
UNIT 3 STAGE AND THEATRE

Mangai Arasu

Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 The Body In Theatre
- 3.4 The Stage and Theatre
 - 3.4.1 The Stage and Gender
 - 3.4.2 The Role of Audience
 - 3.4.3 Performing Women
- 3.5 Types of Theatre
 - 3.5.1 Classical Theatre
 - 3.5.2 Realism in Theatre/ Method Acting
 - 3.5.3 The Epic/Didactic Theatre of Bertolt Brecht
 - 3.5.4 The Theatre of the Oppressed
 - 3.5.5 Folk Theatre
- 3.6 Gendered Interventions in the Stage and Theatre
- 3.7 Performance as Assertion
- 3.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.9 Unit End Questions
- 3.10 References
- 3.11 Suggested Readings

3.1 INTRODUCTION

When we think of stage and theatre, we tend to focus upon how the characters portray their role. In this regard, it is important to recognise the overlapping concerns of both gender and theatre, both of which cannot evade the role of experience in performance. The transience of theatrical experience both for the participants and spectators makes it all the more difficult to be used as an analytical category. Body politics, representation, narratives and counter- narratives, conventions of the society and performance, notions of space, significance of the public space, acknowledgement of the personal and ways of seeing are crucial for both gender and theatre. In this unit, we will examine some of these issues in the context of the inter-relationships between gender and theatre.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to build an analytical understanding of various issues related to stage, theatre and gender and based on this you will be able to:

- Define and explain the meaning of stage and theatre on the context of gender;
- Critically analyse different kinds of theatre; and
- Discuss the reasons for performance being an assertive tool of gender and power dynamics.

3.3 THE BODY IN THEATRE

The body as a site of knowledge has gained currency for various reasons. Be it in medicine, philosophy or arts, the crux of inquiry has been the puzzles thrown open by the way the body works and the workings of the body. Apart from the inscriptions of caste, race, colour, religion and nationality, sex, gender and sexuality occupy a crucial role in the study of the body. The material construction of the sexualised body is a site of contestation for various other inscriptions, imposed and engineered. Especially for the marginalised in society, bodily wounds are the most easily inflicted punishment. In a casteist society like India, where untouchability is still practised, the body as a site for oppression and resistance becomes even more urgent and crucial. The body is at once part of nature, culture and society. That is the premise upon which gender and theatre begin their inquiry.

The representation of the body documented in society through language, art, literature and performing arts become the codes upon which the hegemony of hierarchic structures reside. In other words, one is born into an already given structure of gender, caste and religion. In theatre it gets further sanctified as an aesthetic and universal category. Notions of beauty, health, sanity and dignity are established based on these practices. It is also interesting to note at this juncture how there is a simultaneous existence of contradictory construction of images surviving in the same system, both with the same hierarchic approach. While the gods described as 'beautiful' like Lord Krishna or Goddess Kali are presented as 'dark' in complexion, one can still sell cosmetic fairness creams successfully. The archetypal dark beauty gives way to the industrialised, Eurocentric 'fair'ness, still perpetrating the same hierarchy of colour, caste and beauty.

A body in motion is considered still more dangerous. Societal and cultural prescriptions govern bodily movements. Most often the 'gaze' follows one in all aspects of life, laying down laws of permissibility. The gaze that

probes, masters and objectifies a body is omnipresent and worst still is internalised. Especially in a patriarchal system in which the female is 'othered', male gaze devalues or over-values the female body. Devaluing takes the shape of demonising women; while over-valuing mystifies, de-sexualises and places her as out-of-reach.

Conventions of body codes are the basis of the study of theatre and performance. Most studies on rituals and performance conventions in India assume that community rituals are common for both genders. But in practice, female in performing arts are a separate sub- genre of performance hardly dealt with as part of folklore or performance. In some cases the women guard that space as an autonomous one, forbidding any onlooker, like in the case of puberty rituals. Different regions in India have different conventions that guide the participation of women. That is a subject of study in itself. The Victorian morality reigned supreme in colonial India had a major impact upon gender and performance. Woman in the public space as an object of the gaze was deemed disrespectful. Sharmila Rege brings out the way caste was played out in making women perform for male gaze in Maharashtra (Singh, 2009, p. 1-24). Modernity only stabilised this caste- gender dynamics in performance by making sure that forms in which middle- class and upper- caste women participated gained 'classical' status. For instance, the debates between Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswathi are interesting in this regard (O' Shea, 2007, p. 39-51).

Narratives that are oral, performed in a collective, and non- linear in its form have been crucial for both gender and theatre. Several interesting versions of Mahabharata and Ramayana have come to lime light through studies on narratives of this kind, like those of Iravati Kave, Paula Richman, Alf Hildebeitel, and others. 'Ways of seeing' is the most significant aspect of both gender and theatre. Theatre has proposed various kinds of theatre based on the role of the spectators. In terms of gender, looking at things through a 'gender lens calls for a great deal of un- learning and learning.

3.4 STAGE AND THEATRE

Stage and Theatre are often used interchangeably in common parlance. But for the sake of clarity it is helpful to know the subtle variation of the meaning of the two terms. Stage is usually referred to as an assigned space where 'performers' and 'audience' congregate. The shape of the stage changes the view of the audience. Not surprisingly, Peter Brook called his book on theatre *Empty Space*, to connote that any space can be converted into a stage for a performance to happen. Stage is a space for performers.

Theatre on the other hand is defined either **historically**, like Shakespearean theatre, or **dramaturgically**, like Noh Theatre, or **ideologically**, like Feminist theatre or Dalit theatre. At times theatre can also define the style of

presentation - realistic or stylised, like street theatre, classical theatre, or post-modern theatre.

Both stage and theatre however are temporally defined. The conventions of an age, nation and historical context of a specific form play a major role in defining the way stage and theatre get formed and communicated. Since theatre is always a live performance, constraints and possibilities thrown open by the stage would always be there. In fact, in recent times, site-specific performances have become more popular making the stage-space acquire significant emphasis. Bearing in mind this difference this section explores the way stage and theatre are gendered.

3.4.1 The Stage and Gender

Notions of intimacy and distance and the ways in which bodies are represented are crucial to an understanding of the way gender operates on stage. The levels on which the actors are presented and the angles which they hold to the audience decide the importance ascribed to them in the narrative. Add to it the interaction between actors, which is the alphabet of choreographic principles. A basic understanding of theatre divides the stage space into front (up), back (down), centre and right and left. There are also vertical and horizontal space and movement. The assumption is that anything that is placed at the centre and at a height holds maximum attention. But it is important to raise issues with that assumption itself. Another major contentious practice is to reflect 'reality' by revealing the power structures through levels. The 'reality' thus captured invariably makes one sometimes look at women as a Dalit, servant, worker or a tribal in a submissive lowered stance and level. When the character is juxtaposed against a socially powerful one in terms of class, caste or gender, (eg. man and woman, landlord and labourer), it highlights and re-emphasises the existing hierarchical social relation.

Activity 1

Collect photographs/newspaper clippings of various stage productions. Analyse them from the point of view of level and angle.

The body presented on stage almost always represents something. There cannot be a totally idiosyncratic gesture since gestures are encoded and inscribed by our socio-cultural contexts. They are 'codes' that perform as Judith Butler would say. In a country like India, where traditional and contemporary performance forms exist together, these codes are defined within systems of performance. A symbolic miming of a flower or a bird would take its code from a specific dance tradition of a region; a melody that is drawn upon might have a ritualistic significance like in the case of a lullaby or wailing; an instrument that will become representative of the

region, caste and gender. The politics of re-presentation on stage is an inescapable trope one plays with. There cannot be an 'innocent' or general application of even a single gesture, move or sound on stage. In that sense the stage is a very self-conscious space and therefore, challenging and exciting simultaneously. Apart from gestures, costumes, sets and props (properties) add to the representation. For example when Neelam Mansingh's *Kitchen Katha* makes the kitchen the set for the play, it changes our functional attitude towards the kitchen. The installations of Nalini Malani as used in Anuradha Kapur's plays, such as *Antigone* and *Crusaders* reveals a lot about the self-conscious use of sets in the productions of plays.

3.4.2 The Role of the Audience

No public performance is complete without an audience. The audience completes the performance text. In India, the Natya Shastra places utmost importance to how the reception of a 'bhava' creates a particular 'rasa' in the viewer. The theory of *rasa* is based on the reception of a performance. Like in the Greek society, in India too the stage is considered as a vibrant place of discussion. The Artha Sastra laid down the rule that female audiences be levied a fine for watching a show depending on the time of the performance and the kind of show. As you have already read in unit 1 of this Block 1, there are also variations that operate in the way male and female audience, are imagined. This trend seems continue to this day as evidenced in the advertisements for films, plays and other entertainments. A detailed study of the drama notices is bound to offer an interesting analysis of how the audience was controlled and conditioned and opens up the discussion on how the play, enacted on stage can be a site of power to engage the psychology of the audience watching the play.

3.4.3 Performing Women

Theatre history in India is still to discover who the first female actress was on stage. The tradition of female dancers seemed to have existed from at least 3rd century B.C. Sangam poetry talks about a whole clan of Panar, a performing tribe. It consisted of *Patini*, the female singer and composer and *viraliyar*, the dancer. Apart from these two categories there were also those who played instruments. This clan is nomadic in nature but a patronage of sorts was already in place. Of course, Sanskrit tradition refers to apsaras, who must have been dancers. Since theatre is considered to be part of Natya - dance and drama - there seemed to have been an overlapping of histories in this realm. Apart from the devadasi system, there must have existed a more community based, village based system of offering women to temple gods or goddesses. Hanne de Bruin refers to a few female artists who she had met in their old age (Seagull Theatre Quarterly, 31, 2001, pp. 64-70). In that she clarifies that there must have been a devadasi system prevalent in rural Tamil Nadu, by which women were dedicated to local,

village goddesses unlike the ‘high culture’ counterparts who were dedicated to male gods. These women seemed to have run all- female theatre companies. Prof. S. Ramanujam revived the tradition of Kaisiki Natagam in South India, in which there were temple dancers who performed the annual play at the Vaishnavite temple. With the advent of colonial rule, English education and Victorian morality the idea of women performing was certainly not treated as ‘respectable’. It required a great deal of effort on the part of social reformers and middle-class English educated artists to sanitise the dance forms and make them palatable for consumption. Once that process happened, however, the traditional dancers can be considered crass and lowly in taste.

The division of classical and folk forms survived on caste, class and patronage systems. While the classical soon moved on to ‘modern’ modes of training, the folk forms still survived on hereditary practices, most often ritualistic, and were controlled by the caste hierarchy. You will read about this in details in Unit 5 of Block I of MWG 004. In some cases, utter poverty drove families to literally sell young girls to performance. Whether they were in prostitution or not, the performing women were considered to be of easy morals and sexually available. It is ironic that a culture that had always had women in the field of performance, unlike in most other civilizations, seems to hold on to this perception of performing women as dishonourable. It is also interesting to note that it was not the skill and mastery of art of these women that got the attention, but rather it was their personal lives, which were more dramatic than most plays. In other words the artist mattered more than the art itself. Therefore the performing women lived constantly oscillating between fanfare on stage and condescension and disapproval in real life. The case is not very different for many artists in the film, television, and theatre world even today. The fact that some women quit the field after marriage or commit suicide while in the heyday of their career is proof of this perennial dilemma.

The life of Binodini Dasi, popularly known as *Notee Binodini*, exemplifies the point made above. Famous and reputed for her depictions of roles like Pramila, Sita, Draupadi, Radaha, Ayesha, Kaikeyi, Motibibi, and Kapalkundala, her life shows how nineteenth century Bengali society was opened to European ideas but yet subtly subjugated women within four walls of the household. *Notee Binodini* was given the appellation *Notee*, which in Bengali means a woman who performs for the male gaze and gets financial benefit from her spectators, much like the *Tawaif parampara* in parts of Uttar Pradesh of northern India. Binodini Dasi very carefully presented an embodiment of liberated femininity that can surreptitiously be viewed from a distance, and be loved despite being an object of scorn. She could never aspire to the ‘respectable’ notion of womanhood that was cocooned inside the four walls of the household.

Substantial work has been done to study the contribution of women to stage in Bengali and Marathi theatre by Rimli Bhattacharya (1998), Neera Adharkar (1991), and Shanta Gokhale (2000). Theatre journals in these languages were published from late nineteenth to mid twentieth centuries. But still the documentation of women's contribution has to be gleaned with great difficulty. Neera Adharkar mentions, "In July 1990, 'Expressions' - a women's cultural festival was organized by some women from various women's groups. Since the focal point of the festival was 'Theatre' an effort was made to invite some of the first generation stage actresses of the 1930's to share their experiences. It was soon realized that the task undertaken was rather difficult as very few women of that generation were alive and amongst those who were, most were confined to the house because of their age. The third important factor discovered was that actresses from the upper caste background were comparatively easier to contact than the actresses of devadasi origin. We were denied access to their family members who were rather ashamed of their past" (Adharkar, 1991, p. 87-90).

In his introduction to the Seagull Theatre Quarterly issue Samik Bandyopadhyay says that in contrast to men who came into theatre, solely motivated by the passion for theatre, women entered theatre also for livelihood. This somehow led to discrimination within the groups and the women were treated as hired hands while the men were seen as idealistic. He adds, "For the actresses, several of them single mothers or with dependents, the options were more constricted, and acting remained the only means of living" (Bandyopadhyay, 1995, p. 65-66).

Although the precise date or name of the first woman to enter Tamil stage cannot be authentically established, the notices give us information about many women who were active participants in professional theatre. The system of female artists playing male roles seemed to have been an acceptable trend. We know of the legendary performance of Sundarambal doing Velan and S.G.Kittappa, her partner in life too, performing Valli. It can safely be concluded that by 1920 women performers had established their presence on Tamil stage.

Hindi theatre from Uttar Pradesh also saw women performers on stage, especially in *nautanki tradition*, a travelling folk theatre. Gulab Bai is one such name who brought women performers of nautanki tradition. She is the first female stage performer from the orthodox traditions of patriarchal Hindi speaking regions. She started her career as a performer at the early age of 12, despite belonging to a very poor family in Rail Bazaar, Kanpur. Her diction, script, narrative techniques and songs won her much appreciation from her audience. (Mehrotra, 2006, p. 14)

It is ironic that gender as an aesthetic construction has been codified through female impersonation while the actual, historic women had to

struggle in this field. Theatre seems to have built its own way of meting out bias towards women. It is not always harsh, since women are essential to the field. It is not always welcoming either. Very rarely do we find a couple like in the case of Shombhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra or Sabitri and Kanhailal treated on par with each other on the basis of merit.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How is the body a part of nature, culture and society? What are its implication/s for the stage and theatre?
- 2) What is the stage? What is theatre?
- 3) How does the participation of women on stage affect the audience?

3.5 TYPES OF THEATRE

Each region has a history of theatre that could be further analyzed in terms of various kinds of theatres that evolved during different times, for instance Elizabethan theatre and Victorian theatre in England, Sanskrit theatre in India, etc. But cutting through regional histories of theatre are conventions of theatre that could be classified according to the forms of presentation or the ideology of theatre. Therefore, we shall take up the two major styles of acting - stylisation and realistic acting - that are seen as two extremes of the spectrum. Stylised performance or acting has been the major school of acting in almost all classical theatre, be it Sanskrit or Greek. What we identify as realistic acting today is a school of acting referred to as 'method acting' established by Constantin Stanislavski in the late 19th century. It resulted in the creation of "an illusion of disbelief" on the stage by treating the audience as fourth wall. The creation of the fourth wall in perception became a form of representations of social realism. Stanislavski gave a shape to the naturalist tradition of theatre in the Western world. In most cases these two styles (stylized and naturalistic) overlap, at least in training, if not in the theatrical production. In India, however, stylized acting was seen as pre-colonial and realistic acting as a product of modern Western exposure.

3.5.1 Classical Theatre

In her discussion of Classical Greek theatre, Sue- Ellen Case shows how the attic morality of the Greeks replaced the Amazonian practices in theatre. With Zeus swallowing his wife Metis in order to gain her power of reproduction, resulting in the birth of Athena, the dangers of the womb

represented by the earth mother Gaia were annulled. Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, vine and revelry, assimilated the power of female sexuality. Maenads, the female celebrants in the Dionysian festivals went into oblivion. The satyrs or the male celebrants took over. The gender specificity of the satyr was underscored by the actors wearing a leather phallus. Most of the actors and dramatic subjects were male and masculine. (Case, 1988, pp. 14-72). But amidst these, there were women-centric plays like *Medea*, *Antigone*, *Electra*, which focused mainly on Feminine subjects of the contemporary society.

Sanskrit theatre witnessed a different evolution. Women continued to be in the domain of performance and entertainment. Varadpande refers to all-female forms of performance called *Stree Preksha*, referred in Natya Shastra. But the apsaras, as they were called, were not considered high quality performers. Tamil, the other classical language of India that still continues to be a living language, had a whole community of artists patronized by the chieftains of the Sangam era. Silappadhikaram, the Tamil epic contains valuable details about stage, curtains and various dance forms. So, the classical theatre of India allowed a particular section of women to participate in theatre.

Sanskrit dramaturgy, however, stipulates the definitions of the protagonist on the same lines as Aristotle. Since most Sanskrit plays were also based on mythology, the lead characters were male and noble, godly male! In order to assure the nobility of the male character, Natya Sashtra rules that the language of the gods, rulers and lords should be Sanskrit and the language of the 'servants' and 'female characters' must be Prakrit. Therefore, even if a male performer was impersonating a female character, he would speak Prakrit on stage.

Characterisation of the dramatis persona in classical Sanskrit theatre had to follow the norms. Natyashastra itself was seen as the fifth Veda and therefore the purpose of drama is didactic. One has to prove that good will win at the end. The notion of tragedy was not permitted, though the 'soka' rasa was depicted. Playwrights like Bhasa had to bypass these rules to make Duryodhana or Karna to be heroes of the plays. The comedies like *Bhagavathajukkam* had powerful female characters. Romila Thapar's *Sakuntala* traces the way her character is domesticated in Kalidasa as against the portrayal in the Mahabharata.

Kerala has Kudiayattam, the only surviving Sanskrit theatre practiced still. But most of the features of Sanskrit theatre could be found in many other traditional forms like Kathakali, Yaksha Gana, Jatra and Theru Koothu. All these forms continue to have the tradition of female impersonation by male performers.

With the changing patterns of characterization, dancing was reduced and at times relegated to the comedians of the show. The lead actors continued to sing in a poised fashion, dressed close to reality to the accompaniment of harmonium. The legacy of stage songs continues to inform our aesthetics even in films till date.

3.5.2 Realism in Theatre/ Method Acting

The shift to realistic acting that draws from what Stanislavsky called 'emotional memory' in late nineteenth century forms the primary basis of Western schools of acting. He proposed that one can reach a 'believable truth', through 'emotional memory'. To prepare for a role that involves fear, the actor must remember something frightening, and attempt to act the part in the emotional space of that fear they once felt. Stanislavsky believed that an actor needed to take his or her own personality onto the stage when they began to play a character. Later Stanislavsky concerned himself with the creation of physical entries into these emotional states, believing that the repetition of certain acts and exercises could bridge the gap between life on and off the stage. Stanislavski discovered his "principle of opposites," as expressed in his aphoristic advice to the actor: "When you play a good man, try to find out where he is bad, and when you play a villain, try to find where he is good."

From the point of view of gender, method acting or realistic portrayal initiated a whole range of debates about female impersonation, female characters of various plays and the understanding of women's psychology implicated in such characterisations. In India, this acting style became a colonial legacy and coincided with the entry of female performers, efforts at realistic plays like *Adhe Adhure* by Mohan Rakesh and evolving a new idiom on stage.

3.5.3 Epic/Didactic Theatre of Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright and director was instrumental in questioning the Aristotlean notion of catharsis and granted the spectator the status of an 'active thinker'. Drawing his inspiration from a variety of sources from Chinese, Japanese, and Indian theatre, the Elizabethans (especially Shakespeare), Greek tragedy, fair-ground entertainments, the Bavarian folk play, and many more, Brecht had the uncanny ability to take elements from seemingly incompatible sources, combine them, and make them his own. He didn't want his audience to get carried away with emotions -he wanted them to *think* -and towards this end, he determined to break the theatrical illusion.

The result of Brecht's research was a technique known as "verfremdungseffekt" or the "alienation effect". It was designed to encourage the audience to retain their critical detachment. His theories resulted in a number of "epic"

dramas, among them *Mother Courage and Her Children* which tells the story of a travelling merchant who earns her living by following the Swedish and Imperial armies with her covered wagon and selling them supplies: clothing, food, brandy, etc. As the war grows heated, Mother Courage finds that this profession has put her and her children in danger, but the old woman doggedly refuses to give up her wagon. Bertolt Brecht's theatrical techniques are commonly cited as a useful means for feminist revisions of theatrical realism. His persistent antagonism to closed systems of representation taken as a 'given' and the insistence on the construction of 'socialist' paradigm are potentially rich in terms of feminist / gender politics. There have also been strong feminist criticisms against Brechtian theatre in terms of privileging class at the cost of gender blindness or for equating gender neutrality as synonymous with gender equality.

3.5.4 Theatre of the Oppressed

Augusto Boal managed to enlarge the performance space to make the spectators not just an emotional or thinking 'mass' but into 'spect-actors'. Using the potential of theatre as a discursive space, the Theatre of the oppressed evolved into Forum, Image, Invisible, and Legislative theatres. Boal broke the normative notions of theatre's representation as autonomous; he underlined the scope of representation to be modified by spectators based on their specific context. His theatre also questioned the hierarchy within the practice of theatre. The role of the actors ceased to be one of histrionics alone. It called for an empathy and sensitivity to contextual variations and evolved a methodology to understand differences with mutual respect. Though the style of acting in Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) did not emphasis gender aspects, the thematic and conceptual framework of never lost sight of gender as one of the major categories of social analysis. Boal insisted on the difference that women brought into discussion based on their lived experience. It was not an accident that many women's groups and street theatre activists in India took to Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in creative ways, chief among them being Jana Sanskriti of West Bengal.

It is important to analyse the modes of gender operations in various kinds of theatre both in practice and theory.

3.5.5 Folk Theatre

Folk theatre of India has a very long history. The gradual decline of Sanskrit theatre saw the emergence of folk theatre in the country, however, its origin can be traced back to Buddhist literature folk theatre. It is considered as a 'lived experience', both historically and culturally. In India, songs and dance drama were the main aesthetics of folk theatre, like *jatra* of Bengal, Orissa and Eastern Bihar, *nautanki* from Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab, *bhavai* from Gujarat, *yakshagana* from Karnataka, *therukoothu* or *therubuttu*

from Tamil Nadu, and others. Not only these, the dance forms like *chhau*, *kuchipudi*, Buddhist lion dance, *santhal* dance, all contributed to the magical sheen of folk theatre as an aesthetic art form. This tradition eloquently exemplifies the navarasa of the Natyasastra. They all display contrasting styles, usage of local language, dress, attitude and humour of the region, and their contents -are all depicted with strong gender biases. It is observed that women performers were kept away for a long time, until women like Binodini Dasi and Gulab Bai, pointed out the differences vehemently through their performances, proving the fact that women were no less in performing on stage. Although male performers had been performing the women characters for ages, but most of them could not bring aesthetic beauty to the performance, except Bal Gandharva from Marathi theatre and Chopol Bhaduri from the Bengali theatre.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What are the gender implications of different forms of theatre?
- 2) What sort of performance takes place in Classical theatre? Are there any codes for characterisation and representation?
- 3) Describe Brecht's epic/didactic theatre?
- 4) What does Augusto Boal mean by 'spect-actors'?

3.6 GENDERED INTERVENTIONS IN THE STAGE AND THEATRE

Interventions in the stage and theatre are the primary concerns of cultural activism. The socio-cultural aspects of form and content of such interventions ought to be studied. In terms of gender, the interventions in stage and theatre can take the form of entry of women in forms hitherto considered a male bastion; re- presentation of gender in ways that question the conventional modes; introduction of new images and narratives that are specifically of importance to gender; and creating an aesthetics of non-hierarchical, collective imagination. These aspects have to be analysed from textual and performative aspects.

Activity 2

Read any play or drama written by any woman playwright. Try to analyse the play in terms of content and narrative structure from a gendered point of view.

Life stories of early actresses in Indian theatre are a growing field of study. Binodini Dasi, a pioneering stage actress of West Bengal wrote her autobiography as a serial in an early Bengali theatre magazine. It has been translated into English by Rimli Bhattacharya. There are also interviews and biographies of these artists that could throw light on how much they dared and how little were they rewarded. The stigma attached to performing women and their morality seems to have been the overarching concern of these women. The discriminatory attitude of theatre historians in documenting the contribution of male and female artists in the stage and theatre needs to be critiqued with intellectual rigour.

The role of comedy or humour to re-inscribe values of patriarchal hierarchy and the ways by which female practitioners have subverted this has been the basis of a study by Susan Seizer (2005). Women's groups took up theatre as their primary tool of mobilisation of views in the late 1970s. The 1990s saw the emergence of a new crop of women directors who have changed the idiom of theatre in interesting ways. The works of Neelam Mansingh, Anuradha Kapur, Maya Rao, Kirti Jain, Usha Ganguli, Amal Allana and many others all over the country have negotiated with the form of theatre in different ways to create a new world view. "It (Feminist theatre) slits open the certainties of gender roles, of the stereotype of wife, mother and courtesan and it dissolves the boundaries between public and private, between outer and inner selves" (Dalmia, 2006, p.16-23).

3.7 PERFORMANCE AS ASSERTION

The 1990s saw a new discourse emerging. With the advent of the AIDS epidemic and the question of sexual health getting foregrounded as mandatory aspects of gender and sexuality, many unspoken subjects were forced to appear upfront. Sex and morality that were often discussed within the realms of reproduction, the family system and law had to be discussed in terms of actual practice. The 'high risk' groups of sex workers and homosexuals had to be 'treated' or 'protected' from the spread of the epidemic. Initially, the understanding of victimhood and enlisting sympathy prevailed. But soon organizations of sex workers and queer communities were formed and their discourses challenged the earlier understanding of patriarchy and sexuality. The 'us' and 'them' divide that was overtly present in the political theatre scenario was reversed in an ironic way. Performers

emerged who called attention to the masses, not for mobilizing collective struggle but for comprehending a hitherto silenced point of view. It was an assertion of identity and sharing of 'lived' experiences, by the communities themselves. The issue of representation dealt more with the embodied selves of sex workers and queer groups; the very bodies that are presented for public viewing served as a counter to the stereotyping that had gone into the 'imagining' of these people.

The two major initiatives of sex workers' movements were in West Bengal and Maharashtra. Both the states have made use of theatre as a major venture in communication. There are many interesting films that have documented these movements*. But in the theatrical presentations, one finds the participation of the community members for a considerable period of time and the process is longer and perhaps more sustained. Des Moires Social Club (DMSC) of Iowa has a cultural wing called Komal Gandhar and Sangram and Point of View in Maharashtra produced a play entitled *My Mother, The Gharwali, Her Maalek, His Wife*.

As one of the reviews of the above play says, "These people are not actors; they wear no masks on the stage. All they did was, tell the story of their lives" (Wagle, 20 March, 2008, DNA). Sushama said that the play is "an attempt to inform society about how these people live and to give their perspective of life". One of the members of the cast said, "We have staged this play to ask society not to enforce their rules on us". The narrator of the play Sangita said, "In real life, we act to make money. Here we act to show people what our lives are like". These performances have posed a great challenge to heteronormative, patriarchal structures. It has also laid bare the unease the women's movement has about addressing these issues.

Kannadi Kalai Kuzhu was formed as the cultural front of Sudar Foundation in Tamilnadu. It is a collective of transgender people who wanted to work on community issues in a broader spectrum. They did not want to be restricted by the work around AIDS awareness. As Priya Babu, one of the founder members of Sudar says, "It is as if we are remembered only for the spread of HIV. If not for that, we cease to exist".

The sex workers' movements and queer movements have pushed the boundaries of gender to include sexuality. At the same time they have helped in establishing the old dictum of feminist thought that gender is performed after all. In theatre, we are yet to create a breakthrough performance that can turn upside down our gaze. But the theatrical efforts of these groups have forced us to study our own gaze in a new light. In thus gendering theatre through their bodies, existence and lives, these performances have expanded our discourse.

3.8 LET US SUM UP

This unit has drawn attention to the way gender is performed on stage and theatre that reflects the ways in which gender is conceived of as a socio-cultural system. It draws attention to the hurdles that are inherent in the cultural systems of which theatre is one. Since it is a performative art, it exhibits the values inscribed on performance and therefore makes it easier for the observer to know the codes that operate. A self-conscious analysis of the performative aspects of gender would hopefully pave the way for a critical study and endeavour to change the patriarchal modes of functioning.

3.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Describe the role of the body while performing on stage.
- 2) Elucidate the role of women performers in India, citing relevant examples.
- 3) Compare and contrast the Folk theatre and the Classical theatre.
- 4) How can theatre be used as a metaphor for asserting one's space?

3.10 REFERENCES

Adharkar, Neera. 1991. In Search of Women in History in Marathi Theatre: 1843 to 1949. *Economic and Political Weekly*. October 26, 1991. Mumbai: Economic & Political Weekly.

Bandyopadhyay, Samik. 1994. Theatrescapes. *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*. Vol. 7. Kolkata: Seagull Books.

Bhattacharya, Rimli. 1998. *My Story and My Life as an Actress: Binodini Dasi*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Brook, Peter. 2008. *The Empty Space: A book about the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate*. New York: Penguin, 2008. First published by Touchstone, New York, 1968.

Bruin, Hanne de M. 2001. Kattaikuttu: The Folk Theatre of Tamil Nadu. *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*. Vol. 31.

Case, Sue-Ellen, 1988. *Feminism and Theatre*. New York, London: Routledge.

Dalmia, Vasudha. 2006. *Poetics, Plays and Performances: The Politics of Indian Modern Theatre*. New York, Oxfordshire: Oxford University Press.

Gokhale, Shanta. 2000. *Playwright at the Centre: Marathi Drama from 1843 to the Present*. Kolkata: Seagull Books.

- Hollander, Julia. 2007. *Indian Folk Theatres*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Mehrotra, Deepti Priya. 2006. *Gulab Bai: The Queen of Nautanki Theatre*. New Delhi: Eastern Book Corporation.
- O'Shea, Janet. 2007. *At home in the World: Bharat Natyam on the Global Stage*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.
- Singh, Lata. 2010. *Playhouse of Power: Theatre in Colonial India*. New York, Oxfordshire: Oxford University Press.
- Singh, Lata. 2010. Women Performers as Subjects in Popular Theatre: Tamasha and Nautanki. *History and Sociology of South Asia*. January 2010. Vol. 4. No. 1. New Delhi: Sage.
- Varadpande, M.L. 2005. *History of Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Wagle, Archita. 2008. *When Sex Workers Removed Their Masks*. DNA, Mumbai Edition, 20 March, 2008. http://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report_when-sex-workers-removed-their-masks_1156842

3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Varadpande, M.L. 2005. *History of Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.