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## Gender and Performance: Indian Perspective

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### Abstract

Gender Studies is not so new discipline in academia and it has contributed a lot in the epistemology of discipline of knowledge and better understanding of the people and society and challenged in its own ways the customs, rituals and the way woman subjects were seen and treated in the human society. Likewise, Performance Studies is almost a new discipline in the arena of knowledge and it is contributing in the knowledge society in its own fashion. Though, art and art practices should be gender neutral but it's not the actuality. The issues and challenges of Gender is as visible in Performance as in society. This paper tries to have an overview of the same in Performance discipline and particularly through the perspective of theatre in India.

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Richard Schechner has developed the Performance Studies as a discipline of social science through his remarkable theoretical writings during 1980s. He has tried to redefine the whole business of 'Theatre Studies' into 'Performance Studies' which has opened the discipline to various new fields apart from studies of mere theatre performances. He opened up the discipline of Theatre Studies by assimilating anthropological methods to the area and he teamed up with one of the leading anthropologists Victor Turner for the same. Richard Schechner has seen performance as 'Restored Behavior' which we accumulate through our



social-cultural conditioning. According to him, ‘Performance is ‘twice behaved behavior’ which means re-iteration of certain physical, vocal behavior of a person. As a human being, we are assigned to some roles and we were either driven to those roles through consent or coercion. Our physical-mental behavior has been guided by certain social-cultural customs and conditioning. This is how he defines Performance in his book *Between Theatre and Anthropology*;

Restored behavior is symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significances. These difficult terms express a simple principle: the self can act in/as another; the social or transindividual self is a role or set of roles. Symbolic and reflexive behavior is the hardening into theatre of social, religious, aesthetic, medical and educational process.

Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the 2nd to the nth time. Performance is ‘twice behaved behavior’. (Schechner 37)

These roles have been defined also according to our gender identity. We have been trained by our parents and social conditioning according to our subsequent gender identification during the early age of our lives. As our gender identification, we have been trained and groomed in our society differently. We are supposed to learn certain behaviors during our childhood that society thinks would be suitable for us as our gender identity. Gender plays a definite role in acquiring our behavior and social life. Feminist and Performance Studies scholar Judith Butler has worked a lot in this direction and tried to understand gender politics and behavior according to the performance theory and come up with arguments that our gender identity and behavior associated with it is also related to



social learning which we tend to achieve through ‘twice behaved behavior’. Butler argues in her book titled *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* that our conditioning to a certain gender behavior is the product of: “the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them” (179).

Thus, we can say that our behavior as a member of a certain gender group is not neutral but according to the conditioning and training imparted to us through social programming. If we all revisit our childhood or see our immediate social setting and parenting methods acquired by relatives and other known couples we can easily see these things happening around us. In societies like ours where feudalism is still in practice in values and ethics, we see that according to our gender identities, certain behaviors are being expected by our parents and immediate social setting. If some child or grown-up person doesn’t obey the social practice and behavior accustomed to his or her gender parents, siblings, relatives or other people around ask him or her to behave properly which directly refers to the ‘accepted norms’ of the society. This trend is very much visible in our dramatic traditions also. I will be discussing these with certain examples of the plays and performances in our theatre history and performing traditions.

If we refer to our ancient theatre tradition which is also known as the classical tradition of our country, namely Sanskrit Theatre and its texts and other epics we see that in many of these texts; roles and dialogues have been written according to the assumed behavior of the gender identities. If we analyze these texts we find that there is hardly any text available in



the whole era which has treated the female gender as equal to the male gender. There is hardly any Sanskrit text in which women have been made protagonists of the play. In all the Sanskrit plays male characters have been portrayed as leading characters of the plays with the sole exception of '*Abhijnanasakuntalam*' written by great poet-playwright Kalidas.

Another important thing, we see in these plays is that most of the female characters which occur in these Sanskrit plays are mostly passive characters. Neither they are the leading characters of the plays nor do they do anything on their own that develops or carries through the storyline. They are mostly treated as non-functional characters although in many of them, all the events or activities are done by their male counterparts. Even, if we see our great epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* the protagonist female characters like *Sita* and *Draupadi* do nothing apart from being with their male counterparts. The same thing has been reflected in the plays written in that period.

Many of these plays are romantic in nature where love is the primary element of the play. Even in the plays based on love stories in almost all cases, it is the hero who has fallen in love with the female and tries his best to get her by hook or crook. The female characters just reciprocate his love and at the max bleed some tears. Here, she doesn't have any say even in choosing her love or falling in love with his male first. Once the male falls in love with her she will reciprocate, which says a lot about the conditioning of female genders through these texts.

Surprisingly, in many of these Sanskrit texts, female characters are not treated as equal to their male counterparts. In many of these Sanskrit plays different languages are



assigned to different characters suiting their social status and gender identity. While, the king or any other noble character of the play, which is almost like custom in Sanskrit plays that only these characters could be portrayed as protagonists, and his ministers or Brahmins have been shown speaking in Sanskrit, on the other hand, characters portraying lower social strata or position and females characters of the play speak other language which could be 'Pali', 'Prakrit' or 'Aphhransh' according to the region and timeframe of writing the play. Even the strong characters like 'Queen' or 'Beloved of the King' can't speak the same language spoken by the leading male characters. This clearly shows that in social hierarchy female gender are treated lower than their male counterparts.

This gender-related bias is not visible only to the female gender in the plays; it has been seen many times in male characters also. Male characters or the protagonist of the plays are supposed to be masculine and performance-driven in the plays. These are the characters who have to keep all their faith in gender-divided roles and society through their acts. They were the carriers of the plot and storyline and they had to do it without showing any lack of their morals or ethics. The burden of being a hero is too much on these male gender protagonists and they don't have to show any weakness in that. They can't be shown desolated and weeping on the stage. This is why when great poet and playwright *Bhavabhuti* depicted lord Rama as desolated and crying for *Sita* after losing her to the tricks of *Marich* and *Ravana*, in his play *Uttarramcharitam*, in the 8th century AD, this was accepted by the Brahmins and Pundits of that society and copy of his play was being burnt at that point of time. It has been also said that the play *Uttarramcharitam* has never seen the stage for hundreds of years and it was revived on stage only in the modern era.



These examples from the Sanskrit plays show that gender bias was very much there not only in society but also in the representations of the characters portrayed in the plays by different writers. The roles, dialogues, and behavior of the characters used to be decided according to the conventional thoughts and the gender bias prevalent in society. This could be seen easily through the language, dialogues, actions, and other conduct of the characters portrayed in the plays.

Surprisingly, even in the present day society, the dogma related to gender can be seen easily in various media sources. Most of these have stock characters that behave according to the rule of the law and according to the good book of society. In that way, these media representations of characters are still catering to the same gender bias. It is visible in all the mediums of media and performance-oriented genres. This is happening not only in the third world or developing countries but also in the first world countries, which are supposed to be developed and should have shown less gender bias. In her book titled *Gender: the Basics*, Hilary M. Lips, has referred to one survey in which 101 top-grossing US films from 1990-2005 (S.L. Smith et al. 2010) has been examined. The outcome of the survey shows that even in these popular flicks representation of males has outnumbered the female gender in many ways. Here she writes and I quote;

They found that male characters outnumbered females 2.57 to 1 – a ratio that has not changed over the 15 years. They also found that female characters were more likely than males to be depicted as young, as parents, as being in a married or committed relationship. Males were more likely than females to be portrayed as strong and funny; females to be more likely to be presented as





physically attractive. Both male and female characters were likely to be depicted in gender traditional occupations. (Hilary M. Lips 13)

The situation in India is no different when we see all-around images and characterizations we see around us through different media vehicles. Whether, take the examples of advertising, daily soaps, talent shows, reality shows, music videos, films, or theatre performances, we see stereotypical representation of female and male gender in all these mediums. The images of the female gender which we see now and then everywhere depict them as sensuous and alluring as if she has nothing else to do in her life apart from charming the male gender. Even the performance scenario of this country is not void of these stereotypical imageries of the female gender. Although, there are some performances after independence in which the female gender has been depicted as strong characters even in those plays the audience feels at the end that the degeneration shown in the moral and ethical values of these characters is disturbing and this is going to harm the society in future or she shouldn't have done so.

First, I would like to mention a play titled *Aadhe-Adhure* written by Mohan Rakesh, a famous Hindi story writer and playwright, in this instance. In his play *Aadhe-Adhure* he shows a female character titled 'Savitri' who is married to some person for a very long time but still wants to elope with someone else four to five times, as she finds her life dull and responsibility-driven. Although the play strongly talks about her individuality and her quest for life yet every time at the end she has to compromise with his husband as her lovers dispose of her after a point of time. The play initially created sensation on the Indian stage when it was performed by certain groups as its protagonist character *Savitri* was challenging





all the moral-ethical values of the society through her act.

The other play that I would like to mention here is a play titled *Devyani Ka Kahna Hai*, written by playwright Ramesh Bakshi. The play has a character called *Devyani*, who plays the protagonist in this play. The play opens with a scene where *Devyani* reaches home with his new husband; they are looking comfortable and happy with each other. But within three days *Devyani* decides to walk away from this marriage as she did some times before also. This play has also a shock value for Indian society as in India female gender is supposed to bear all the adverse situations within a marriage, they are expected to suffer and even then try to carry on anyhow, as according to the notion related to marriage, 'women's salvation is in the feet's of her husband.' Through the character of *Devyani*, the writer has broken the stereotype related to the female gender. This play has been discussed a lot but very few groups have shown courage to perform it as the play challenges the value system of the society and they fear that society would not like the play.

So, with examples like these, we can see that some writers and performers are breaking the stereotype related to the representations related to Female and Male gender but still they are very few in numbers. Most of the performance scenes of this country are still catering to the stereotypical representation of the Female and Male gender bias.



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