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# UNIT 4 PERFORMATIVE BODIES

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## Structure

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## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Let us ask ourselves this question: How do we understand performance? The term ‘performance’ can be understood in at least two different ways. Firstly, it can be used to indicate all those public and everyday acts of individuals and collectivities that contribute to the making of clearly identifiable social contexts. So, in this sense, walking in a group along a delimited space in order to mark that space as ‘ours’ is an act of performance. These kinds of performances include those practices that are not necessarily recognisable as the anthropologist’s ‘ritual’, but which nevertheless mark the contours of social life through simply having been carried out. Such performances contribute to the ‘social construction’ of space, a term that captures ‘the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes such as exchange, conflict, and control’ (Low, 1999, p. 112). As **Ravinder Kaur** (2003) points out in her analysis of the ‘Ganpati utsav [festival]’ of western India, dedicated to the god Ganesh, the “performative uses of public space” (p. 18) both point to and intensify the “volatile tension between order and disorder, [and] celebratory and socio-political aspects” (p. 12). Performance, in this sense, refers to the creation of meanings out of everyday acts of being and doing; it reinforces the fact that human social existence is forever in the process of being made and remade through actions upon and within collective life. Hence, **Edward Bruner** (1986) speaks of the manner in which performances ‘re-fashion’ reality”. It is in the performance”, as he puts it, “that we re-

experience, re-live, re-create, re-tell, re-construct, and re-fashion our culture... the performance itself is constitutive” (p. 11).

The second sense is the more conventional one where we understand performance as ‘staged’ activity, one that is watched by an audience gathered for the purpose. Here, performances might be in the nature of dances, plays, or, religious rituals such as initiation ceremonies, weddings, and birth ceremonies. The history of these kinds of performances, as this unit will explore, is also a history of changing ideas about different kinds of identities - national, gendered, caste, and class for example - as well as an indication of the struggle over cultural meanings across different sections of the population.

Anthropologists, feminist scholars, and scholars of dance have contributed equally to the theorisation of different kinds of performances as socio-political acts. So, for example, a study that explores the relationship between cultural and economic transformations and changes in ideas about the body in China points out that “Changing perceptions of the body were at the centre of the growth of consumer culture” (Brownell, 1995, p. 108). Further, **Susan Brownell** suggests, “the pursuit of beauty was officially acceptable and much discussed in the media. Fitness, beauty and fashions played an increasingly important role in people’s lives and they were also promoted in state discourses” (Brownell, 1995, p. 108). In a similar manner, feminist scholarship, in focussing on the relationship between social norms and women’s body-image, has explored how “the tyranny of slenderness” is a product of the mind/body dichotomy fundamental to western culture in which men hold power and are identified with the exalted mind, and women serve men and are likened to the denigrated body (Counihan, 1999, p. 77). The manner in which the body becomes a site for understanding social, political and economic processes in contexts of dance and performance will be explored in subsequent sections of this discussion in order to more fully explore the key concern of this unit.

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## 4.2 OBJECTIVES

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After going through the unit, you will be able to:

- Comprehend gender as a performance;
- Analyse the construction of gender in relation to both body and performance;
- Compare the construction of gender identities in relation to ‘Male Body’ and ‘Female Body’ in performance; and
- Analyse the socio-cultural processes involved in the production of a performative body.

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## 4.3 GENDER, BIOLOGISM AND PERFORMANCE

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Within western theoretical contexts, the discussion on gender as performance (or enactment) owes much to the work of **Judith Butler** (1999) who has sought to move discussion of gender and sexuality from notions of ‘depth’ to ‘surface’. As you have seen in various previous units where Butler’s work has been discussed (MWG-001, Block 6, Unit 1, MWG- 003, Block 1, Units 1, 2 & 3 and MWG- 004, Block 1, Unit 2), **Butler** also argues against the separation of ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’. She suggests that “the regulation of gender has always been part of the work of heterosexist normativity and to insist upon a radical separation of gender and sexuality is to miss the opportunity to analyse that particular operation of homophobic power” (Butler, 1999, p. 186).

However, it is also important to recognise the limits of ‘performativity’ (in the sense utilised in Butler’s work) as a framework of analysis, and that it can not be applied without careful attention to specific contexts. For, as **Blackwood and Wierenga** (1999) point out, “Although performance theory is interested in unraveling the workings of gender, it can not explain how people of different races, classes, and cultures and in different historical periods experience their bodies and their sexuality” (Blackwood and Wierenga, 1999, p. 14). That is to say, while performance theory can offer significant correctives to biologism (that primarily understands the body in terms of ‘inner drives’ and fixed ‘essences’), it may be far too general a framework to offer insights into the specificities of identity and behaviour. So, for example, if gender identities are ‘fluid’ - as performance theory suggests - then how do we explain the fact that ‘butch women’ in Jakarta base themselves on mythical idealised *male* figures? That is, that their sense of being depends upon essentialised representations of manliness (Wieringa, 2007). And, further, why is it that a *biologically female* transgendered person from Sri Lanka - who wishes to be recognised as male - bases his idea of manliness around notions of physical strength and aggression? (Wijewardene, 2007). In other words, gender identities, on the ground, must account for the social and historical contexts within which ‘performing’ subjects are nurtured, and this requires a more nuanced understanding of what makes the ‘everyday’.

Following the caveats noted in the previous paragraph, this discussion on ‘performative bodies’ will not so much focus on any overarching theory of ‘performativity’ as on several culturally and historically specific instances where performing bodies have something to tell us about issues of gender derived from localised conditions of life.

Moving on to the other significant topic within this course, it is important to ask why over the past few decades there has been such intense focus

within social science and humanities contexts on the **cultures and politics of the body**. To begin with, a focus on the body allows us to “examine those taken-for-granted aspects of the human body and what they reveal about the social organisation of everyday life” (Howson, 2004, p.1). This relates to the growing recognition that “the human body is central to the establishment and maintenance of social life” (Howson, 2004, pp. 1-2). This perspective suggests that the body is a site for the unfolding of a wide variety of social processes. Hence, the way we look, the manner in which we seek to present our bodies, and the regulations to which our bodies are subjected to, are both reflections of social mores and norms as well as sites of production of these norms. **Embodiment** is the term employed to invoke the relationship between the body and society. Embodiment, in turn, is a culturally and socially specific phenomenon; belching loudly after a good meal may be regarded as an expression of appreciation for the skills of the cook in India, but a sign of bad manners in most western countries. Further, men holding hands might be considered a sign of friendship in India, but one that indicates sexual intimacy in other cultures.

In contrast to the perspective outlined above (and which will be followed in this course), the traditional focus on the body - even within the social sciences - has tended to proceed from more or less medicalised interests in it, or in terms of the restraints put upon it by a number of regulatory frameworks. For instance, women or lower caste persons may not be allowed to perform certain tasks such as among some tribes, women are not supposed to hold plough, they are debarred from the task of ploughing. It is, however, the medicalised understanding of the body that has proved to be particularly restrictive in terms of a wider understanding of the relationship between the body and society. So, as **Bryan Turner** (2008) notes, even when we speak of illness, a “disease is... a system of signs which can be read and translated in a variety of ways” (Turner, 2008, p.176), and that the medicalisation of aetiological knowledge - those that deal with causes, effects and implications of diseases-may obscure the complex nature of the human situation and the possibility of a more effective aetiology which might result from taking account of the non-medical context of diseases. So, for example, a commitment towards a socio-cultural analysis of sexual contexts—within which the spread of AIDS is embedded - must lead us towards the study of such *cultural* forms as masculinity and conceptions of the body which underline sexuality and its practice. This has increasingly come to be recognised by medical specialists in the field of AIDS research. Further, as Turner also suggests, we need to abandon conceptions of gender and the body as “regulated” topics, conceptualising these “in a more fluid manner to allow for... important social changes in the wider social context” (Turner, 2008, p. 21).

A significant reason for the lack of focus on the body as a *social* mechanism also relates to a powerful trend within western philosophy which has significantly influenced the development of the social sciences. As you have read in the first unit of the block (MWG- 004, Block 1, Unit 1) about **Rene Descartes**, this relates to the Cartesian (after René Descartes 1596-1650) framework within which “the mind and the body are considered distinct from each other, [and]... the body is subordinate to the mind” (Howson, 2004, p. 3). Further, within this view ‘bodily sensation is not seen to influence or contaminate [mental] perception’ (Howson, 2004). In more recent times, there have been significant departures from this perspective and a questioning of its assumptions. The questioning to summarise a complex set of arguments derives from the idea that “our physicality is the very means by which we define our existence as social beings because the body is a symbolic vehicle that delineates how meaning is shaped, presented and represented in society” (Holmes, Lauzon & Gagnon, 2010, p. 230). The remaining part of this discussion will be devoted to presenting specific case studies, drawn from scholarly analyses, that demonstrate the different ways in which ‘performances’ and ‘bodies’ come together to illustrate the processes of gender in particular, and other kinds of social relationships in general.

***Check Your Progress:***

*What is the meaning of medicalised model of the body and how does it connect to performance? Explain this in the larger context of the relationship between biologism, gender and performance.*

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## **4.4 PRODUCING THE MALE BODY IN PERFORMANCE**

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The ideas of ‘making’ and ‘producing’ are crucial to the study of gender identities, as all individuals are engaged in different forms of performance. They crucially point to the historical and social nature of both gender identities as well as performative activities. In the context of this discussion, then, the gigantic archive of ‘proper’ masculine behaviour - in novels, films, advertisements, and folk-advice - would clearly be unnecessary if it was a naturally endowed characteristic. The very fact that masculinity must consistently be reinforced - ‘if you buy this motor-cycle, you’ll be a real man’ - says something about the tenuous and fragile nature of gender/masculine identities, which must continually be reinforced. Following from this, we might also say that masculinity is *enacted rather than expressed*.

In this section, we will focus upon a specific context of performance that also serves as a site for learning the ideologies and behaviours of gender.

In his discussion about the Kerala martial arts form known as *kallaripayattu*, **Phillip Zarrilli**, points out that Indian martial arts are “founded on a set of fundamental cultural assumptions about the body-mind relationship and health and well-being that are similar to the assumptions underlying yoga and *Ayurveda*” (Zarrilli, 2005, p. 20). Techniques of combat developed during the Sangam Age (roughly 300 BC to 300 AD) in South India are generally regarded as forerunners of *kallaripayattu* which itself emerged as a distinct martial art around the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The context of its emergence, as Zarrilli points out, was a period of extended warfare (Zarrilli, 2005, p. 23). What is important to keep in mind is that, given the historical association of ‘martial’ behaviour and demeanour and men, *kallaripayattu* became a site for the expression and consolidation of masculine identities.

Of course, there is no unbroken link between the practices of *kallaripayattu* as it existed in antiquity and the contexts within which it is practised and exhibited today. As Zarrilli points out, “In an increasingly heteronomous society, in which traditional practitioners must vie for students with karate teachers who often emphasise immediate ‘street wise’ results, the paradigms, beliefs and practices discussed in this essay are in constant process of negotiation with competing paradigms and practices and, therefore, are only more or less observed by teachers today” (Zarrilli, 2005, p. 20). Nevertheless, what is shared between its past and its present is the gendered nature of ideologies and practices that contribute to the making of masculine identities. *Kallaripayattu* training is organised around a complex set of ritualised techniques that include elements drawn from yoga, meditation, as well as methods for increasing powers of concentration. Historically, these were intended such that “the practitioner might ideally achieve the superior degree of self-control, mental calm and single-point concentration necessary to face combat and possible death and thus access to certain aspects of power and agency in the use of weapons in combat” (Zarrilli, p. 27). It should be noted that ideas of ‘self-control’, ‘mental calm’ and ‘single- point concentration necessary to face combat and possible death’ have historical association with masculinised identities. Hence, within the very structure of its training regime and process, *Kallaripayattu* borrows its practices from widely held ideas about the attributes of manhood.

What are some of the other ways in which *contemporary kallaripayattu* training might be interpreted as a continuing site for the making and reinforcement of masculine identities? *Kallaripayattu* training consists of a series of exercises that includes the mastering of a number of ‘poses’ (*vadivu*) that are named after different animals. And, while Zarrilli does not

dwell upon this, the animals whose names attach to the poses are stereotypic ‘male’ animals: horse, peacock, snake, and cock. That is to say, their ‘attributes’ are popularly understood as those that attach to men and, we could say, are intended to ‘teach’ masculinity (or, at least; a certain version of masculinity). Let us see how one of the teachers of *kallaripayattu* explains the peacock and cock poses:

**Box 4.1: Describing Mayuravadivu and Kukkuvadivu**

When a peacock is going to attack its enemies, it spreads its feathers, raises its neck, and dances by steadying itself on one leg. Then it shifts to the other leg and attacks by jumping and flying. The capability of doing this attack is known as mayuravadivu.

When a cock attacks, he uses all parts of his body: wings, neck, legs, finger nails. He will lift his one leg and shake his feathers and neck, fix his gaze on the enemy, and attack. This is Kukkuvadivu (Zarrilli, 2005, p. 31).

It is in the various processes of training and performing the techniques of *kallaripayattu* that elements of masculinity are utilised to produce the gender identity of both the trainee and the performer. A significant aspect of training is the belief that ‘inner development’ (self-control, enhanced powers of concentration etc.) will lead to increased ability to exercise control over the external world. Importantly, Zarrilli notes that “In the ethnographic domain, the belief in such powers [of being able to control the external world] is the closest contemporary reflection of the subtle, esoteric powers attained by epic heroes like Arjuna” (Zarrilli, 2005, p. 36). That is to say, it is ‘epic heroes’ who, in the current time at least, are imagined as icons of untempered masculinity that continue to provide inspiration figures of “other” to be emulated and followed.

***Check Your Progress:***

*Explain how gender identities get constructed through performance? Draw examples from television soaps, street plays, and performances to show the process of gender construction.*

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## 4.5 COLONIALISM, NATIONALISM, AND PERFORMANCE: REFORMING THE MALE BODY

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If performances are sites of the making of gender identities, they are also significant as contexts for *remaking* of such identities. Let us consider the ways in which body-politics and colonial and nationalist politics joined to produce ‘appropriate’ male dancing bodies in the case of Egypt during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Anthony Shay (2008) points out that before the era of colonisation, traditional dance forms in Egypt in Central Asia, the ‘movement vocabularies’ (Shay, 2008, p. 212) employed by men and women (that is, bodily gestures and techniques they exhibited during performance) were quite similar. However, Shay goes on to say, colonial and post-colonial attitudes towards gender and sexuality substantially contributed to the making of a ‘hypermasculinised choreographic’ (Shay, 2008, p. 211) culture within which male dancers were instructed to dance ‘like men’, firmly distinguishing their bodily movements from those of women. Of course, this process also defined how dancing women’s bodies should ‘behave’ in performance.

The ‘reform’ of male dancing bodies in Egypt and certain Central Asian societies (such as Iran and Uzbekistan) came about as a result of specific attitudes towards gender and sexuality held by the colonising powers and, in turn, internalised by native elites. So, “Coming from the homophobic atmosphere that obtained in Europe, where men caught in homosexual encounters were jailed, tortured, and executed, the sight of male dancers performing articulated movements of the torso and pelvic areas offended Westerners who believed such movements to belong solely to the domain of women” (Shay, p. 218). Scholarship on colonialism indicates that in most historical contexts, indigenous elites displayed a love-hate relationship with the culture of their colonial masters. That is say, while they articulated resentment at being treated as social and cultural inferiors, they also sought to emulate the colonisers in order to be accepted as their equals. A variety of attempts both by individual as well as state-sponsored dance companies in Egypt, Iran and Uzbekistan during the twentieth century to ‘create “proper” images for male dancing’ (Shay, p. 211) reflect this attitude. The creation of “new, hypermasculinised choreographic forms” was, according to Shay, “related to pressures from both colonial administrations and the newly emerging, postcolonial, Westernised elites and middle classes to counter negative historical stereotypes of male dancers in these regions” (p. 211).

Colonial powers frequently characterised non-western cultures as ‘backward’ in their acceptance of gender and sexual identities which were not always strictly divided into the binaries of male and female, and hetero and homosexual. Colonised elites accepted this characterisation and sought to



align local cultures along the lines suggested by the colonizing European powers.

As part of the ‘civilising mission’ of colonialism, enthusiastically adopted by native elites, male dancing bodies were sought to be ‘cleansed’ of the ‘taint’ of ‘effeminacy’, as well as placed outside a realm that might possibly have been interpreted to be homoerotic. For, not only did men and women share the same ‘movement vocabulary’ but quite often in local dance forms, male dancers cultivated “an ambiguity in dress and performance mannerisms that were attractive to their male audiences” (Shay, 2008, p. 220). The desire on the part of native elites to approximate to western ideals of gender and sexuality - in turn expressive of a deeper craving to be respected by the colonising powers - led, in turn to specific changes in the ways in which national dance forms were ‘reformed’ in both the colonial and post-colonial periods. This resulted in ‘hypermasculine dance styles’ that sought to present the male body as distinct from (and ‘opposite’ of) the female one, thereby largely reversing a historical situation. The most significant western performative context that was used to change male dancing styles was ballet. Hence, a key difference that occurs in the new style of male dancing in all of these areas is that *‘the torso is held immobile, which is not true in the previous forms of traditional dance; there are no shoulder shimmies or articulated pelvic movements. The hands and head also remain stiff and unyielding, in contrast to the intricate arm and hand movements, and lively facial expressions and head gestures that formerly characterised these traditions’* (Shay, 2008, p. 227).

There is also a class dimension to be considered within the above context. For, once the movement and presentation of male bodies was adequately sanitised - made distinct both from women’s bodies as well those of ambiguous gender - it became easier to attract a more middle-class cohort of dancers: for dance as a career was now seen to be free from its ‘disreputable’ past. In this way, new dancing male bodies in Egypt, Iran and Uzbekistan were produced through cultural collaboration between colonial powers and the colonised elite.

So far we have looked at the male body in the context of performance. Let us now turn our attention to similar issues relating to the female body in order to develop a comparative gendered perspective.

***Check Your Progress:***

*How does performance construct and reconstruct gender identities? Explain with the help of references from a dance form or performance tradition.*

## 4.6 COLONIALISM AND MODERNITY: PERFORMANCE AND THE FEMALE BODY

This unit began with descriptions of the performing male body in order to widen the framework of gender beyond its traditional boundaries. The performing female body is also, of course, a site of social, cultural, and political importance. The case of the *lavani* song and dance form of western India is instructive in this regard.

‘The earliest traceable *lavani*’, Sharmila Rege suggests, ‘dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century’ (Rege, 2002, pp. 1040-1041). Further, the version known as the ‘*shringareek*’ or ‘erotic’ *lavani* - that contains explicit sexual references - has “been traced to the ‘*Gatha Sapatshati*’...[Which] is a collection of *Prakrit* verses composed by the masses about their everyday lived practices, including the sexual and dated between 1 AD and 7 AD” (Rege, 2002, p. 1041). The Peshwa period (from late 17<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) was the high point of the erotic *lavani* in western India. Indeed, a popular Marathi proverb attributes the decline of Peshwa rule to the latter’s ‘excessive fondness’ for *lavani*.

Erotic *lavani* of the Peshwa period can, according to Rege, be interpreted as having played an important role in constructing the sexuality of lower caste women in specific ways. So, “the bodies of lower caste women were constructed in the *lavani* as either arousing or satiating male desire” . Further, ‘This construction was crucial to the pre-colonial Peshwa state in the appropriation of the labour of lower caste women - through the institution of slavery” (Rege, 2002, p. 1041). The manner in which lower caste female sexuality was represented through *lavani* performances was itself through dichotomised representations of lower and upper caste bodies. So, *lavanis* that speak of ‘insatiable desires of women’ were usually attached to the speaking voice of the ‘lower caste whore’, whereas those that expressed loftier sentiments such as ‘*virah*’ (the pain of separation) (Rege, 2002) were attributed to ‘wifely’ characters. If the ‘whore’ sought out men in order to satisfy her ‘insatiable’ needs, the wife expressed ‘purer’ desires of attaining motherhood and admiration of her husband’s ‘virility’. The explicit dichotomy between the ‘whore’ and wife’ was a significant aspect of the *lavanis*’ construction of female sexuality that, in turn, provided justification for the oppression of lower caste women.

The end of Peshwa rule brought about important changes for the *lavani* performers and performances. These related to changing (and usually middle-class, upper caste) notions of what constituted ‘vulgarity’ and ‘decency’ in public life. As *lavani* performers were forced to travel to other regions in order to earn a living, they encountered new social, cultural and economic environments which were also contexts of a different set of attitudes towards

them. A significant aspect of the change in the field of public performance was the emergence of 'elite theatre' that sought to distinguish itself "from the folk via a process of de-sexualisation, so that only men perform on the stage" (Rege, p. 1043). In the new environment, *lavani* increasingly came to be portrayed as the 'popular culture' of certain sections of the population that was simultaneously 'immoral' in its overt preoccupations with sensuality. The growth of 'bourgeois theatre' (Rege, 2002), where male bodies performed almost all the female roles was a process through which "The theatre of the male performers came to be marked as cerebral as against the sensuous *lavani*" (Rege, p. 1043). Here, we can observe a particular manner in which 'performance' and 'body' came together through their location in a variety of social, cultural and political contexts: the male body itself came to be identified as 'cerebral' and the female one 'sensual'. This in turn, was also the consolidation of class, caste, and gender power. This process further intensified later on with the incorporation of the *lavani* within Marathi cinema, "the *lavani* from the Marathi films constructed the *lavani* dancer as a 'pakhru' (bird) 'bijlee' (lightning), and 'jawanichi baag' (garden of youth)..., the focus being on a native, wild and rustic sexuality which was to be tamed and reformed by the hero (invariably either the patil's son or school master, i e, always upper caste" (Rege, 2002, p. 1044).

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## 4.7 MODERNITY, PERFORMANCE AND TRANSVESTITE BODIES

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The discussion of 'bourgeois theatre' in the previous section brings us to the final section of this unit, with its focus on 'theatrical transvestism'. Around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kathryn Hansen (2004) points out that there developed in Bombay "a metropolitan theatrical culture structured by the overlapping practices of the Parsi, Gujarati, and Marathi theatres" (Hansen, p. 101). Parsi theatre companies, as they were known, not only performed in the Bombay area, but also travelled to other parts of the subcontinent, including cities in Burma, Ceylon and Nepal. As noted in the discussion of *lavani* above, part of the popularity of this (urban) theatre form lay in the fact that it was seen to be offering a 'respectable' alternative to the 'vulgarity' of traditional theatre forms.

A significant aspect of the performances of Parsi theatre companies lay in the fact that all the female roles were performed by men. Indeed, certain of the female impersonators, such as Jayashankar Sundari and Bal Gandharv, achieved enormous fame in their own lifetime. Female impersonation has, of course, a very long history within Indian performative traditions. However, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rural theatre and dance forms where impersonation was present were slowly falling out of favour with the urban middle classes. These came to be regarded - with European attitudes as cue - as 'crude' and 'debased' forms of entertainment. Given their origins in

lower caste milieus, the reaction to ‘folk’ performative traditions was also a way in which the upper castes marked their ‘distinction’ from lower caste populations (Hansen, p. 104).

The manner in which the male body came to impersonate the female one in the new theatrical traditions of Bombay has an interesting and complex connection with the older traditions of performance (such as *Bhavai*) which, though containing practices of female impersonation, had become devalued due to perceptions of their ‘lewdness’ and ‘vulgarity’. However, simultaneously as the older forms were eschewed, they were also constituted templates for new theatre stars such as Sundari and Bal Gandharv. As well, the involvement of women in the folk drama traditions was a frequent source of their characterisation as ‘debased’, with women performers regarded as the equivalent of prostitutes. Indeed, a frequent justification for hiring men to play female roles in the modern theatre was the ‘stigma’ attached to women actors. However, as Hansen points out, the fondness among spectators for erotic genres of song and dance such as *thumri* and *ghazal* dictated that these items be retained within the performative structure of the urban drama. In consequence, female impersonators took on the double burden of enacting noble womanly characters even as they inherited the arts of women of the *Kotha* (Hansen, 2004, p. 106).

The final sentence of the previous paragraph, regarding the *kinds* of female representations that were being portrayed by the leading male actors of the day, provides an important clue to another kind of gender politics that was then taking shape within the context of theatrical transvestism. So, the woman of the modern stage (played by the female impersonator) was of a ‘noble type’, and just as importantly, formed the prototype for ‘ideal woman’ of the nationalist period. The following excerpt that concerns Jayashankar Sundari - who had begun his career on the Gujarati stage - nicely captures this aspect: *Returning to Bombay*, he played Rambha, the milkmaid in the Gujarati drama *Vikram Charitra*. The play was performed every Saturday night between 1902 and 1905, for a total of 160 times. Sundari was between thirteen and sixteen years of age. In his most memorable scene, he entered the stage with a pot on his head and offered milk to the hero, singing *Koi dudh lyo dilrangi*. The Vaishnava trope of the youthful lord Krishna with his adoring gopis (cowherd women) associated sexual/mystical enjoyment with the pleasures of oral consumption. As the bestower of ‘milk’ from her ‘pot’, the transvestite heroine maintained a demure, inward-turned posture that legitimised her seductive gesture. Her carefully arranged hair, jewellery, and sari border worked to produce a sublimation of sexuality, an interiorisation of virtue as ‘moral character” (Hansen, 2004, p. 115).

It has frequently been argued that the key reason why men took on women's roles on stage related to 'the social taboo against women appearing on stage' (Hansen, p. 107). However, Hansen points out, this reasoning appears to ignore the fact that female impersonators were popular in their own right, and that given audience preferences, theatre management often employed female impersonators even when female actors might have been available. Further, the author states that "the historical record indicates that rather than filling for absent women, female impersonators competed against them, and actresses competed against female impersonators, for female roles within the theatrical troupe" (Hansen, p. 109). In continuation to this, the author argues that contemporary analyses that view female impersonation as a 'compulsion' arising out of social restrictions upon women might, which reflects an 'anxiety' about both the prevalence of a circuit of homoerotic enjoyment among theatre going publics of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as concerns 'regarding cross-dressing and the implications of effeminacy' (Hansen, 2004). These concerns are similar to those that were expressed by the native elites of Egypt, Iran, and Uzbekistan discussed above as they sought to establish the 'real' nature of indigenous masculinity in their respective societies.

The homoerotic sphere of the *Parsi* theatre was, in the ways discussed above, simultaneously a context of the erasure of certain older forms of performance as well as the site for gender, class, and caste politics. However, as Hansen suggests, while "the eclipse of theatrical transvestism has been heralded as a triumph for the female performer and therefore for women in general, it also marked the end of an era of gender ambiguity. A binary sex/gender regime allied to differences of class and caste has displaced the transvestite performer and distanced urban spectators from the circulation of homoerotic imagery" (Hansen, 2004, p. 122).

***Check Your Progress:***

*What do you understand by the transvestite body? Substantiate your answer with suitable examples.*

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## 4.8 LET US SUM UP

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The preceding discussion has sought to outline the various ways in which the notion of 'performative bodies' can be utilised to explore a wide variety of social and cultural processes and norms attached to female and male

bodies. The discussion has suggested that the recent interest in exploring the body as a site of significant symbolic and material processes allows us to move beyond the medicalised models of the body as well the philosophical tradition within which there is a strict mind-body division. The notion of the performative body allows us to go beyond the existing mind/body separation by opening up the possibility of roles in opposition to the sexual body. By conjoining 'body' with 'performance', we are also able to see how each transforms the other and the manner in which the transformations reflect a wide variety of positions of power as well as resistance. Performances - whether in everyday life or the ones that takes place upon a stage - serve as symbolic vocabularies of beliefs regarding categories such as class, caste, and gender. The human body is, in turn, the slate upon which the symbols are inscribed.

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## 4.9 GLOSSARY

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- Lavani** : *Lavani* is a genre of music popular in Maharashtra and southern Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. *Lavani* is a combination of traditional song and dance, which particularly performed to the enchanting beats of Dholak. *Lavani* is noted for its powerful rhythm and erotic sentiment. *Lavani* has contributed substantially to the development of Marathi folk theatre.
- Lewdness** : The trait of behaving in an obscene manner.
- Homoerotic** : Refers to the erotic attraction between members of the same sex, either male-male (male homosexuality) or female-female (lesbianism), and its specific connection to the depiction or manifestation in visual arts and literature.
- Transvestite** : A person who seeks sexual pleasure from wearing clothes that are normally associated with the opposite sex. Receiving sexual gratification from wearing clothing of the opposite sex.

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## 4.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Is gender performative in nature? Discuss in the context of Indian society and cultural embodiments.
- 2) Analyse the construction of gender in relation to body and performance and explain how performance might enable us to go beyond the rigid separation of mind/body.

- 3) Explain the notion of the performative body and show how the projection of male body differs from that of the female body in the context of performance.
- 4) “Gender is produced through performance”. Discuss this by drawing examples from folk dance, theatre, and local performance in the Indian context.

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