THE BORROWED GARB: UNDERSTANDING FEMALE IMPERSONATION ON INDIAN STAGE

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"… If one is concerned with issues of representation, one cannot ignore the fact that, for most of the history of the theatre in south Asia, women have been represented by men."[1]

Abstract

The tradition of male impersonating female, which is also known as cross-dressing or role-playing, has been an essential part of early Modern Theatre in India. Particularly in the Marathi, Bengali and Parsi Theatre, during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, female impersonators were so famous that 'they comprised the largest draw to the theatres and were celebrities and role models.' Women were omitted from theatrical traditions, yet were needed to engage the audience and popularize the theatre. Therefore men 'borrowed' the 'garb' of 'femininity' and excelled in it so much so that they created paradigms for the 'ideal Indian woman'. This paper seeks to understand the tradition of female impersonation on Indian stage and questions the 'construction' of 'femininity' and its representation by men.

Milly S. Barranger defines theatre as 'a form of art and entertainment that places actors before a group of people—an audience—in a representation of life.[2]' The actors/performers as well as the audiences played a significant role in popularising theatre as an art form. In the Indian context, theatre has been an extremely popular medium of communication. Richard Salomon in the Indian epigraphy has mentioned about the popularity of theatre. According to Indian mythology, Sage Bharata was bequeathed with the knowledge of drama by the Hindu mythological Gods. Bharata in turn penned the *Natyasastra*, a canonical treatise on performance art, also referred to as the fifth Veda, allowing for more effective dissemination of this knowledge via his one hundred sons, and, thus giving rise to Sanskrit drama.[3] In the *Natyasastra,* the major source of dramaturgy and the earliest treatise on drama in India, Sage Bharata created women to make drama more effective and entertaining. He suggested that, dance and romance must be acted out by women alone,[4] thus giving way to the politics of gender in Indian theatre from its inception itself. He divided women into three categories: the wife, the beloved or the prostitute.[5] All the three categories had women playing their roles in relation to men. This can be construed as a means of controlling female sexuality where her sexuality was either for a single man as wife/ lover or for all as prostitute. 'For the sentiment of love women have to be presented in all her charms. Thus they are presented in attractive costumes, enchanting postures and as engaged in melodious songs.'[6] Female roles, it can be argued, were introduced for voyeuristic pleasure and her body for sexual gratification. Sanskrit plays drew heavily from the Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata which depicted women as sacrificing mothers, obedient wives and erotic lovers.

Kathryn Hansen makes an extremely interesting observation:

Sita, Draupadi, Subhadra, Damayanti and other heroines from epic and myth have long been celebrated in the visual and verbal arts and rightly credited with establishing gender roles for women in Indian society. But what did it mean when men played their parts, as was so often the case in pre modern performance traditions? Were the paradigms of womanly virtue parodied by the cross-dressed actor, or did his masquerade contribute to the construction of a powerful ideal?[7]

The late 19th CE and the early 20th CE saw a change in the public image of women when women's presence in a public platform like stage was frowned upon by many. Women actresses were not allowed on stage, and if at all they appeared, they were viewed as sexual objects satisfying erotic pleasure.[8] As women performers did not fit into the paradigm of 'respectability', 'only women

[1] Hansen, Kathryn. 'Stri Bhumika: Female Impersonators and Actresses on the Parsi Stage', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 35 (Aug. 29 - Sep. 4, 1998), pp. 2291-2300. DoA: 27.11.2020.
[2] Barranger, Milly S. *Theatre: a way of seeing*, Thomson Wadsworth, USA, 2006, p. 1.

[3]Figueira, Dorothy M. and Farley P. Richmond. [CMLT 4250 Lecture Notes]. Dalit Theater. Spring 2014.

[4]<epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp_content/women_studies/gender_studies/02.women_and_literature/13._women_and_theatre/et/6547_et_13et.pdf> DoA: 4.01.2018.
[5] Sharma, Priyanka. 'Communication Of Women's Discrimination &Sexuality in Natyashastra,' in *Global Media Journal*-Indian Edition, Vol.4, No.2, December 2013. DoA: 06.12.2017.
[6] Shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/22513/6/06_chapter1.pdf DoA: 04.01.2018.
[7] Hansen, Kathryn. 'Stri Bhumika: Female Impersonators and Actresses on the Parsi Stage', in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 33, No. 35 (Aug. 29 - Sep. 4, 1998), pp. 2291-2300. DoA: 27.11.2020.
[8]<epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp_content/women_studies/gender_studies/02.women_and_literature/13._women_and_theatre/et/6547_et_13et.pdf> DoA: 4.01.2018.

from marginalized, 'anonymous' and 'condemned' quarters came into theatre. 'Respectable' women dared not tread on this path.'[9] Gradually men began to play female roles, thus completely erasing the need for female actors and female 'artists that did exist have been delegitimized as sex workers and singers from marginalized communities.'[10] The tradition of male impersonating female, which is also known as cross-dressing or role-playing, observes Angelie Multani, has been an essential part of early Modern Theatre in India. Particularly in the Marathi, Bengali and Parsi Theatre, during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, female impersonators were so famous that 'they comprised the largest draw to the theatres and were celebrities and role models.' Multani further states that the popularity and demand of female impersonators like Bal Gandharv from Marathi Theatre and Jai Shankar Sundari of the Parsi Theatre was so enormous that they actually contested real actresses and in many instances were chosen over the real woman by the audience.[11] Hansen rightly opines that the "tensions within the theatregoing public about the nature of spectatorial pleasure are crucial to understanding this contestation. The discourse of respectability promulgated by reformists existed uneasily beside a fascination for erotic display, the staple of audience enjoyment, and both were manipulated by the profit seeking proprietors in a struggle for control of the represented female body."[12]

These urban theatres moved away from a burlesque, transgressive mode of female embodiment, often associated with folk practice, to an elaborate code of modesty, propriety, and respectability that identified the New Woman in hetero-normative terms. But equally they positioned the homoerotic gaze towards a refined, transgendered performer who aroused a different kind of desire.[13]

Acclaimed for having touched the very essence of womanhood or more precisely the image of 'Indian Woman', female impersonators, mainly in the Western India, became representatives of women's appearance, fashion as well as feminine behaviour and mannerisms. Kathryn Hansen's extensive research on the tradition of female impersonators and the Parsi Theatre shows that with the establishment of the Victoria Theatrical Company in 1868, the Parsi theatre entered a period of professionalization. 'Young men of **pleasing figure**[emphasis mine] and superlative voice were sought out to play women's roles'. The female impersonators received schooling in female roles, 'especially in the minor parts of the companions of the heroine. Certain actors became known as 'all-rounders', capable of performing the role of hero, heroine, or comedian, as needed. In other cases, with age and changing physical characteristics, the performer shifted from female to male roles.'(stri bhumika) Female impersonators such as the Marathi actor Bal Gandharva (1889-1975) were leaders in defining and dictating contemporary women's fashion and norms of beauty. Sundari and Gandharva popularised certain ways of draping saris, with particular cuts for blouses, for example.[14] Gandharva's photograph was used in advertising to sell everything from calendars, to match-boxes and women's cosmetics. He popularised items of jewellery such as the 'nathni' or nose-ring, the use of flowers to adorn and scent the hair, and the carrying of handkerchiefs on one's person. Photographs of him in his most famous roles, such as ones where he played a 'pati-vrata' middle-class housewife adorned the rooms of many an elite family's homes.[15] Gandharva had an immensely sweet singing voice and the diction of an upper or upper-middle class speaker.

Ironically, the notions of ideal 'femininity' in India were thus, cultivated and 'performed' through a male body. Young men performing femininity, was not, however, considered as immoral, unnatural or threatening to the society. 'Through the sphere of the tragic woman, the wronged wife, the victim (abala nari), the female impersonator was rendered non-threatening, a stimulant of tears rather than titillation'[16]

Another interesting account of the much desired and romanticised notions of 'femininity' is illustrated in the autobiographical account of a leading female impersonator of the Parsi theatre called master Champalal.[17] He lists the following as non-negotiable criteria for any female impersonator attempting 'authenticity' in their portrayal of Indian women:

- You must never, ever cut your hair short. Long silky tresses are a must for being a woman.

-As long as you play at being a female, proximity to males must be a big no! If you must meet boyfriends (sic) or male members of the family, take care the theatre-goers never see you – meet other men, and you risk getting a "reputation".

-While travelling, you must sit in separate compartments from male actors and stay in your tents upon arrival. You must never invite men into your tents, whether from the troupe or from the audience.

-You should neither drink, nor eat spicy food. They spoil the complexion and your voice, and make you manly and "hot-tempered".[18]

[9] Singh, Lata. 'Transgression of Boundaries: Women of IPTA', in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 39, No. 11/12 (November-December 2011), p. 63. DoA: 5.3.2015.
[10] Javalgekar, Aishwarya. Op.cit. DoA: 14.11.2017
[11] Multani, Angelie. '"Just like a Woman": Female impersonation, gender construction and role-playing in Begum Barve', in Arya Madhavan (ed.) *Women in Asian Performance: Aesthetics and Politics*, Routledge, London and New York, 2017, pp. 39-41.
[12] Hansen, Kathryn. Op.Cit.
[13] Loc. Cit
[14] Hansen, Kathryn. 'Making Women Visible: Gender and Race Cross-Dressing in the Parsi Theatre', in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (May, 1999), p. 128. DoA: 09. 01.2019.
[15] Nadkarni, Mohan. *Bal Gandharva: The Nonpareil Thespian*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, pp.67-68
[16] Hansen, Kathryn. 'Stri Bhumika: Female Impersonators and Actresses on the Parsi Stage'. Op.cit. p. 2296
[17] Pande, Mrinal. 'Moving Beyond Themselves': Women in Hindustani Parsi Theatre and Early Hindi Films,' Economic and Political Weekly, 41. 17 (2006), p. 1646.
[18] Ibid.

This, besides exemplifying the dedication involved in 'performing femininity', also reveals how the paradigms of ideal Indian womanhood was 'constructed' for women not by herself but by the patriarchal hegemony. Historian Kathryn Hansen also asserts that female impersonation transgressed the differences between genders. In her words:

…theatrical cross-dressing in this period went beyond the reification of existing gender boundaries, or the transgressions of those boundaries for the purpose of generating laughter…by subsuming the overt sexuality of the traditional female impersonator [or courtesan performer] within norms of modesty, cross-dressed performers together with playwrights and directors crafted a new interiority, identifying the ideal woman with inner sensibility and the capacity to suffer. [19]

Both the statements above, give way to a few pertinent points—firstly, it clearly shows that the role of woman, even when played by a male, was for visual pleasure or to be more precise for sexual gratification. Secondly, who decided the 'norms of modesty' and who 'crafted' this 'ideal woman'? Lastly, who was/is this 'ideal' and 'New Woman'? The answers to these questions are perhaps in the statement itself. It is the impersonators, the playwrights and the directors—the representatives of the patriarchal society—the men and they 'crafted' and defined the 'ideal' woman as they wanted her to be. Thus it can be argued that it is the male who 'decides' and sets the rule and code of conduct for the female. This can be interpreted as an attempt to control not only the female body but also its representation as a symbol of femininity. As far as the roles are concerned, even males performing as females were objects of male gaze, desire and visual pleasure or eternal sufferers, thereby reemphasizing the stereotypical image of woman.

Alisa Solomon provides a very relevant argument on the practice of using female impersonators, although in the Western context, but it will be apt to quote her here in the Indian context as well, where she states that the tradition of cross-dressing 'reinstates the presumption of the male as universal; he remains the standard, the given, even when wearing feather boas and four inch stilettos.'[20] Solomon further raises a significant question asking that 'if femininity is best performed by men, why is not masculinity best performed by women?' She asserts:

…unlike many female characters, male characters rarely exist on traditional stages for their gender alone—they are statesman, soldiers, salesman, not merely men…because "man" is the presumed universal, and "woman" the gussied-up other, drag changes meaning depending on who's wearing it…And since femininity is always drag,…it's easy to caricature.[21]

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*[22], uses the concept of female impersonators (drag queens in the Western context) as an example of her theory of performativity. Drag, Butler believes, challenges the idea of gender being innate or inherent and thus subverts or transgresses gender identities. She argues that drag can be political in the sense in which it deconstructs our naturalised normative gender conceptions. Butler suggests that in 'imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency'[23]. Charlotte Coles defies Butler and argues that drag performances are:

…defined primarily by male mastery of the depiction of highly selective feminine identities that focus on surface aesthetics (hair, clothing, make-up) rather than social narratives of family or reproduction. Consequently, feminist criticism has critiqued drag as the reproduction of a specifically sexualized rendering of feminine identity, which reflects persistent hierarchies of desire and desirability: of men dressing as the male-oriented version of women. In other words, drag performs and sustains forms of femininity which primarily serve patriarchal interests.[24]

It therefore, implies that the argument that the institution of female impersonation helped in transgressing gender roles does not hold good in the sense that it emphasises only one of the two genders which is obviously the preferred one—the male. It is the male performing the role of a female and not the other way round. It is the male who not only substitutes the female but also excels in her role and sets standards for her in the future to perform. By seizing the place of women actresses in the entertainment world, on one hand, female impersonators deprived women of employment opportunities and strengthened the misogynist belief that women should remain absent or invisible in the public domain. And on the other they paved the way for real women to enter the public domain.[25]

It was not only the Western India where the trend of role-playing was prevalent. Bengal was equally following this trend and Chapal Bhaduri was the most popular name in the list of female impersonators. Interestingly, in Bengal, women appeared on public stage earlier than her counterparts from the other parts of the country. But real women playing their own roles on stage was not a sudden phenomenon. The mid nineteenth century witnessed a growing preference for the realistic theatre and the proscenium stage which demanded women performers. Moreover, men who performed the roles of women earlier were getting older and therefore lacked conviction on stage and young boys who replaced them went short of experience and commitment. It was also the popularity of song based plays which demanded the use of female voice that led to the entrance of women performers. Therefore,

[19] Hansen, Kathryn. 'Making Women Visible: Gender and Race Cross-Dressing in the Parsi Theatre', Op.Cit.
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[20] Solomon, Alisa. 'It's Never Too Late to Switch: Crossing toward power', in Lesley Ferris (ed.) *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993, p. 153.
[21] ibid. p. 154.
[22] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York & London, 1990, pp. 186-88.
[23] Ibid. p. 187.
[24] Coles, Charlotte. 'The Question of Power and Authority in Gender Performance: Judith Butler's Drag Strategy' in *Gender: Power and Authority, eSharp 9*, pp. 1-2 DoA: 02.02.2018.
[25] Hansen, Kathryn. p.141

in order to cater to the demands of the audience and to enhance the commercial viability of theatre, the use of women performers on stage became imperative.[26] Thus, the appearance of real women on stage was not a part of any social reform, nor was it any attempt to elevate the position of women in society but a well calculated move or strategy on the parts of the directors and playwrights—all of who were of course men, to popularise their theatre companies and raise its commercial success.

Michel Madhusudan Dutta's *Shormistha* became the first full-length play to use women in lead roles which led to a storm of discontentment among many. There appeared strong condemnation through newspapers and magazines where the women performers were equated with 'prostitutes'[27]. Rabindranath Tagore opines Nandi Bhatia, 'broke a major barrier on *Valmiki Pratibha* where 'a maiden from a respectable family acted before the public.'"[28] In his *Mayar Khela* (1888), the women from his own household played both the female and male roles. In 1892 Tagore took a step forward by treating the tabooed subject of women sexuality in his *Chitrangada* and by 1926 in *Natir Puja*, he 'went to the extreme of writing a play without any male parts at all.'[29]

Omission of women can also be witnessed in the folk tradition of Indian Theatre like *Raslila, Ramlila, Jatra, Bhavai* and many more where women roles were played by men. As far as the roles assigned to women were concerned, they were more or less the same as in the Sanskrit plays. C. Casassas states that *Kutiyattam*, an ancient form of Sanskrit drama in Kerala is the 'only classical theatre form where women have played a role throughout history.' But in the 14th CE, *Kutiyattam* was performed inside the temples as a ritual and women were restricted to appear on stage. Male actors applied various theatrical techniques to enact the roles of women characters. It was only in the mid and late 20th CE that *Kutiyattam* was brought outside the temple area and women's role and presence was re-defined.[30] Kathakali is another art form which was exclusively a male domain, women were not allowed to appear on stage and so the male performers played female roles. Women's entrance into this art form is of very recent origin. An interesting fact about folk forms of theatre in India where women began to appear on stage is that it was more or less for recreational purpose. Forms like *Nautanki, Tamasha, Kutiyattam* where dance is the base of narrative, women are present as dancers. The characterization of the heroines of *Nautanki* is on the lines of the 'mythic prototypes from the Hindu epics in their potential to shape social conduct and serve as cultural ideals.'[31]

Thus, the latter half of the 19th century and the early 20th century was a period of transition when the public image of Indian womanhood was being constructed not only through literature and social experiments but also through the commercial media like professional theatre. Gender masquerades commonly found in these confusion about the demarcation between male and female. 'The female image thus presented perpetuated patriarchal control not only of the material female body but its visual manifestations.'[32]

[26] Sengupta, Debjani. 'Playing the Canon: Shakespeare and the Bengali Actress in 19th Century Calcutta' in Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz (ed.) *India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation, and Performance*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, USA, 2005, pp. 245-46.
[27] Loc. Cit. p. 147.
[28] Lal, Anand. 'A Historiography of Modern Indian Theatre', in Nandi Bhatia (ed.) *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader*, OUP,New Delhi, 2009, p. 35.
[29] Op.cit. p. 36.
[30] Casassas, Coralie. 'Female Roles And Engagement of Women in the Classical Sanskrit Theatre "Kutiyattam": A Contemporary Theatre Tradition', in *.Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol.29, No.1, Spring 2012, pp. 1-30. DoA: 14.07.2016.
[31]<epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp_content/women_studies/gender_studies/02.women_and_literature/13._women_and_theatre/et/6547_et_13et.pdf> DoA: 4.01.2018.
[32] Hansen, Kathryn. 'Stri Bhumika: Female Impersonators and Actresses on the Parsi Stage'. Op.cit. p.2291