

Feminist Readings of Space, Body, and Performance: An Overview of Emerging Feminist Theatre in India

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Abstract

The theatre has been an amalgamation of history, society, and its representation where it connects with the audience directly. It has been a medium of resistance, protest, and entertainment and a cultural and social tradition in various countries. This paper is an analytical study of feminist theatre and its nuances, showing that theatre, which has been used as a mode to protest and resist, becomes a tool to reclaim and re-own space and body for women. It is essential to theorize Feminist Theatre so that its congruency can be established with the socio-cultural and historical paradigm. All the genres that were written to stabilize feminist thought in the discourse fell back on the conventional praxis of mythology and other texts. For example, Indian narratives borrowed feminine tropes from the classical texts whether it was Rabindranath Tagore or Girish Karnad, women were phenomenal yet subdued. Hence, when men wrote women, there was always a hint of "othering" the female gender in these write-ups; there was always a moralistic judgment of these women. Thus, this study is an attempt to theorize women playwrights and feminist performances that have made an attempt to pave the way for feminist scholarships and feminist theatres to evolve.

Keywords: feminist theatre, performance, space, body, protest, feminist scholarship

Feminist Theatre: A Theorization

Beginning in the 1960s, feminist drama and feminist theatre as a field of study emerged in the West. In the same way that feminists in the women's movements battled for social and political change to liberate women from patriarchal oppression, feminist critics also battled to broaden their perspectives on cultural execution. Feminist Theory arose in the wake of the debates stirred by Marx and Freud, and later by critical theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and Lyotard. The way was paved for the emergence of Feminist Theatre (Lyotard, 1975, p. 176). A discourse that established an environment for female authors to present their works as well as for performers/actors who took on the role of feminist representation is known as feminist theatre. Additionally, it is a dual process in which the audience and the performer's "body" are intertwined and both parties actively participate in the message conveyed through the theatrical performance. Thus,

the reason why in the past we were prone to imagine a single, uniform performing body—namely the performer's performing body—is perhaps trivial: the body of a performer is active and creative, carrying out roles on the stage under the spotlight, while the body of the spectator is placed quietly in the dark, contemplating intellectually and/ or emotionally a communication on the stage. The convention that regulates the relations between those two bodies is thus not exactly equivalent or symmetrical. At least one body and this would be the body of the spectator, is in a subordinate position. (Krpic, 2011, p. 168)

The modern feminist theatre dispenses more prominence towards the duality of performance where the spectator is not merely "placed quietly in the dark" (Krpic, 2011 p.

168) but he/she is part of the act. Here, the spectator is not Aristotelian in nature where he/she consummates the catharsis or the Brechtian audience who finds that the performance on the stage can be moving but he/she is not transcended with the character in its reality; here, the spectator achieves complete metamorphoses, and he/she becomes the part of the performer. The examples of Street Theatre and Nautanki in India, Verbatim Theatre in Europe are apt examples where the bodies of the spectator and the performer become one single entity.

The purpose of this study is to theorise the feminist theatre movement, especially in India. It is necessary to study and practice feminist theatre as a mainstream genre rather than a subculture, given the deliberate efforts made by feminist theatre practitioners to establish their theatrical scholarship. As concepts and theatrical techniques have developed, feminist theatre has also been developing its own dramaturgy, redefining how to reclaim and reclaim the politics of the body and challenging the normalisation that heteronormativity has come to possess. This theatre approach is designed to be closely aligned with different movements.

Literature Review

The Feminist theatre have borrowed several concepts from the feminist critic and one such concept is *écriture féminine* (writing said to be feminine) coined by Helene Cixous. Elaine Aston has dedicated a chapter to the three notable French feminists: Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, who have touched upon different facets on the representation of women; hence, these aspects are borrowed to analyse the nuances of the feminist theatre. Aston further takes up the feminist thought of Irigaray, contemporary of Cixous. She has denounced the Western philosophy which has projected women as non-verbal, non-substantial entity which had been neglected throughout the ages. Irigaray's two most seminal works are *The Sex Which is Not One* (1985) and *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), in which she claims that women are "self-defining" and "self-meditated" when it comes to attain sexual indulgence (Irigaray, 1985, p. 47). To understand the representation of women it is important to understand the struggle and social construct of these women who have entirely different histories. This is dealt profoundly in Chandra Talpade Mohanty's book *Under the Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse* published in 1984. This book sets the discourse to understand the lack that Western feminism holds while it deals with the women of colour. She is of the opinion that these movements are centred towards white women which in turn hegemonies the struggle of liberation. She has pointed out writers like Fran Hosken, Maria Cutrufelli, Juliette Minces, etc. who have published a book titled *Third World Series* where they have codified the third world women as inferior and they are subjected to collective "othering." The works of Sue-Ellen Case and Elaine Aston's have proved fundamental in theorising the Feminist theatre in Anglo-American whereas in the Indian context this has been realised by theorists like Aparna Dharwadker and Tutun Mukherjee, but experimental performances of Maya Krishna Rao and Fazeh Jalali are crucial too. Thus, the development of womanist's dramaturgy accentuated by Mukherjee has been detrimental in re-claiming the theatrical space which has been male-dominated since its inception.

Feminist Dramaturgy to Reclaim Space and Re-Own Body

A playwright attempts to instil numerous concepts, while dramaturgy gives them a form and a framework. In order to construct their own discourse, a number of feminist theatre researchers, including Elin Diamond, have maintained that it is critical to reject and criticise all of the current theatrical settings. This part will go over the subtle differences between misogynistic theatrical practices and feminist dramaturgy, which has developed as a

reaction to them. Helene Cixous in her essay "The Laugh of Medusa" (1976) coins the term *écriture féminine*¹ – a concept based on the Lacanian belief that language is phallogocentric and the Symbolic Stage marks women on the margins of the order. She goes back to Freud and his psychoanalytic theory where he propounded that women suffer from "penis envy." A commentary by Bloomsbury Literary Studies on Cixous' essay sums up the idea that it contends that anybody can occupy the marginalised position of "woman" inside the Symbolic and write in *écriture féminine* from that position, proving that feminine writing is not only the domain of women:

The idea of *écriture féminine* comes from the idea, stemming from Freud, that women are incomprehensible, less moral, less rational than men; Freud calls women "the dark continent," and Cixous uses that as a metaphor to celebrate the lack of control possible over the position of woman in the phallogocentric Symbolic Order...Feminine writing does not belong exclusively to females, however; Cixous argues that anyone can occupy the marginalized position of "woman" within the Symbolic, and write in *écriture féminine* from that position. (Tighe, 2012, p. 4)

Furthermore, it can be argued that *écriture féminine* is not limited to women i.e. anyone who has been "othered" or rather marginalised can write from that perspective. Hence, feminist theatre has used *écriture féminine* to develop its narrative and dramaturgy. It has been observed that it is more to do with performance than writing. By challenging the hegemony of male supremacy over female sexuality, Cixous' writing challenges the hierarchy that has been established as a result of sexual differences. She goes on to discuss the history of women writing for themselves and rejecting the notions that males have been promoting for ages, contending that writing helps women connect with their bodies and their lives. Since males have been writing about women for so long, it is crucial that they rewrite themselves because women are only ever seen from the viewpoint of male filmmakers and writers.

Thus, in the process of writing or representing themselves, women un-make the histories re-write their mythologies, "it requires a bursting, a violent breaking up of the symbolic order/language which has denied women their 'voice', their identity" (Butler, 1999, p. 43). One of the examples for the idea of writing about one's own self could be Rashid Jahan, who was part of the Progressive Writer's Association (1936). She wrote and directed plays which were ahead of their time. She authored an anthology titled *Aurat or Dusre Afsaane wa Drame (Woman and Other Stories and Plays)* in 1937 which highlighted the woes of Muslim women who were subjected to a lot of oppression. As a medical professional, Jahan's writings mirrored her background in medicine. She discussed menstruation hygiene, the health risks associated with recurrent pregnancies, and postpartum depression, a topic that is incredibly uncommon among her peers. This makes it an acceptable illustration of a woman writing for herself and adhering to the customs Cixous discusses in her essay. In this sense, a great number of female playwrights and performers have investigated sexuality, violence against the body, space, and the socio-cultural norms and ideals that support male hegemony, much like Rashid Jahan did. Because some experiences are unique to women, Cixous suggests that when women write about themselves, they can be as honest and genuine as possible

¹ This is translated into English as "women's writing" or "feminine writing."

Another example in this context could be the re-writing of the Indian mythology which has been revolving around the gallant men and beautiful apsaras in plays like Polie Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpnakha, So Said Shakuni* where these two infamous villains have been denied their due part in these narratives. The setting of the play is an airport where the danger of terror attacks is always lurking; during their course of conversation, both characters talk about the misconceptions and misrepresentations and even marginalization that they have suffered in the hands of black and white dichotomy:

WOMAN: You know what they did to me... the two brothers... they laughed. Laughed at me. They teased me. Mocked me. The older one said, ask my brother... he might want you... the younger one said... I can't marry without my brother's consent... ask him... They tossed me this way and that, as if... as if I did not deserve any more respect. As if I were a broken plaything. (p. 261)

WOMAN: What was Shoorpanakha's crime? That she approached a man with sexual desire? Shoorpanakha merely wanted love. (p. 277)

They assaulted a defenceless woman. (p. 278)

MAN: It was all part of my plan anyway. The five brothers and the wife were exiled for thirteen years and they left the city as the crowds wailed... But I did not let my bloody nephews forget their hate. I coaxed their hatred... fed it... I inflamed it and finally, there was war. (p. 271)

WOMAN: I started a war too. But it was not fought for my sake. (p. 271) MAN: I felt that Shakuni hadn't been given his due... I realized that he was a victim. (p. 276)

Thus, this fusion of ancient mythology with the modern pathos, Sengupta puts forth the unjust representations of those characters who stood in contrast with the main characters who were represented with all the good in the world

Re-Reading Body and Space

The female representation as to the "the subject of feminism" (p. 5) is facilitated by the politics which divide it in the binary of masculine and feminine excluding all the other existing sexual orientation. Simone de Beauvoir's remarkable work *The Second Sex* (1949) carries the statement that "one is not born rather becomes a woman" (p. 2) which has defined the structure of feminism and feminist rendering of the discourse. The purpose of theatre is to present the world around, and thus, it depicts the power relations and role plays. This "becoming" of a woman which de Beauvoir talks about takes an extensive turn where the stage becomes the agency which sees this transition. The binary of sex-gender which is categorically a socio-cultural context has reduced to the existence of women mere to a "lived-body" (Young, 2005, p. 15) which sees her as a biological being and cease to acknowledge her theoretical and political existence. Such biological determinism also defines the gender roles which are constituted socially and can be challenged socially as well. Hence, to read this approach of genderless "lived body" in the Indian context would be an interesting abstraction since the representation of women in Indian English theatre has been concurrent with that of Western literature. Thus, what is signified as the Madonna/Whore concept in the West, it becomes Sita/Shoorpnakha (*Ramayana*) perspective in India where women are either as pure as Sita or as evil as Shoorpnakha. For example, in one of the oldest treatises for Indian theatre – *Natyashastra* has portrayed men as the owner of the space whereas women as their subordinates who are in dire need to be rescued or need validation from their male counterparts. The creation of *Apsaras* (a member of a class of celestial beings in Hindu and Buddhist culture. They are originally a type of female spirit of the clouds and waters, who later plays the role of a "nymph" or "fairy" - Wikipedia) was mainly to present romance and increase the beauty of the stage.

Since Lord Brahma created Apsaras to abode them in heaven and hence to create that heaven-like scenario these Apsaras was played by the real women so that they could easily portray the “femaleness” that is required. Hence, these performances are choreographed taking into consideration male audience and cater to their fantasies.

With the rise of feminist theatre, actors have made an attempt to challenge these conventional perceptions of women and female portrayal. By giving them their own narratives, they have freed themselves from the oppressive grip of patriarchal gender standards and contested the domestication of women and other marginalised genders. There was opposition to the way the body was portrayed in all creative forms, including painting, sculpture, and photography, from performers as well as painters and sculptors. One such example was Cindy Sherman who used various props and make-up to transform herself from “Hitchcock-era femme fatale; in another a Botox-happy suburban housewife.” Marina Abramovic performed a six-hour work titled *Rhythm 0* in the year 1974, where she presented the audience with seventy-two objects like a feather, honey, whips, and even a gun to be used on her unopposing body. At first, the audience caressed her body with rose petals and feathers but as time passed, the audience became more aggressive and violent. They used razors and blades to cut her, licked her blood and even at one point some of them pointed the gun at her throat. When the performance was over, Abramovic was hurt physically and psychologically to see the aggression towards the female body and to what extent her body can be objectified without any sort of realization. Her performance is instrumental in creating a narrative around the body where it is the medium as well as the subject of the discourse. This could be understood in the context of Hindu mythology as well, since there has been diverse Gods and Goddesses who have not stood in binary oppositions rather existed together as two halves, thus, in the mythology, this diversity has been acknowledged. However, when it comes to substantiating it in real society, these halves give in to the power structure and the women become their subordinates. Another loophole in this representation of women is that they are “devis” (the Goddesses) i.e. to say they are not born out of vaginas but from nature, subsequently, these women-cum-devi *avatars* were not expected to commit any mistake or diverge from the path of correctness. Pattanaik further points out:

Yoni or vagina is seen as a reminder of human mortality. And so in temples, women are shown standing displaying their vagina to devotees - for it offers the both pleasure of life and pain of death. Literally and metaphorically, a symbol of the world. That is why the inner sanctum of the temple is imagined as womb-house or garbhagriha and the temple is imagined as a spread-eagled woman who houses the deity in her body. (Pattanaik, 2018, p. 2)

Therefore, these Goddesses who are all powerful, demon-slaying warriors are deprecated to “*garbh*” or womb who are tender mothers or givers and their bodies become the agency to give birth and produce life, their role becomes sedentary. Thus, feminist theatre theorizes gender representation; it has entailed reassessment of plot and character which redirects the meaning and performance on stage and in the script; it poses challenges to the stereotypical depiction of the race, class, gender or culture, etc. European performers like Martha Wilson and Adrian Piper have pointed out the constant pressure for women who “perform” even in their everyday lives. Wilson says, “as women we are performing all the time to meet society and the culture’s expectations about what we’re supposed to do, how we’re supposed to look, what we’re supposed to think” (Wilson, 1975, p. 56). Hence, these pioneers of feminist performance tradition chose theatre to make their voices heard.

Tutun Mukherjee, an eminent theatre theorist, refuses to acclaim feminist theatre as essentialist rather it is “consciousness raising” which further creates an awareness of womanist theatre and stands in contrast with the gender construct. Feminist theatre enables female actors/performers/directors to reclaim the space which was earlier given to them by their male counterparts according to their own disposition; it emancipates them to become “speaking subject.” Thus, when these women made their presence felt on stage, they brought with them their histories, their mythologies which they claim and reclaimed on stage. These women recreated their own narratives which have evolved as a part of “womanist dramaturgy” (Mukherjee, p. 17) constructing their own discourse. For example, the Indian theatre has been dominated by male actors and directors, in the past when female actors were not allowed on stage, young men without beards played the female roles on stage. But with the passage of time and with the advent of female playwrights and directors this disquisition found new definitions to put forth their own perspective/commentary on different socio-cultural aspects of the society. Therefore, one of the earliest all-female troupe was constituted by a former devadasi R. Nagarathamma in Karnataka in 1958. In the pre-Independent era, earliest examples of female playwrights like Rashid Jahan and Swarnakumari Devi wrote plays in Urdu and Bengali articulating the conservative and dogmatic society and it was followed by Indian women from all over the country writing on their vernacular languages and in English as well. However, this trend grew at a faster pace after Independence which saw playwrights like Mahasweta Devi, Varsha Adalja, Nadira Babbar, Polie Sengupta, Dina Mehta wrote revolutionary plays and they were not only restricted to socio-cultural orthodoxies but their works made commentaries on the political scenarios as well. In this process, these playwrights obliterated the old dramaturgy and developed feminist dramaturgy where the theatre semiotics emerged, to break away from the stereotypical depictions of the marginalized sections and gender roles.

Dynamics of a Female Spectator and the Performance

In the year 2006, Janelle Reinalt came to the conclusion that “we live in a time of post-feminism,” since there is a paucity of an “overarching umbrella movement” and the unidentifiable common goals. In the recent attacks on reproductive rights, angst over sexual violence, and misrepresentation or no representation at various socio-cultural and political space has given gender studies a new push. Konstantin Stanislavski, a seminal Russian theatre scholar, and practitioner developed an acting system in 20th century to train actors which involved not just physical or vocal training but also to instil in a performer the “art of experience” – Stanislavski’s “art of experiencing” also stands in congruency with the Cixous’ the idea of women writing themselves – here also the female performers could comprehend through their own experiences and present their roles with more honesty and rawness. However, Sue-Ellen Case, an eminent feminist theatre critic criticizes Stanislavski’s concept of “art of experiencing” where she is of the opinion that while internalizing/introspecting the situation the female performer impute misogyny. Case also says that “female actors learn to be passive, weak, and dependant on her sexual role, with a fragile inner life that reveals no desire” (Case, 1988, p. 19). She further argues that Stanislavski and his “method” do not give space to the performers to separate themselves from the character, rather they have to make the characters’ truth their own reality even when it is not so, often their truth comes from outside agencies is often specified by sexual stereotypes and patriarchal conventions. The viewership plays an important role while discussing the theatrical nuances since as it is known that theatre is meant for an audience, to be viewed by a group of people who have certain expectations from the performance they are about to see. Elaine Ashton in her book *Feminist Theatre Practise: A*

Handbook (1999) has borrowed Laura Mulvey's concept of male gaze and asserted that in the context of theatre in the light of the dominant theatrical traditions that situate male in the active and female in the passive position. Ashton says:

Although some feminists, both in the academy and in the profession, adopting a bourgeois or liberal feminist position were prepared to argue for a greater representation of women in the theatrical 'malestream' on 'malestream' terms, others objected to the objectification of women in the realist tradition, and in particular, to the character-based, Method-acting derived from the teachings of Constantin Stanislavski attendant upon it. The characters' role made available for women to 'get into' in this 'method' invite the actress to identify with the oppression of the female character to whom she has been assigned. (Ashton, 1999, p. 8)

Feminist Theatre Movement as Performance Activism

To confront the sociocultural and economic disparities that exist, performance activism uses creative performance as a medium. Its basic tenet is that the current social structure has to undergo social transformation. Confrontation, demonstration, and protest have been the prevailing modes of social dissent in recent times. The goal of performance activism is to challenge the societal hierarchy and order by utilising the human capacity for play, creation, and performance. Maya Rao's *The Walk* (2015) raises some disturbing questions and asks for the basic right to walk free on the streets without the fear of getting raped or sexually abused or even catcalled. Rao in a power-packed monologue advocates the freedom for women to claim and own what is their own- the right over their body and right to say no or about marital rape is a criminal offense. Her performance was a breakthrough and revolutionary in its nature; it is a re-creation of the conventional street theatre where the masses become the spectator of a commotion that is stirred by Rao's basic yet inquisitorial appeal to walk and reclaim the space that has been taken away from the women because the fear of being sexually abused is inevitable. In her monologue she says, "I want to walk; I want to sit on the bus; I want to lie in the park, and I want to try not to be afraid of the dark" (YouTube, 2012) these seem such basic pleas but it is her conviction and urgency that makes all the difference; it is not only restricted to Indian context but it can be transported to a larger geopolitical domain. This the movement has reformed the cultural front and revolutionized the politics of representation where women have been subjected to male-gaze; performances such as these have seen misogyny in the eyes and put to question the patriarchal norms. Thus, the street theatre has always been the most popular mode of theatre a practice which has worked to raise awareness regarding the socio-economic conditions and social evils that are prevalent in society.

Even while performance activism did not fully explore the possibilities, it did provide a voice to the story that had been silenced and restored a sense of trust that had been undermined by the mansplaining of the entire genre. By redefining and recreating the already-existing theatrical conventions, it has attempted to break the prejudices that were produced by the old theatrical practices of the male practitioners. The female directors and playwrights made a conscious effort to create a parallel theatre that distorted the gender gap, allowing them to be included in mainstream representation without feeling "othered."

In India, for example, it has its roots in the various traditional theatre practices and with the passage of time, it has emerged as a tool for social change. These performances have given rise to a theatre that has not only translated feminist values onto the stage, and it has also broken down the institutionalized conventions; it also questions heteronormativity as the only way of life. Heteronormativity disregards the existence of "compulsory heterosexuality" which most often becomes the only way of looking at one's sexual

orientation. Judith Butler has also borrowed the term “performativity” from the theatre studies to identify heterosexuality as patriarchal propaganda to marginalize the other genders that exist in a society. She, further, differentiates between “performance” and “performativity” - where the former requires an author or a performer to impersonate an act whereas the latter itself produces impersonation. Therefore, as it is discussed earlier that the feminist theatre practitioners and theorist have always resort back to their roots to define and redefine their own territory without aiming to find a new and distinct socio-cultural and political dimensions. Indian mythology has been one such domain which has been re-explored and re-written to highlight the feminist thought in order to depict heteronormativity to be unnatural and forced.

Faezeh Jalali explored the myth of “Shikhandi” in her play *Shikhandi: The Story of the In-betweens*, which talks about how Shikhandi who was born as a girl but raised as a boy so that she could kill Bhisma who would only be killed by someone who is “in-between.” Jalili writes “I’m androgynous, the Mr the Ms, I’m good and the evil too. I’m me, but I’m also you. I’m sublime. I’m timeless, I’m all the universe encompassed” (Open the Magazine, 2017). When asked about her choice of the subject which has been taken from the Hindu mythology, she says:

Shikhandi is among the earliest trans- characters in Indian mythology, and for me, mythological stories have always been the ones that have issues that are so relevant to the modern-day. If a trans-gendered person existed then, their problems must have been very similar to our dilemmas today. So the idea of the story was to portray the in-between of everything—of the physical form, of heaven and earth, of gods and demons, and ask why can’t a person just be a person regardless of their gender? (Open the Magazine, 2017)

The play is a commentary on the stereotypical rendition of the LGBTQ+ community through the myth of Shikhandi and its sexuality to violate the code that is attached to the politics of representation of the gay community on stage. The play is bold in its treatment of Shikhandi where she acquires the penis from Yakhsa and satisfied his passionate wife with new sexual organ; to Shikahndi’s dilemma about its being caught in the dichotomy of male and female. The play is an attempt at understanding the fluidity that the world has and not everything can be seen unidimensional. Thus, this play becomes an appropriate example of feminist theatre scholarship of redefining the existing theatrical conventions to accommodate the feminist cause which has been long neglected. Hence, Feminist theatre has been used as a tool for activism in the various parts of the world to challenge the gender norms that are caught in the dichotomy of men and women. it has created its own discourse where it has destabilized the existing theatrical conventions since it was tailor-made to suit the patriarchal thought that has been part of the Western as well as the South Asian sensibility. Therefore, it propounded the idea of women writing for themselves i.e. *écriture feminine* rejected Stanislavski’s “art of experience” which was believed by the feminist theatre theorists that it imputes misogyny; the female performer does not internalize the character rather it depicts her placement in the socio-cultural and economic space. It questions the culture that has normalized the female sexuality as passive and invasion of her body as legitimate.

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