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## **Performance, Male Gaze and Women's Space: A Study on Female Representation in Theatrical Space**

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### **Abstract**

Knowledge is governed by those who are in power, asserts Foucault. Knowledge is constructed and contextualized, not natural and universal. Fields of writing are not untouched by the hierarchy and domination. Theatre has remained a field where female characters are written about, presented and performed also by male writers/directors/artists in majority and it is still in trend found in many of the Indian folk forms. Women playwrights have also not been given adequate critical attention in the established literary canons, either in past or in present era. The present paper aims to explore the presence of women in the tradition of Indian English theatre and also to find out the reasons behind the underestimated position of women in theatre in general.

### **Keywords**

Feminist Theatre; Male Gaze; Public/Private Space.

Peter Brook in his seminal book *The Empty Space* wrote that “There is no doubt that a theatre can be a very special place. It is like a magnifying glass, and also like a reducing lens”. Brook’s statement is very apt here as in the long tradition of Indian theatre it seems that women’s contribution has been seen with reduced lens in the patriarchal society because either they are rarely mentioned or they have got a small space in the history especially in the tradition of Indian theatre. Moreover they have been objectified and shown as a beautifying element to decorate stage by and large. Thus it becomes important to point out the visibility of women in theatre as they have been ignored by the critics despite their strong and vital contribution for a serious art form like theatre.

Women’s visibility could be described possibly in three ways: woman as a playwright, as an actor and also as a part of the audience. Theatre is one such domain where women playwrights and artists have been invisible or rarely mentioned since the ancient times and their part of story is missing largely. The journey of women writing plays in the West began from writing closet drama which was not meant for public performances and kept women away from the “male gaze” in public sphere. Closet drama is a kind of drama which is considered to be more suitable for reading than for performing. It is well known that the motif of a dramatic text lies in its enactment and its live interaction with the audience. What compelled female playwrights to write closet drama and reasons behind the distance between their texts and the performance space are some of the issues which need attention. The aristocratic household offered a space of writing to a small group of elite women only who have wealth, leisure and education to compose drama where either it remain out of production on a stage or the venue of the performances are their great houses which is not open for the public scrutiny. Martin and Mohanty argues that the early drama by women however confined initially to the household thematically as well as physically but gradually there has been a move from ‘being home’ to ‘not being

home' and it comes out of its safe boundaries and started questioning and exploring over multiple dimensions outside through their plays. Thus the plays located in the home have the ability to move beyond the walls (Findlay 8-18). There was certain situation which made women's drama to remain in closet not to be staged in public spaces.

Tutun Mukherjee, in her work *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translations*, has explored and discussed the reasons of being particularly restrictive about writing plays by women authors. The relationship of women with drama and theatre has been problematic, tenuous at best, observed Tutun Mukherjee. Women authors in India, as elsewhere, have preferred to write fiction, poetry or short stories rather than drama. She says that reason behind this lies in the requirement for drama to be performed. As a form, drama is more public and social than other literary arts are. It is an art form that makes its author more visible and accessible to public scrutiny. It also belongs to an explicit public gaze (which is essentially male), since it is a form of a performed discussion of any issue/content. The separation of the private and public space has served to confine women to certain genres and restrict or erase their presence in others, she points out (1-11). When Mahesh Dattani was asked regarding the dearth of women playwrights in modern Indian theatre he shared his observation without getting conclusive and replied, "theatre companies by and large prefer to do plays with a male protagonist" and women playwrights writes about strong feminine concerns or about women same like male playwrights who writes about males without thinking about it. It could be a reason of less female representation in playwriting as male protagonists in central position are the mainstream preference. Another problem that feminist theatre faces is the problem of access to materials which are not always published and production which are not always recorded or reviewed. Yet women practitioners are reconstructing the available text according to their ideologies and concerns.

The above discussion shows how early female playwrights remained outside the reach of mainstream theatre, left to write closet dramas and produce it only in private realm. So it becomes necessarily important to analyze the concept in the socio-cultural context. A social space is generally divided into two broad categories, i.e. public and private. However these spaces are not clearly demarcated and fixed but are fluid and in a constant flux. These two categories in the binary division are loaded with meanings and also suggests the hierarchical order where one is powerful and 'other' powerless. Culturally informed people interact with each other in defined spaces and bounded locales (9).

During the twentieth century, there was a rise in the number of female dramatists both in India and in the West penning down works of significance on theatre. Manjula Padmanbhan, Poile Sengupta, Dina Mehta and Mallika Sarabhai are some of the female playwrights who assertively entered in this male dominated field, got appreciation and fame for their creativity introducing new subjects, vocabularies and alternative modes of perception in the genre. The inner world of feminine psyche along with other subjects has been projected in the theatrical works of these writers. This kind of theatre was called *Stree Preksha* in India in the ancient times; now "feminist theatre" as used commonly worldwide.

Bharata says in *Natyashastra*, "The gods are never so pleased on being worshipped with scents and garlands, as they are delighted with the performance of drama" (Varadpande 45). Where drama was seen as a form of worship to the God the Supreme Being, the female actors have been seen as public women who are not so respectful. As written in *Arthashastra*, it was particularly *Ganikas*, *Dasis* and *Rangopajivanis* who used to receive training in such performing art and acting was one of means of livelihood for them. Women who went to watch theatre was also seen with remorse and not good for a respectable women and she cannot go to see a play without her husband's permission and it was a

punishable act for a female, as written in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Lawgiver Manu also prescribes a fine for women who attend dramatic performances, *Prekshasamaj*. Where dramatic performances are taken as sacred ritual, a form to worship God and drama is equated to 'yajna' and women are restricted to attend it and also seen as an object to gift deities in the form of Devdasis. As *Nati* or *Ganika* or *Devadasis*, female artists served Indian theatre through the centuries that were not given the due credit in the history of Indian theatre (Varadpande 35-45).

Certain indications of female theatre are found in chapter twenty of Bharata's *Natyashashtra*. There is also a reference of '*Stree Preksha*' which is found in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. The term *Stree Preksha* was used in fourth century B.C. which becomes a significant evidence of female tradition in dramatic performance. The reference suggests that this kind of performances were exclusively performed by the female artists. In this way *Lasya* is certainly a kind of *Stree Preksha*. Bharata Muni describes about different types of drama and among them *Lasya* is one of the minor forms. "The *Lasya* has a form similar to that of *Bhana*, and it is to be acted by one person" (Ghosh 377). There are twelve types of *Lasyas* which are to be acted out by women only and sometimes it is performed by a single female actor. For example, it is *Pushpagandita* "when a women in a guise of man recites something sweetly in Sanskrit for the pleasure of her female friends," it is a form of *Lasya*, said Bharata. Male actors are being disguised to perform female roles from a very ancient time which still exist, for example the famous Ramlila of Ramnagar, Uttar Pradesh which takes place once in every year in which all female characters are performed by male actors. In Bharata's *Natyashashtra* it is evident that female performers also used to disguise themselves as men and act on the stage which is importance to understand the rich tradition of female theatre too. Bharata wrote in *Natyashashtra* that Brahma created *Apsaras* 'skillful in embellishing the drama' for their participation in dramatic performances. Through mentioning the names

of *Apsaras* in his work, Bharata made the female actresses of his time visible in one way which makes *Natyashastra* an important text in every way. The male actor was called *Nat* and the female actor *Nati* as there are references in texts. The female actors of those ancient times to which Bharata is referring are said to have received training in theatrical arts like male actors. According to such evidences, it is clear that all female theatre tradition flourished in India since the fourth century B.C. So women are associated with dramatic arts since the theatre itself came into existence (Varadpande 35-39).

Women as actors have started getting visible in the history of the rich tradition of theatre very late in India due to lack of research and proper documentation in the area until late nineteenth century. In the West, it was during Restoration period that women first began to appear on stage in English theatre instead of female roles being played by boys and young men due to French influence. But the audiences were mostly male who were attracted by the idea of seeing women acting out. Clothes were often too small so as to emphasize the curves of female bodies that have made them not more than sexual objects. The images of women depicted in the plays of dramatists are seen through the male gaze. Either woman is temptress, or mother, the comforter or just a victim. The concern of feminist theatre is to challenge these traditional and stereotypical images which confines women in certain categories giving no significance to her individuality as a human being. It would be a feminist intervention against the structurally linear and stereotypical plays of mainstream theatre which provides an alternative way of looking over certain issues to the audience and the critics. Many female playwrights have written almost exclusively for feminist theatres and have not sought a larger audience. Others have won recognition in mainstream theatres and among them best known are Marsha Norman, Beth Henley and Wendy Wasserstein. In this realm of play writing over feminist concerns, women in the field of play direction and production have also emerged. Although it was only after World War II that women have come to be accepted as

directors and heads of the theatre companies. Beginning in the 1970s, a number of English theatres were formed to present the work of feminist writers.

The concern of feminist theatre is to challenge the traditional and stereotypical images which misrepresents women and confines them into certain categories. The image of women depicted in the plays of dramatists which have been seen through the male gaze is contextualized by Lakshmi Subramanyam and other critics in their writings. Either woman is temptress, or mother, the comforter or just a victim. "Male gaze" is a concept developed by Laura Mulvey in the context of female representation in cinema. She has argued that the controlling gaze in cinema is always male. "Pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female", wrote Mulvey. Female body is presented as a passive erotic object for the gaze of male spectators. According to Mulvey, cinema imposes 'masculine' gaze over all of its spectators, irrespective of their actual sex (qtd. in Chaudhuri 31-44).

Feminist theatre gives voice to the silence, it constructs and re-constructs the traditional texts, myth, and images of women and presents it before the audience. Feminist theatre often moves beyond the proscenium and bring theatre between the masses on streets and in rural areas. It also breaks the set format of linear structured texts and adopts more innovative techniques in writing as well as in production. The visual images become more important than the words and dialogues in the feminist theatre. Since a few decades feminist theatre groups in India has become more visible and acknowledged in the realm of Indian theatre due to their multiplicity of theme and forms, innovative techniques and flexibility with the performance space of the play which could be enacted anywhere from closed walls of proscenium to the streets under the sky.

Drama becomes a powerful genre and medium of expression and through this medium, a woman playwright challenges the positions allotted to her in a given social and physical order. Performance space transgresses boundaries, makes the set place a fluid one and engages spectators to make meanings out of

it which also provoke them to question the existing structures. It has a strong impact as the space that it produces is to be read and lived by the spectators and the actors both. It connects the audience to the social space to which they actually belongs and to rethink over it with alternative perspectives. It re-negotiate women's place and provides them an open space to explore multiple areas which they aspire for in their real space of living. It is another issue how much control women manage to exercise over artistic space which is again a part of the society and bound to be influence by the power politics. Hanna Scolnicov argues that spatial conventions are changing positively now in drama and the attitude is changing towards women and her sexuality in male authored drama (Findlay 7).

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