actress

Rimli Bhattacharya (editor and translator); Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998, 277pp, ISBN 8185107459 £13.95 (PbK).

Theatre Beyond the Threshold: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Bengali Stage 1905–1947.

Minoti Chatterjee; Indialog Publications, New Delhi, 2004, 268pp, ISBN 8187981636 £10.00 (PbK).

Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947

Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker; University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 2005, 478pp, ISBN 0877459614 £34.95 (HbK).

Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation

Tutun Mukherjee (editor); Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005, 551pp, ISBN 0195670086 £21.99 (HbK).

Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India

Susan Seizer; Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2005, 440pp, ISBN 0822334437 £17.95 (PbK), ISBN 0822334321 £73.00 (HbK).

Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre

Laksmi Subramanyam (editor); Shakti Books, New Delhi, 2002, 272pp, ISBN 8124108706 £24.50 (HbK).

Scholarship that seeks to describe and explain women's contribution to theatre in India is getting larger, generating a spectrum of critical insights into women's agency and construction of their subjectivity both on stage and off. This corpus of work coincides with the growing need in diverse fields, to study the implications of nationalism as a gendered discourse, and to critically assess women's participation in the formation of nations. As interest in the area expands, theatre provides useful insights into the multiple constructions of women in accordance with the imperatives of nationalist politics, and the negotiations and contestations offered by playwrights and performers to subvert the dominance of masculine ideologies operating in the theatres of the nation.

Approaches to representation of women and their involvement in theatre activities come from practitioners of theatre and scholars in diverse fields ranging from anthropology and political science to postcolonial studies. Scholars such as Susan Seizer use anthropological methods such as interviews and participant observation practices in order to understand the strategies deployed by female performers for negotiating with their stigmatized position in society. Others, for example, Minoti Chatterjee and Nandi Bhatia, consider collaborative readings of historical documents and dramatic texts effective strategies for recuperating personal histories of women performers and their lives on stage. And theatre directors Tripurari Sharma and Amal Allana employ autobiographical accounts and rigorous open-ended dialogues to offer a critical overview of their own engagement with women's theatre (Subramanyam, 2002). Viewed together, scholars and artists combine extensive archival research, innovative analytical models and experimental theatre practices to contextualize the material realities of women within their own individual histories rather than present them within the grand narrative of the nation's destiny.

Research on Indian theatre exhibits a wide array of interests in terms of its subject matter and theoretical concerns. Works like *Theatre beyond the Threshold* and *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance* trace the evolution and transformation of theatre practices in the wake of colonial rule and anti-colonial resistance. Drawing relations between aesthetics and politics, between performance and social experience, this body of work demonstrates how theatre and rising nationalist consciousness appropriate each other in order to construct one as an extension of the other in the public imagination. In this process, gender comes to play a crucial role in aligning nationalist fervour with masculinity and bourgeois aspirations. Nandi Bhatia argues that in the course of constructing an anti-colonial rhetoric, women are frequently condensed to their symbolic value as victims of colonial violence (2004: 39–43). Minoti Chatterjee investigates other implications of such passive representations and concludes that women are often presented as signifying sites of religious identity and their individual concerns are repeatedly buried under the burden of communal sentiments in nationalist drama (2004: 93–137). Rimli Bhattacharya's translation of the memoirs of a 19th

century Bengali actress, Binodini Dasi, offers a significant intervention in this dialogue. Although maintaining patriarchal values of their times, autobiographies such as Dasi's, she argues, provide a glimpse into the hidden aspirations of a woman that are simultaneously rendered invisible by her own performance of a compliant bourgeois femininity.

In the contemporary context, the social positioning of theatre performers is discussed at length in *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*. Working on Special Drama, Susan Seizer provides an in-depth analysis of the stigma attached to this genre of performance in Tamil Nadu. For Seizer, hostility towards artists of Special Drama can be viewed as a product of the elitist impulse of nationalist movements that places certain subaltern cultural practices on the fringes of revivalist culture. In their personal lives, Seizer argues, female performers of Special Drama are largely preoccupied with improvisational performances that distance their subjectivity from the stigmatized social role of their profession. While Seizer offers profound insights into an alternative genre, Aparna Dhawadker in *Theatres of Independence* draws upon a vast multilingual body of literature to explore the incorporation of indigenous genres of performance in mainstream theatre activity. She argues that theatre in post-independence India has developed a unique mode of expression through 'syncretistic practices' that collapse dominant cultural binaries such as rural/urban, tradition/modernity and east/west. As a result, a space is created in urban theatre for folkloric productions that allow alternate imaginings of feminine desire.

In a similar vein, collections of critical essays such as *Muffled Voices* stress the multiplicity of theatre activity that has emerged with interpenetration of diverse forms of representation such as folk traditions with Brechtian theatre in modern India. Editor Lakshmi Subramanyam views this mode of expression as a crucial breakthrough for women's theatre since it allows for the emergence of a complex female subjectivity that resists its own reification in the process of resisting dominant depictions. In order to showcase such attempts, Tutun Mukherjee brings together the work of 18 women playwrights writing in different Indian languages in the anthology *Staging Resistance*. Playwrights in this collection search for an appropriate theatrical methodology that provides political immediacy to women's issues that are often seen as too personal or trivial in the national imaginary.

One constant in this diverse body of research is to draw attention to the absence of women's voices despite repeated assertion of their centrality to the grounding of the nation. Various studies point out this contradiction by reflecting on the recruitment of actresses during the early phase of nationalist theatre. While the training of actresses becomes an extension of a larger reformist project for women's emancipation, little effort is made to remove the social stigma attached to their presence in the public gaze (Chatterjee, 2004). According to

Rimli Bhattacharya, in the context of Bengali theatre, the social stigma attached to the actress works as a double entendre since it legitimizes the stage as a site of spiritual redemption for 'fallen women' and also facilitates the erotic iconicity of the actress to ensure greater publicity for performances (Bhattacharya, 1998). In other contexts, for example, Parsi Theatre, women's participation tarnished theatre's reputation and contributed to its expurgation from canonized drama (Bhatia, 2004). Beyond the realm of theatre, public exposure of actresses' private lives takes on a didactic overture and becomes emblematic of the evils of social mobility for women (Chatterjee, 2004). As Susan Seizer points out in the context of Special Drama, remnants of these discursive formations can still be found in existing attitudes towards female performers. Actresses are stigmatized less for their 'lack' of domesticity and far more for their 'excessive' psychosocial mobility to form interpersonal relations and marriage alliances across community lines (Seizer, 2005). Actresses are often labelled as 'loose-women' not so much for their moral behaviour, but for their potential to displace 'pure' ethnic boundaries of their respective communities.

Scholars have examined the ways in which individual women's lives are altered by their presence in the public gaze. These studies demonstrate that the power of a female performer to defy prescriptive feminine behaviour only reinforces her stigmatized persona. For Bhattacharya (1998), canonization of an actress such as Binodini Dasi is not an acknowledgment of her strengths as an actress. Rather, her status as a cultural icon can be largely attributed to her writings that encapsulate her private and public life within the parameters of bourgeois respectability. The inability of actresses to transform their relative freedom into agency arises largely from the internalization of prevailing ideological constructs regarding separate spheres of propriety for women and men (Seizer, 2005). The gendering of social spheres is often reiterated in nationalist drama, conceptually distancing them into two separate worlds where the domestic sphere becomes the natural precinct for feminine virtues (Bhatia, 2004: 112). This conceptual separation, according to Seizer, makes actresses extremely conscious of their own transgression and they constantly transform their private lives into enactments of distancing themselves from the public gaze. Female performers of Special Drama, for example, re-enact 'a sense of entitlement to privacy and domesticity' through creative uses of self-erected enclosures to 'preserve their honor' while on tour (Seizer, 2005: 301–333).

While historical and ethnographic research point towards the continuity of hegemonic constructions regarding gender identity, scholars try to record instances of their displacement by performers through creative practices. These dislocations often come in unexpected ways. For instance, actress Binodini Dasi elevates personal pain over ideals of renunciation upheld by the 19th century Bengali stage by intertwining autobiographical introspection with theatrical performance in her writings and in the process resists her objectification in the

cultural imaginary (Bhattacharya, 1998: 235–236). Although largely voicing dominant moralizing narratives on Special Drama stage, actresses sometimes weave in their resistance in the guise of comedy, and expose inequalities of kinship practices and injustices of domestic gender roles (Seizer, 2005). Outside the theatrical space, actresses of Special Drama disrupt the moral distinction between public and private through their improvised practices of experiencing privacy in public spaces. As Seizer (2005: 329) points out, ‘actresses struggle to conform to the dominant terms of gendered respectability, but in doing so, they subtly alter – by refiguring – these organizing terms themselves’.

Attempts have also been made by theatre activists in recent years to question and alter dominant gender perceptions that continue to construct women as partial citizens in the postcolonial era. Directors such as Amal Allana emphasize the performative aspect of gender roles in their theatre by often casting a male actor to play the female lead. For Allana, such strategies prove to be rather effective in highlighting the predicament of women who are constantly defined in terms of their roles as mothers, wives or daughters (Subramanyam, 2002: 165–192). Other theatre practitioners, for example, Anuradha Kapur and Usha Ganguly, revisit historical and literary female characters and bring them to stage to interrupt the enunciation of an ‘authentic’ Indian woman in terms of the bourgeois rhetoric of respectability (Subramanyam, 2002). In her solo performances, Usha Ganguly merges her individual voice with those of celebrated women theatrical characters in order to weave a rich narrative of female consciousness (Mukherjee, 2005: 69–85).

Scholars critically engage with activist theatre to assess its contribution to practices of resistance and affirmative action. Working on People’s Little Theatre, Nandi Bhatia argues that this form of theatre foregrounds the nexus of gender and national politics, and further complicates it by inserting female characters who deconstruct the dominant nationalist trope of motherhood along with exposing historical processes of socio-economic subjugation. Contrary to the identification of women’s roles in the domestic sphere, playwrights such as Utpal Dutt project women as active participants in nationalist struggles (Bhatia, 2004: 105–107). Playwrights such as Mahesh Elkunchwar and Cyrus Mistry, on the other hand, extend the critique of patriarchy to masculine conceptions of the nation by appropriating the nationalist trope of ‘nation as home’ (Dharwadker, 2005: 295–309). Besides projecting a subversive female subjectivity that exposes the fragility of nation-home equation, such appropriations, according to Dharwadker, generate immediacy between private experiences and public issues of caste, class and ethnicity.

Moving away from conventional theatre practices, scholars examine the ways in which social organizations use theatre to contribute to larger changes in society. While theatrical space is being reworked to accommodate revisions of nation and gender history, structural principles of theatre are also being modified to make it

a more flexible mode of representation. Street theatre, for instance, emerges as one such approach to performance that takes theatre beyond the proscenium as a tool of awareness and protest. Theatre activists and women's organizations adopt this form of theatre to reach out to people in their own familiar spheres of everyday life, creating a greater sense of dialogue and community between the viewers and performers (Bhatia, 2004). Theatre practitioners like Mangai emphasize the interventionist rather than didactic role of theatre while addressing issues such as dowry murders and female infanticide. As a step towards a conscious assertion of their 'subject status', Mangai proposes theatre activities that require greater improvisation and participation on the part of women spectators (Subramanyam, 2002). According to Bhatia (2004: 118), 'For many women, participation in street theatre provides the impetus for turning their domestic identities or limited roles into new independent social identities'.

From generating powerful nationalist symbols during anti-colonial struggles to foregrounding crises in secular nationhood in postcolonial India, women in theatre have played a significant role in the nation-building process. While research on theatre sheds light on this crucial intersection of nationalism and gender, it also draws attention to the centrality of performances in everyday life that both strengthen and dissolve dominant conceptions of gender roles. Constant historical contextualization is necessary for such a project, and scholars recognize personal memories and narratives among the most effective tools for understanding the processes through which certain notions of femininity get constructed and disseminated. Equally fundamental to this project is a need to foreground opposition forwarded by women to these hegemonic constructions, both in theatre and in their immediate spheres of everyday life. Tracing these intertwined trajectories of domination and resistance entails an interdisciplinary approach to theatre activity, and the authors discussed here use unique methodological approaches to this complex dynamic, and argue for a distinct theatrical idiom for addressing women's issues. While exposing different social and political registers that reduce women to their allegorical value in nationalist history, they propose a non-cohesive identity for women who can be best represented through a difference predicated on power relations. Through scholarly and creative efforts, women emerge as dialogic voices that interrupt all pronouncements of 'authentic' femininity and contribute to a more gender sensitive imagining of the nation.

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