

"SHIFTING PARADIGMS: GENDER REPRESENTATION IN MARATHI THEATRE WITHIN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT"

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the shifting paradigms of gender representation in Marathi theatre within a multicultural context. Through an analysis of various plays and performances, it explores how traditional gender roles and stereotypes are being challenged and redefined in contemporary Marathi theatre. The intersectionality of gender with other identities such as caste, class, and religion is also explored, highlighting the complexities and nuances of gender representation in this specific cultural context. The study delves into the ways in which female characters are portrayed, the agency given to women in the narratives, and the impact of these representations on audiences. By critically examining the gender dynamics in Marathi theatre, this study sheds light on the evolving landscape of cultural representation and social change within the context of a diverse and multicultural society.

KEYWORDS: gender representation, intersectionality, female characters, social change, cultural representation, stereotypes, agency

INTRODUCTION:

In the context of this research paper, the portrayal of women in theatre serves the dual purpose of reflecting societal values and shaping collective understanding. This portrayal holds a nuanced power dynamic with real women, as the distinction between reality and representation is often blurred. This power dynamic is central to the cultural politics of theatrical representation, where the construction of representation carries embedded ideologies and cultural norms. The examination of this power dynamic involves analysing how theatrical representation is structured and imbued with significance, influencing the embodiment of female characters in performances. The politics of theatrical representation in this study refers to the deliberate choices made in positioning the subject within the narrative and performance of the female character. Within this framework, theatre functions as a vehicle for semiotic and phenomenological expression, portraying the performing body as a cultural text or signifying entity. The transition from a mere sign to a fully-realized subject hinges on the concept of performativity, which extends beyond theatricality according to Fischer-Lichte's perspective.

The genesis of Marathi theatre is commonly attributed to a royal order commissioned by Shrimant Chintamanrao Appasaheb Patwardhan in the post-Peshwa princely state of Sangali in the late 18th century. This order led to the creation of a new form of performance, reflecting a desire for refinement and sophistication in entertainment that catered to elite taste. The intention was to distance the theatrical production from what was perceived as crude forms of indigenous folk performances, such as *Tamasha*, which were associated with lower caste status. The transition towards a more refined form of entertainment marked a significant shift in the cultural politics of theatrical representation, where aesthetics were tied to caste values and social hierarchies. The adherence to tradition and the introduction of new sophistication in performances aimed to cater to a selected and sophisticated audience, indicating a move towards the monopolization of theatre by the Brahmanical elite.

The establishment of Marathi theatre was further propelled by factors such as caste, class, masculine gender norms, urban conditions, colonial education, and the adoption of the proscenium form. Following the demise of Bhave's patron, the troupe migrated to Bombay where they encountered a cosmopolitan environment conducive to the growth of theatre. The exposure to public patronage, media publicity, and interactions with the native intelligentsia in Bombay facilitated the evolution of a vibrant theatre culture influenced by English, Urdu, and Gujarati language performances.

The pivotal moment in the genesis of Marathi theatre occurred when Bhave performed his first show in Bombay utilizing the proscenium theatre space. The use of this theatrical form, inspired by European practices, marked a significant departure from traditional performance styles and signaled the beginning of modern Marathi theatre. The recognition and feedback received from English-educated social personalities further reinforced the importance of the proscenium stage in shaping the trajectory of Marathi theatre.

IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING GENDER REPRESENTATION IN MARATHI THEATRE

Despite the historical presence of women as loyal audiences and subjects of theatrical content, their voices and contributions to Marathi theatre have often been overlooked and marginalized. Women have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes regarding theatrical content and presentation, both in the past and present. This constructed invisibility of women in the theatre is a significant issue, considering the theatre's role in reflecting and influencing social changes, nationalist movements, and class struggles in Marathi society.

The absence of women in Marathi theatre cannot be solely attributed to patriarchal norms prevalent in society. Historian Uma Chakravarti suggests that the non-recognition of women's contributions amounts to a deliberate suppression of their histories. This erasure not only disregards women's creative abilities as playwrights, directors, and actors but also denies them agency and a rightful place within the theatrical landscape.

The invisibility of women in Marathi theatre is often brushed aside by justifying the theatre's male-dominated nature as a reflection of broader societal norms. However, this indifference towards women's participation cannot be justified by mere numbers, as the representation of women in professional capacities within the theatre industry has been significantly limited compared to men.

Exploring the reasons behind the absence of women in Marathi theatre involves questioning the socio-cultural factors such as caste, class, and the elite nature of the theatre. Interrogating the historical narratives and meta-narratives of Marathi theatre is essential in uncovering the overlooked stories of women's contributions and experiences within the theatrical realm. To address this gap in understanding, it is crucial to adopt a critical approach informed by feminist perspectives in theatre historiography. By examining the broader developments in feminist theatre historiography and applying them to the specific context of Marathi theatre, a more nuanced understanding of women's roles and experiences in the theatrical landscape can be achieved. This process requires a consideration of Indian cultural contexts and local conditions to effectively analyze and interpret the presence or absence of women in Marathi theatre history.

GENDER, PERFORMATIVITY AND THEATRICAL DISCOURSE:

Considering language to be a system of representation, theatre productions and their performances can be said to constitute a language for presentation of specified content. There is a close relationship between language and the notion of gender as a social role. It is observed that just as language constitutes gender, performance of gender 'acts to pattern language' (Robson and Stockwell 2005: 4). The role of language as well as production of meaning in relation to gender was closely analysed and problematised by Judith Butler's path breaking work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Building on the theories of Jacques Derrida, various French feminists and Michel Foucault, she argued that the character of

gender was unfixed and that 'woman' was a fiction. It implied that gender attributes are performed by the body that embeds them. Her postulations were debated for questioning feminist politics. They declared the category of 'woman' as a fiction. Yet, her arguments opened identities to subversive re-interpretation and 'allow[ed] for connections among high theory political activism and quotidian choices' (Hall 2006, 108). Her formation of the analytical category of performance, the meaning of which she insists, is not to be equated with that of performance in theatre because there is a danger of gross oversimplification to mean choice of a new sexuality at will (Hall 2006, 108).⁹² The formation suggested that all identities are available for subversive reinterpretation. Though she considers subversion of gender identities in everyday life as not useful in the wake of unfixed character of gender, her treatise is credited with inauguration of 'a method of studying the ways in which, in social life, literature, and the visual arts, gender is constantly being re-made' (Evans 2006: 230). As it challenged significance of the category of personal experience in feminist explorations, Butler's theory was understood to be a radical culmination of 'the turn away from biology and essences and towards language and meaning production' (Hekman in Malpas and Wake 2006, 99). It revealed that 'the identity 'woman' is literary created (...) by the discourses that define it' (ibid.). In fact, 'it is not that an identity 'does' discourse or language', but the other way around – language and discourse 'do' gender (Butler cited in Salih 2002: 64). The performance of gender is constituted by language understood as system of representation and by discourse understood as social practice.

Butler's explanation about how various discourses constitute identity of gender is potentially useful for the present theatrical analysis. The possibility is generated by the awareness that final realization or embodiment of women characters in theatre performances is a result of multiple processes. It includes conceptualization, casting, comprehension, rehearsal and embodiment, and thus appears to be a product of collective imagination that feeds on, reiterates and constitutes sociological knowledge about women. The performance of feminine gender as in acting out a theatrical character amid the theatrical event is thus constituted jointly by theatrical language and social discourse that 'do' the feminine gender. Following this logic, a range of women characters in Marathi theatre productions can be understood as embodiments of the culture specific historical and contemporary ideas of feminine gender. Further, the characters can be schematically and intermittently placed in the history of the theatre to form an idea about theatrical social knowledge about feminine gender. In this view, the function of creating a socially powerful language of femininity can be assigned to theatrical discourse.

If theatrical construction of femininity is doing gender in theatrical way, it forms the prior stage of analysis of representation planned in the next chapter because as Shepherd and Wallis (2004: 79) explain '[b]ecoming gendered means participating in th[e] realm of representation'. Referring to de Lauretis' ideas of interpellation by gender into the feminine, they point out that de Lauretis 'helps foreground the theatrical apparatus as one 'technology of gender' amongst many (ibid.)' for she 'provides a performative model of subjectivity geared to the subversion of the sex-gender system (ibid.)'. Her submission that representation constructs gender instead of simply reflecting it is also important for understanding why and how caste identity dominates over other identities of women in Marathi theatre

WOMEN AND MARATHI THEATRE:

Identifying the theatre as masculine enterprise generated the complex question of invisibility of women. Due to meager archival resources, findings had to be case based. Similarly, it was hard to determine between women's disinterest and the theatre's attempt to keep women at bay, to be the reason in individual cases. A set of questions was prepared to accommodate maximum number of different aspects of historical relationship of women with the theatre. Itemised discussion of each of them exposed the theatre as a gendered institution and broke the myth of phenomenal invisibility of women. Instead of women being disinterested in the theatre, lack of suitable conditions was found to have hindered their contribution in most of the cases. Employing the notional understanding gained from feminist theatre historiography, search in the distant past of Marathi theatre threw light on the multiple erasures and absence of

'attribution of significance' (Bhattacharya 2008: 66) to various theatrical events that involved women. It appeared more a question of permission, requirement, confinement and encouragement rather than being about independent capabilities of women. The fact that post-colonial increase in number of women actors does not match with number of women directors, producers or playwrights, and that the actors rarely received challenging and memorable lead roles illustrates that the theatre needed women more as visible biological bodies rather than creative geniuses. The findings suggested masculine privilege to be responsible as epistemic agency for women related content and prepared a frame for understanding masculine theatrical imagination of women. Nevertheless, women are historically found to be critical of the theatre's indirect interference in their lives, and in post-colonial period they are found to protest overtly insensitive depiction of women's negotiations with problems in life. It is to be noted that pertaining to the fact that most of the theatre women in the past as well as in the present belong to the Brahman middle classes, caste seems to have facilitated women's minimal participation.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the exploration of gender representation in Marathi theatre within a multicultural context reveals a complex and nuanced landscape. The traditional invisibility and marginalization of women in the theatre industry, despite their historical presence as audiences and subjects of theatrical content, underscore the need for a critical reevaluation of the historical narratives and meta-narratives that have shaped the discourse around Marathi theatre.

By delving into the ways in which women have been excluded from decision-making processes and creative roles within the theatre, this research sheds light on the deliberate suppression and erasure of women's contributions to Marathi theatre. It becomes evident that gender dynamics intersect with caste, class, and the elite nature of the theatre, creating barriers for women to assert their agency and carve out a space for themselves within the theatrical landscape.

Examining the historical interactions between women and Marathi theatre through a feminist lens offers a pathway for reinterpreting the existing narratives and reimagining the possibilities for women's participation and representation in the theatre. By drawing upon insights from feminist theatre historiography and adapting them to the Indian cultural context, we can challenge the status quo and work towards a more inclusive and diverse theatre industry that reflects the multifaceted experiences of women.

In moving forward, it is essential to continue interrogating and interpreting the history of Marathi theatre, with a focus on uncovering the forgotten stories of women playwrights, directors, and actors. This process of rewriting the narrative and amplifying women's voices within the theatre not only enriches our understanding of the past but also paves the way for a more inclusive and equitable future for gender representation in Marathi theatre within a multicultural context.

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