

**GENDER BODY SPACE**  
**EXPLORING AESTHETICS AND POLITICS IN THE WORKS**  
**OF SELECT CONTEMPORARY WOMEN DIRECTORS**

(Amal Allana, Anuradha Kapur, Maya K Rao, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry)

In the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

**RAMAN KUMAR**



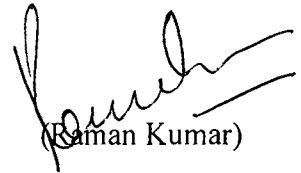
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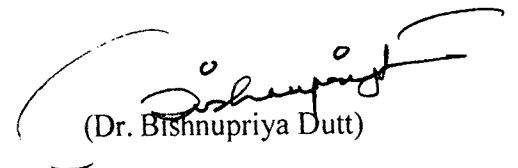
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**DECLARATION**

I declare the dissertation titled **GENDER BODY SPACE: EXPLORING AESTHETICS AND POLITICS IN THE WORKS OF SELECT CONTEMPORARY WOMEN DIRECTORS** is submitted by me at School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Theatre and Performance Studies is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full for any other degree or diploma to any other University or Institution.

  
(Raman Kumar)

This is to certify that the dissertation titled **GENDER BODY SPACE: EXPLORING AESTHETICS AND POLITICS IN THE WORKS OF SELECT CONTEMPORARY WOMEN DIRECTORS** is submitted by Raman Kumar at School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Theatre and Performance Studies is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full for any other degree or diploma to any other University or Institution.

  
(Dr. Bishnupriya Dutt)

*For my Parents*

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## Introduction

From the year 2003 that the Women's Director Theatre Festival called *Poorva* was started in Delhi. Twenty plays were being performed showcasing the works of Nadira Khan, Azeer Babbar, Anamika Haksar, Maya Rao, Amal Alana, Anuradha Kapur, Kirti Jain, Mansingh, Usha Ganguli, B Shailaja and others. Ironically *Poorva* remained a one-time affair and could not be revived again as is usual with other festivals. Though the works of women continued to make a mark in other forums but could not come under the banner of a specifically women's theatre.

In a few examples, Anamika Haksar takes up Dostoevsky's text *The Idiot* and is able to focus by making the female character as the protagonist of her play *Baawla*. In contrast, Anuradha Kapur's detailed work on *Sundari*, the female impersonator traces the journey of a child to a boy to a man and then to a woman. This fluidity of identification is then able to open other gender related issues. On the other hand, Amal Alana who documents the oppressed life of the Bengali actress in her play *Natigani* (2007), at the same time she picks up the theme of female bonding in *Sonata*.

There are other plays by women directors which go beyond women-related issues. Maya Rao's solo acts involving Kathakali, social Cabarets' and video installations pick up motley of subjects from environmental issues to marriage and the crisis in India. Kirti Jain's *Aur Kitne Tukde* (2003) delves into the brutal history of the violence of the partition for women. However, in spite of covering these wide varieties

of subjects, these directors still manage to keep the presence of “Woman” in their production. In the process they have challenged the stereotypical images of woman that of being a sacrificing mother, loving wife and indulgent lover.

It is not just the product but also the process which these directors use which has its significance. Anuradha Kapur in her recent work has heavily depended on collaboration and is inclusive of different media modes. She has collaborated with visual artists Vivan Sundaram, Nilima Sheikh, Arpita Singh, Nalini Malani and Ein Lall in staging *Gora*, *Umrao* (1993), *Romeo and Juliet* (1995), and *The Antigone Project* (2002). One of the other aspects of her plays is that they are episodic in nature. This she attributes again to the collaborative theatre by creating ‘visual- the image’ which uses very complicated technique and traverse various mediums like video, painting and sculpture. It is through these kinds of forms she constantly confronts the presentation of women and in her words “figure of woman on the stage.”<sup>1</sup>

Neelam Mansingh draws heavily from the Punjabi tradition and uses Naqqals (the female impersonators) in many of her plays to tell the story in her plays like *Kitchen Katha and Nagmandala* (2005). She has taken up many strong women characters in her plays. For instance, Doris Lessing’s *The Unposted love letter*, Tagore’s *The Wife’s letter* (2010) and Can Thumba’s *The Suit* (2007)

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<sup>1</sup> Kapur, Anuradha in *Muffled voices: women in Modern Indian theatre*, Subramanyam, Laksmi (ed), Shakti books,2002

Maya Rao is both a performer and actor. Most of her performances have been solo acts combining various genres like Cabaret, Kathakali and Video Installations etc. The point to be noted is that she is a trained Kathakali dancer and is known for her dexterity in performing male parts. This gives a unique standpoint and objectivity to her performance. In Manto's *Khol Do* (1993), she keeps alternating her character between the father and daughter till the time both the characters merge into one. Though there are no roles she takes up, which are consciously and exclusively oriented towards women's questions, her performance and allusions which she continues to make, satirize and ridicule the conventional role of a woman in our society. Amal Allana's Binodini, Erendira, Hadda, Rukaya, Noora are a few of the women characters, which she has explored in her plays.

What is also striking about the Poorva festival is that it seemed as if it deliberately evaded the usage of the word 'feminist theatre' and was recognized simply as women's theatre. The questions raised through these festivals were focused exploring themes that wished to develop a specifically gendered aesthetic. While the portrayal of woman on stage has been an underlying concern along with women related themes/issues such as domestic violence, rape and oppression etc, some plays ventured into broader social critique and developed more innovative ways of storytelling. In that process they were able to create shifts in focus and their specific individual perspectives of womanhood.

Tutun Mukherjee, in her foreword to her book *Staging Resistance: Prolegomenon to Women's Theatre* distinguishes between feminist and women's theatre or theater by



women. She argues that while Feminist theatre is vehemently classed as too political and subversive in the present context, the latter is considered as less political with more focus on “women’s perspective/experiences towards ‘consciousness raising’ to improve the social conditioning for women”( *Staging Resistance: prolegomenon to Women’s Theatre*, 14).

The select directors on whose work my research is based on are Amal Allana, Anuradha Kapur, Neelam Mansingh and Maya Rao. Two of these directors Anuradha Kapur and Maya Rao have been part of the late 70’s and 80’s agitprop feminist theatre and have been associated with grass root level intervention. Thereafter they have moved back to conventional proscenium space, which runs parallel to the movement of feminism to post feminism.

I think the more important question here is this movement from feminist theatre to theater by women. What lead to this transition and consequently what does it consist of? In the West, this has been slightly easier to explain as there was a distinct feminist movement with clear cut goals which slowly disintegrated and arguably moved to a phase called post feminism. It could be argued that it was fueled by the dictates of post modernism which promised a new kind of fluid identity. Postmodernism attacked the “assimilationist quest for uniformity” (*Facing Postmodernity*, 46) creating a space for multiple voices at the same time but also giving rise to a new phenomenon, which I will discuss shortly.

Mary E John in her book *Women's studies in India: A Reader* refers to the American binary of Nature/Culture which gets replaced by the binary of Culture/Politics in India. Culture could also be cited as one of the factors in the dispersal of the feminist movement because it highlighted the 'differences' and thus the women's collective was broken into smaller categories based on caste, class, race, religion etc. The 'Culture debate' also brings forth the issue of high and low culture which is deeply rooted in class consciousness. Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana in their essay "problems for a contemporary theory of Gender" (*Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian history and society*, 1996) depicts the problematic of this new 'visibility' of women which at one level celebrates the success of women's movement but at the same time manages to deflect and dilute feminist initiatives. The deflection or dilution is not necessarily counterproductive rather it has the potential to make some radical alliances. Tharu and Niranjana refer to politics of gender, caste and class through the dichotomy of citizen-subject and how women constantly move from one pole to the other leading to contradictions and mixed results. This upper class female respectability (citizen) as against lower cast licentiousness (subject) is what led to women protesting against Mandal commission whereas the success of the anti arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh show a positive alliance by mixing of feminist and class politics.

In this given context that one must understand the work of this new generation of women directors. I would like to explore how and if these directors, considering their positions of upper class female respectability, are able to critically engage with contemporary politics and confront gender analysis through their work. So far we have seen how the feminist

movement in India has changed its form and also how caste and class have complicated the gender question to create the complex scenario in which these new directors are creating their work. This scenario further gets complicated when we place these performances in relation to the market which has the capacity to shape and influence the 'product'.

Though India started to open up its economy slowly in 1980's, it was in early 1990's when it opened gates officially to globalization and liberalization policies. The work of the directors I wish to study needs to be looked into this context. Postmodernism was not only able to create a space for multiple voices but also opening negotiations with the bigger phenomenon of 'consumerism'. Postmodernism can be seen as outcome of high capitalism and therefore beneath its finer nuances one can see the power play of the capitalist economy, which has the capacity to make everything into a 'commodity' and consequently ready to be consumed. The market becomes the deciding factor in this case instead of state. Alike modernism, postmodernism also does not function in the same way in India as in the West because of our historical ambivalence towards modernity itself. Lyotard refers to the collapse of the grand/meta narrative in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. It is this break of authority, which allows these directors to challenge the institutional, hegemonic or closed interpretation of the texts. Anuradha Kapur's play *Antigone project* is able to build connection with Antigone and the Gujarat riots. Neelam Mansingh's interpretation of the story of Phaedra only through the conversation between Phaedra and her maid without any male cast is her attempt to reinterpret the canonized text.

It is also vital to note that the rise of fundamentalism and communal forces along with liberalization policy. Ilina Sen refers to this trend as “Global context of communalization of politics” (*Feminism in India*.146). We would then need to locate the performance of these women directors in this context. How are these directors are able and sustain a positive dialogue when the fundamentalism is increasing with currents issues like honor killing, rape, sexual violence etc.

### **Literature survey:**

It is important to look into works of these directors from the perspective of ‘Third Wave Feminism’ with specific focus on feminism in India. Its dialogue with second wave feminism within and outside India brought new contemporary and localized interpretations. Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana in their essay “Problems for a contemporary theory of Gender” (*Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, 1996) discusses the changing gender identities with class consciousness. *Feminism in India* edited by Maïtryee Chaudhuri has a number of essays which show the differences which can be marked in Indian feminism from its western counterparts. Mary E John in the same book refers to the “combined legacies of the colonial encounter on one hand and the dominance of western theories on the other” (*Feminism in India*, 64) which brings us to the dichotomy of culture/politics. Ilina Sen’s article in the same book “Woman’s politics in India” (*Feminism in India*, 206) then moves to the contemporary scene and questions the parallel rise of fundamentalism with neo capitalism. Malini

Bhattacharya's essay on "Changing roles, women in people's theatre in Bengal" in the book *Theatre in colonial India: Playhouse of Power* is insightful as it delineates the process of dealing with new nationalism along with women's and their involvement with IPTA. These histories depicts how 'class' played an important role in mobilizing some of the developmental projects and its limitation to only the upper class 'society woman' which runs parallel to the profile of some of the contemporary women directors who can be grouped into a very 'mobile, upper middle class'. *Women's studies in India: A Reader* edited by Mary E John, further elaborates on Women's movement post independence and its slow movement from passivity to action. Gail Omvedt in the same book connects social feminism to the upcoming women organizations and how it had mobilized some grass root intervention in 1970s. One of the most important discussions in third wave feminism has been around sexuality and the 'body' itself. An important work on this area in the Indian context has been by Seemantini Niranjana who in her book *Gender and Space: Femininity, Sexualization and the Female Body* explores gender in the ritual-cultural realm and suggests strategies for formulating the basis for female agency within space-body matrix. In the same context Uma Chakrabarty's book *Gendering Caste through Feminist Lens* examines the linkages of female body and sexuality and its usage to control and maintain the hierarchal and unequal society. It would be interesting to see that how this matrix of body and space comes into play by the work of these directors not just by studying the portrayal of women characters on stage but also by examining the whole process and the people involved in these productions.

What is very crucial in all these mixing of gender with class, caste and new nationalism is the sense of 'control' and 'censorship'. Therefore feminism in India in eighties has delved deeper into the legal and state interventions and its relationship with feminist politics. *Recovering Subversion; Feminist Politics beyond the Law* by Nivedita Menon brings this issue in forefront through the comparative study of relationship between feminist politics and legal systems of France, US and India. In the similar line of thought, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan analyses the operations of state, state makers (who have traditionally always been men) and the impact of some of the developmental policies which had adverse affect on the state of women through her book *The Scandal of the State: Women, law and citizenship in postcolonial India*.

Janelle Reinelt's essay, "Navigating post feminism: writing out of the box" in *Feminist Future? Theatre, Performance and Theory* and *Third world feminism: a critical exploration*, edited by Stacey Gills, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford are some of the books I would be referring to in the context of my work.

Postmodernism as a term has always been difficult to define and therefore under its umbrella many different and contradictory ideas co exist which further complicates its function. Lyotard's *The Postmodern condition: A Report on Knowledge* depicting the new reality as the breakdown of the grand narratives to its working mechanism and influence in the capitalist society by Fredrick Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* are crucial to understand the influence of post modern elements

in the work of these directors. Sara Ahmed's two books *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (1998) and *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000) are also relevant as she explores new paradigms between feminism and postmodernism. She critically analyses how the postmodernism takes over the concerns of feminism and dilutes its potentiality. Closer home Meera Nanda's *Prophets Facing Backward: Postmodern Critiques of Science and the Hindu Nationalism in India* though throws light on rise of popular Hinduism but is vital to understand the market dynamics and the building of a brand image. Kwame Anthony Appiah article: "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" raises some important issues pertaining to identity politics and the influence of consumerism, which makes every art work into a commodity. Pierre Bourdieu's work through his book, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* would help us to check the making and usage of the symbolic capital which these directors have generated over the years.

The understanding of contemporary identity politics and postmodernism would not be complete if we do not trace it to the roots of the modernity which India negotiated with through the course of its 'nationalist' history and adopted post independence. India continued to safeguard our 'culture' and 'tradition' and at the same time encouraged the intrusion of technology and science. Sri Aurobindo calls it as "Selective assimilation", which means not an eclectic synthesis but "subordination and transformation of external elements" so as to "harmonize the new element with the spirit" of our own culture" (*Foundations of Indian Culture*, 32). Partha Chatterjee points out in his essay "Nation and its Woman" (*Nation and its Fragments: colonial and postcolonial histories*) the

dichotomy of home and the world which had to be kept alive in order to maintain the distinction between the inner spiritual self and the outer materialistic world which Nationalism demanded. Thus women were chosen as protectors of the sacrosanct home, the spiritual culture and they were given a selective access to modernity in the form of education. Nirmala Banerjee in her essay “Whatever Happened to the Dreams of Modernity” depicts that how recommendations of WRPE (Women’s role in Planned Economy) was silenced and how budgets continued to shrink for issues women’s education, welfare all compromised for economic growth.

The last and the most important reference would be the work done in the field of theatre off/for/by women along with its historiography. One of the most important works which directly deals with feminist politics and theatre is by Elin Diamond. In her book *Unmasking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* she discusses the ‘theatre specific’ theory called ‘Gestic Criticism’. Drawing from both feminist theory and the Brechtian theory of alienation, she focuses on Brechtian gest of the feminist performer, particularly in the way that ‘gestus’ creates a specific relation with the spectator. By retaining her own historical subject position separate from the character and using ‘gest’ to ‘read’ the social attitudes encoded in the play-text, the feminist performer enforces an awareness on the spectator of her own temporality. Though not always applicable to all the plays by women, it would be interesting to see if there are specific ‘gestus’ which are being developed by these directors and if at all these works could be seen from the perspective of gestic criticism. Dr Anuradha Kapur who is a director herself has tried to collate and analyze these works as feminist strategy in *Modern Indian theatre: A Reader*, edited by Nandi Bhatia, she analyses the feminist strategies of the specific women



directors. Additionally, the book, *Muffled voices: women in Modern Indian theatre*, along with other writers focus on various aspects of women portrayal on stage. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker in *Theaters of Independence: Drama, theory and urban performance in India since 1947* bring out elements of realist drama and its limitation in dealing with women's issues. She cites examples of Neelam Mansingh, Saoli Mitra, Usha Ganguli, Anurdaha Kapur and others who have tried to place the women's experience at the center of the practice by destabilization of patriarchy, textuality and modernity. The other important work to be cited is by Dr Bishnupriya Dutt in her article "Actress stories: Binodini and Amal Allana" in *Staging international Feminism* edited by Case and Aston assesses that how the contemporary women director have tried to break the colonial Sapphic body codes in the performance. In *Engendering Performance*, Bisnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsri have also tried to bring in limelight marginal or alternate history of women performers in theatre and dance and how it disrupts the dominant narrative in places. This can be related to the contemporary Directors who choose to show these marginal stories on stage and reinterpret them in their own way in the contemporary scene. Another important source of information comes from *Poorva* festival (2003) organized by Natrang Pratishthaan in association with National School of Drama and ICCR. Apart from 20 performances from India and abroad, it also held a 4 day conference on Women's directors work seeking to create or identify contemporary theatre in language from their traditional roots .

## **Theoretical Intervention**

While there have been reasonable amount of intervention on the works of these women directors, I feel that there is still an important need to relook and reevaluate these in fresh perspective. There has not been any specific study on the works of women directors in reference to India entering the phase of globalization or liberalization which adds its own politics to them. These policies not only just focused on economic growth, capital investments, and emergence of new markets but also had great impact on feminist movements, state policies and market dynamics. It is this interface I would like to capture in my research.

In order to locate and analyze the works of these women directors, I would like to trace its relationships with the prehistory i.e. involvement of women in nation building. Partha Chatterjee's framework of how nationalism and nationalistic discourse not only built sharp line of demarcation in its cultural essence to defy west but also in the process alienated masses from it, thereby marginalizing the role of women in the modernist project by emphasizing the image of Indian woman with domestic conjugal bliss. The modernist project precipitated then into industrialization, developmental/welfare programs all aiming at economic growth. There was continued focus to safeguard our 'culture' and 'tradition' and at the same time the intrusion of technology and science was encouraged.

This ambivalent modernity was then grappled with, by many progressive directors like Ebrahim Alkazi who brought a certain materiality in his performance. He also happened to train and perhaps influenced the next generation of actor/directors including women directors in his detailed style of bringing material to life and not always cater to any 'spiritual' or 'transcendental' notion of India. Traces of his work can be still found in the work of these directors but over the period of time they have been able to develop their own politics and aesthetics. One of the attempts they made related to issue of body was by attacking/breaking the breaking colonial, hegemonic body codes imposed on women. The classical body which was eternalized in the form of the image of the nation (Bharat Mata) then was ruptured by them. Neelam Mansingh's constant usage of 'Naqqals' in most of her plays then brings a different body on the stage pitted against the regular naturalized bodies which is able to break in the fixed codes on stage. Along with main narratives, the story of marginalized body is also delineated. For instance, Maya Rao's usage of Kathakali and specifically borrowing from the roles of male protagonist Bhima or Ravana in some of her plays brings up a unique identity on stage.

India opened its gates to the phenomena of globalization in 80's as mentioned earlier. At the same time the agitation/reaction towards the implementation of Mandal commission and other caste based politics also had an impact on feminism. The question of gender demanded to be complicated by other categories of identity like caste with greater urgency. Issues of national (dis)integration, caste and class violence, the question of 'development' as well as the systemic oppression at the peripheries of the nation-state

also emerge with greater critical force at this juncture. Maya Rao uses Godhra riots<sup>2</sup> (*Deep Fried Jam*), Manipur women protest<sup>3</sup> (*Heads are what we walk into*) as some of the performative texts in her performance. There is also a conscious attempt to break away from realist, coherent, phallogentric theatre language. Anuradha Kapur's interventions in this regard, for example, include usage of episodic structure and video installations to create a rupture in dominant narrative. The question is then how these strategies do work on stage and how far they are successful when practiced?

There is a distinct aesthetics which is emerging out of these works which cannot be compared to some of the radical feminist's works of West, yet the work also does not fall upon any specific traditional path. The problem arguably lies in the way this new aesthetics seems to be more uniform and homogenized in its functioning. It is not just in the form of 'play' on the stage but also in the form of spectatorship it enjoys. A new 'imagined global audience' comes into play, which is ready to consume this product. There is a constant tussle between the politics of the play and its marketability which arguably introduces the process of 'streamlining' and adding polish which in turn might lead to a certain degree of dilution and digression. A good example could be Amal Allana's *Nati Binodini*, the cast on stage and their performance whose presence I argue is overpowered by white glass stage with moving curtains robbing it of its potentiality. Several comic scenes which intrude in the action of *Nati Binodini* leads to instances of parody, perhaps cause the dispersal of the core emotion of the performance. These are

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<sup>2</sup> 2002 Gujrat violence was a series of incidents including Godhra train burning and Naroda Patya Massacare

<sup>3</sup> 2004, naked protest by women in front of Assam Rifles force

few instances which depict that how postmodern elements are making their presence felt in these performances by creating a space for popular culture or technology.

One of the most important themes of the feminist/identity politics has been its critical engagement with the theme of 'subject' itself, specifically a single, male, coherent, subject. Different theorists have tried to break this dominance of this coherent subject in many ways. On stage also this theme has been challenged in many ways. One of the simplest techniques which have been used is the usage of split bodies wherein one single character is broken into many characters which gets played by many actors. Amal Allana's *Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother* is a good example where in we have multiple Erendiras. Allana uses the same technique in *Nati Binodini* where Binodini is divided into many Binodinis. Similarly in Neelam Mansingh's *The Wife's letter*, the main character Mrinal is divided into two, one male cast (denoting Naqqal) and the other as female cast. She then goes to repeat the same split body technique in Lorca's *Blood wedding* wherein every important character is divided into two. The point I am trying to make here is that how an ideological position has the full capacity to transform into an aesthetic intervention can be gauged by these examples.

Amal Allana's production of *Erendira and her heartless grandmother* picks up a Spanish short story from Marquez, locates the play in Rajasthani vernacular and not Hindi, uses Latin American music along with old Hindi film music. The play did its rounds in the festival circuit in India and traveled to London with subtitles can be cited as a good

to see how various forces come into play together and develop a new aesthetics-  
and a multicultural and yet uniform target audience.

of the most direct interactions of these works with the state has been through their  
with National School of Drama. Though most of these directors have their  
groups, there is still a lot of dependence in terms of funds, space etc.  
there is another negotiation happening at this level. Therefore, these directors  
with challenges through the forces of market and state both. This is a market  
I would like to suggest, constantly harps upon substitution of old by new and  
as the 'difference', transform these performances too in a commodity ready to be  
assumed. Pierre Bourdieu calls this as 'objectification' and it is impossible to evade or  
this process.

have tried to contextualize the contemporary women director's performances so far and  
rationale behind this research interest of mine. Consequently some research  
are already emerging out of it. Let me paraphrase them and they can be  
sized into three buckets.

## **Research Objective:**

- To explore the dichotomy of women's theatre and feminist theatre in the works of these directors: Questions like what gets identified as feminist in their work, are they just women directors or feminist directors, what gets accepted as 'feminist' in present day performance and what gets left out? Does this selective feminist intervention constitute politics or aesthetics? This would also give me a chance to explore the relationship these directors share with their predecessors and explore the question of how the feminist legacy changes its forms.
- To explore the relationship of these women directors with Nehruvian modernity and the State: What kind of negotiation these directors have with the modernist project? Is there an effort put in to feminize the post colonial modernity project which has been built on the idea of nationalism without creating a post modernist disruption? How do the state and their works influence each other? What kind of negotiation takes place when the state controls the funding, space, capital flow for some of these productions? Exploring the post independence materialism in terms of space, properties and even labor which goes in the making of these performances. What kind of relationship do these works have with state, market, capital and liberalization?

- The third objective ties in with all the above objectives is to identify specific examples from the works of these directors which deals with subjectivity of women or has the potential without being the victim of the dominant cultural field of production. How far can they sustain a radical politics before the particular strategy turns into sheer stylistic intervention? How are these directors pushing the theater paradigms to a new level and how successful are they in their effort?

## **Methodology**

Apart from the reasons given above, of the reasons of selecting these directors is my familiarity with their work by being the part of a live audience. The primary source of my research is their works itself which I would need to watch and analyze them. My focus would be mainly on the performances produced in the period which concerns my research and would be selecting at least 5-6 plays by them. In the case of Anuradha Kapur, I will be looking into plays like *Gora*, *Umrao*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Lao Jiu*, *The Antigone Project* and *Sundari: The Actor Prepares*. In the case of Neelam Mansingh, I would be looking into: *Nagamandala*, *Kitchen Katha*, *The Suit*, *The Unposted Love letter*, *The Wife's letter*, *Little Eyolf* and *Blood Wedding*. For Amal Allana, I would be referring to her works: *Himmatmai*, *Sonata*, *Nati Binodini*, *Erendira* and *her heartless grandmother* and *Metropolis* and finally in the case of Maya K Rao's work, I would be looking into *The Job*, *Khol Do*, *Deeper Fried Jam*, *Heads are what we walk into*, *Quality Street* and her latest *Ravannama* (A brief of synopsis, dates have been given in the end).



Apart from this, I would be conducting extensive interview and would be including the personal narrative of the director in my dissertation. A lot of oral material of this kind would feed into my research.

In order to map the audience response for some of these productions, I would initiate informal discussions with my colleagues, friends, teachers who have witnessed these performances. Lastly, I will also be referring to the reviews which are published in daily/monthly journals, posted online as they would allow me to get the critique's and the audience's view point.

## **Chapterisation:**

### **1. The Body and the Text:**

This particular chapter would delve deeper into the specific works of the selective directors and cite examples to answers questions like how and if these directors are able to destabilize the single coherent male subject and how successful have they been in their effort. How do 'female bodies' on stage come into play and if they break the conventional codes? Is this corporeality then create spaces for the act of resistance. Whether it is through objects used by Neelam Mansingh or Anuradha Kapur's usage of video installation or usage of split bodies as a technique, the questions raised is that how successfully they are able to depict the

politics of it. At what juncture these techniques fail to produce results and become just another aesthetic apparatus? Which particular strategies are these directors using individually and collectively and how effective is it in practice? What is the politics of their works and if the intervention is only at the level of form or content/ideology and how it gets executed. This chapter would primarily explore the relationship between the work of these directors and their predecessors. Along with it, the chapter would try to analyze the historical paradigms which had an impact on the women's/feminist theatre thereby making reference to Nehruvian modernity and traces of it in the contemporary works of these directors. The newly formulated social, economic and welfare policies, post independence will be brought under study from the perspective of its impact and influence on women's issues and theatre consequently. Most of them had their theatre education imparted by Ebrahim Alkazi himself who was a progressive theater director and shared the modernist vision and passed this legacy of ideas and training. How do these directors grapple with these ideas in the present scenario and what changes have come up then?

## **2. The Space and the Style:**

This chapter would try to analyze the space of action i.e. where the performance takes place and how it is structured? What kind of proscenium politics come into play by staging these plays, not just by the way spaces are created on the stage but also the selection of spaces which these directors explore through their work. I would also like to explore some of these urban spaces where these works are

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performed and how do they influence the performance itself. Can some of the urban spaces like some pockets in Delhi could be termed as postmodern spaces, where these works are being produced and staged and thereby the creation of another cultural hegemony which is location based and the politics of it. This would also try to trace the 70's grassroots, agitprop interventions feminist theatre and its breakdown and how some of these directors moved into the conventional space and continued to perform. The movement from feminist theatre to women's theatre would be included. Apart from space, the chapter will also discuss the politics of style in their work. Which kind of style is emerging out their work and what is its relationship with the politics of it? The relationship of form and style as they both are mutually dependent on each other, how does this equation work in the work of these directors?

### **3. The Reception and Spectatorship:**

This chapter will explore the influence of the market and how these works get commodified and circulated in spaces like festival circuit. If there is a certain packaging and 'customization' which these performances undergo in order to make it more audience-friendly? How the usage of technology influence the space and consequently the performance? The state influence through its policy and capital flow would be brought under study and assess if the happy marriage is consummated between global money and state funding. In the same context, I would be also covering the emergence of star director which precedes over the

group itself. I will also like to explore Appiah's idea of how 'postmodern' transforms everything into a commodity to be consumed and if this is applicable here. The notion of individual vs collective, private vs public will be looked into through their work which will open up larger contemporary debates of the changing roles of State, market and civil society. This chapter will use Pierre Bourdieu's framework of field of cultural production and the notion of taste and distinction to analyze the work of these directors. How does an audience receive this work and what is the relationship between author (director) and the audience?



## The Body and the Text

Text and the body have been two important tools of theatre and many times it is difficult to differentiate between them because of their interdependence on each other. A good example of the interdependence would be of a dance performance transforming into another genre of dance theatre where text (written or oral both) have been explored to explore meaning, form and structure. The select women directors under analysis have delved into these areas in their work extensively. The only performance which is almost non-verbal amongst all their works is Maya Rao's *Khol Do* (2007) based on a short story, which gives me an interesting take off point to explore the relationship between the body and the text. I remember, as an audience<sup>4</sup> and all others who came up to watch the play were strictly told to read the four paged brochure before entering the hall. We were reminded at least thrice to read the same and before the play an entire summary<sup>5</sup> was fully read in Hindi and English. Yet it is difficult to say if Maya Rao's performance did correlate with the written text she had provided. Some of the pertinent questions that emerge out of this incident is that are they interchangeable, 'body as text' and 'text as body' by virtue of banishing the text altogether from performance?

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<sup>4</sup> Referring to the version staged in 9<sup>th</sup> Bharat Rang Mahotsava (2007)

<sup>5</sup> An excerpt from the brochure: "Khol do a short story by S H Manto, is set against the communal violence in 1946-1947. A father has lost his daughter in a crowd of fleeing people on a railway station. All he has left is dupatta. Eight young male volunteers offer to find his daughter. How is the old man to know that they have already found her but are not through with her yet? The performance seeks not tell the father to develop the range of physical actions and emotions that are part of the atmosphere of such a harrowing experience. In fact not a word is spoken throughout the performance. As the father continues to search for his daughter, it grows in intensity and in depth to a point that where he begins to find her in his body and finally in heightened world of dance. Most gestures do not signify anything in particular but are open to different interpretations, depending upon the response of the viewer." (NSD Bharat Rang Mahotsava, 2007)

Would my viewing have remained incomplete without reading it? These questions do not have very definite answers, but what I am sure of is that my viewing of this performance was influenced by the text which was provided to me. Not only from audience point of view, even from director and performer's point of view the usage of the short story as text and then transforming it into a performance shows that how they are interdependent on each other. While literary analysis has enabled us to perform textual analysis, the real body in its physicality still eludes its exploration and analysis in many ways. Not only that, the text used on stage and the way it is used also requires a different methodology to be understood, interpreted.

Academic discussion about the body is more or less polarized into two competing groups: those who 'read' the body as text and those who situate the body as physical body. While I am very tempted to mention that I will be specifically focusing on 'body as body' i.e. the real physical body on stage, I am also aware that I would consciously and unconsciously use a theoretical tool to analyze and read the same, hence the two polarities of body as text and body as body in its physicality can not be avoided. Therefore 'reading' the body as text not just textually but reading of it into a complex web of social, cultural and political framework is not just unavoidable but rather crucial. But how does one approach the 'body' remains to be an important question. The number of scholarly writings on body has significantly increased in various disciplines like literature, anthropology, history, social sciences, but there is still dearth of analysis with respect to embodiment, theatre, or stage actors.

In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault contends that “the body is directly involved in the political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; invest it; mark it; train it; torture it; force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (*The Foucault Reader*, 191). The body here is written on “mark[ed]” and is legible because it “emits signs”. Theatre gives us a chance to explore both the aspects of body: ‘Body as’ and ‘Body is’. New Scholars like Sally Ann Ness who interrogate the phrase “gesture as inscription” (*The Inscription of Gesture: Inward Migrations of Dance*, 1). She argues that the body is not written on but is rather written in. While there has been an awareness of limitations of textual or just aesthetic analysis of a performance, it has not been easy to build a coherent methodology around it which could be attributed to the limitation or limitlessness through liveness and ephemerality as innate character of any performance.

The way one can approach this subject could be, to look into the corpus of works of these directors as one unified body, almost watching it from the periphery and cut through to reach the epicenter of the real stage containing different kind of bodies. Though it is not very fair to bring all these directors or their works under one umbrella of ‘unified body’ considering that the works of these directors have been different from each other in form, style, content, yet at the same time there is a subtle attempt to group them together to exhibit a new/different kind of theatre which has developed in past two decades. Their association with National School of Drama and contemporary urban



theatre scene situate them in the same ‘cultural field of production’<sup>6</sup>. The other factor which also needs some consideration is the attempt to create a discourse<sup>7</sup> around the work of these and few others which creates this ‘unified body’ and yet maintain a difference.

### **Locating Body and Text in Past**

Before approaching this unified body of work, it is important to see the relationship it did share with its predecessors and how it influenced the work of these directors specifically in the context of body and text.

If one takes period of Independence struggle, around 1940’s, as the entry point to review this debate, one is confronted with the disjointed theatre history. Two important theatre histories, one needs to look into is the Parsi theatre and theatre propagated by NSD under the guidance of director, Ebrahim Alkazi.

Parsi Theatre which was flourishing in early 20<sup>th</sup> century was also undergoing a turmoil and one of the point of contention amongst these leading companies was about incorporating the female body on stage. The issue of female respectability for those who

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu’s term. To be discussed in detail in 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter

<sup>7</sup> There have been number of writings, books, talks, seminars and speeches about the work of these directors. Anuradha Kapur has extensively written on contemporary Women’s Theatre and others too. The reference to these books and speeches will keep appearing in all these chapters

were against it and on the other side, the commercialization, in terms of attracting more audience, consequently more profits were pitted against each other. Some of the names of the productions like *Gamre ki Gori* (The fair Village Belle), *Bholi Gul* ( Innocent Flower), *Bholi Jaan* (Innocent Dear)<sup>8</sup> show that how women were objectified and profit seemed to be the only motto. No doubt, that it did find its calling in Bollywood cinema to reach larger audience, but the formulae of the Parsi plays remained to be same.

On the other hand, in early 1960's Alkazi and theatre of NSD dissociated itself from commercial theatre and was heavily influenced by Western school of theatre and specifically aligning to British theatre approach<sup>9</sup>. One can say that the important contribution from women's perspective which these performances possessed was to give prominence and visibility to the female actor. In fact some of these actresses like Uttara Baokar, Surekha Sikri, Rohini Hattangadi and others are some of the best and well known names till today in terms of their competence in performing versatile roles. Some important plays which were performed then were Mohan Rakesh's *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* (1962-63), Ibsen's *Guriya Ghar* (1962-63), Euripedes' *Trojan Women* (1966-67), Anouih's *Antigone* (1967) but do these performances are able to destabilise the dominant narrative is an important question to be investigated.

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<sup>8</sup> Source: Hansen, Kathryn "Making Women Visible: Gender and Race Cross-Dressing in the Parsi Theatre

<sup>9</sup> With a disdain for commercial theatre and consequently Parsi theatre, it began its development on the lines of European, specifically British drama in the language of Hindi. It is to be noted that Parsi theatre was also a residual product of English theatre, picked up through the travelling troupes who used to perform in India. That is why, many of the Parsi plays were abridged or inspired version of Shakespeare plays.

Two major theatre interventions of relevance in the given context are: the use of psychological realism<sup>10</sup> and the other was its dependence on Text. Referring to the latter one first, text, whether it was Parsi theatre or Modern theatre at NSD, text never did lose its importance. One simple pattern which could explain this better is the rise and importance of playwrights in 60's and 70's. Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Dharmveer Bharti, etc. found a new identity through their plays. Ironically, there were hardly any female playwrights of the same stature. One can say that it was the legacy which was being continued from Anglo American paradigm, the colonial past where text preceded over body. The text which is considered to be derived out of intellect and therefore mind, gives it a privilege position. Therefore the binary of text and body runs parallel with the binary of mind and body which has been consistently and coherently emphasized through philosopher like Aristotle<sup>11</sup>, Descartes<sup>12</sup>, etc.

This binary can be further extended to the binary of man and woman where man shares the privilege position of text. This dominance of text in a performance can be also read as the dominance of patriarchy. Probably, this has been a direct area of intervention by Women directors, who have tried to deconstruct the text through various means in their work.

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<sup>10</sup> Techniques of realism and naturalism to attain greater loyalty towards 'real life', systemized by Constantin Stanislavsky (Moscow) to train actors Aristotle (384-322 BC) associates mind with intellect and reason and therefore a privilege position

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle (384-322 BC) associates mind with intellect and reason and therefore a privilege position

<sup>12</sup> Descartes philosophy that Mind and body are distinct, now called as body-mind dualism

to flourish in separate forum, the divide between theatre and dance became wider falling into the same binary, where theatre equated text, mind, man and modernity and dance to the other half of the binary.

The legacy of psychological realism in NSD and emphasis on text was passed on to the students year after year which meant that Amal Allana and Neelam Mansingh who are also the product of NSD were also exposed to these methods. While Anuradha Kapur did not take formal training in NSD, her early association with theatre group like Dishantar and consequently, Om Shiv Puri, who was an Alkazi's disciple himself, well known actor and director must have allowed her to interact with such methods. Maya Rao, who is a Kathakali dancer, also started to act without formal training from NSD and did number of plays with actors such as Manohar Singh (again Alkazi's student, well known actor). One wonders, if these directors did find a certain limitation in a method like this? Perhaps yes, but not all of them must have reacted to it in the similar way. Maya Rao is more forthcoming and she says that she found it limiting and while different kind of improvisation was interesting and fun, it could not satisfy her. Anuradha Kapur acknowledges that Alkazi provided a grammar to actors but also adds that she disagrees with his grammar.

Probably, this was the area of intervention which women directors tried to deal with in its given grammar. But this need of intervention was also felt by other directors in late 70's and 80's which was realized through the form of Theatre of Roots. It took the debate of

Alkazi's other intervention has been again through the selective borrowings from Anglo-American paradigm and i.e. of Psychological Realism. He used this method in many plays of different kinds, which allowed a certain agency to the actor to foray into deeper layers of gender. But realism also meant that reality of its time where the narrative did not become the narrative of women, but a narrative of progress and development which had to include women who by being the cultural custodian of the nation signified the 'traditional value' which had to be maintained with modernity.

This brings in the other dichotomy, from text/body, mind/body, man/woman to modernity/tradition through which the notion of respectability, morality was deeply inducted. With a social scene like this, a woman's body in its full prominence and visibility through psychological realism could have become the means to endorse the heteronormative order by adhering to respectability position. For example Dharmveer Bharti's *Andhayug*, where the role of Gandhari, (Dhritrashtra's wife, and mother of Kauravas, played by Uttara Baokar which is still being rotated in the form of photographs in art circuit as a visual marker of fine acting and great direction of Alkazi,) depicting her decision of blinding herself as a choice in many ways get eulogized denoting the sacrificial nature of woman as mother and wife.

What is also important to note here is that the way, the use of psychological realism marginalized the dancing body from the stage at the pretext of realism which did not leave much scope to accommodate it. While classical dance as a canonized text continued

the binary, tradition and modernity from its past and reached out to regional performances to create a new kind of inter cultural hybrid. Neelam Mansingh, who was already exposed to Alkazi's style of theatre making, also got the opportunity to work with B V Karanth, in Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal who was one of the important figures of Theatre of Roots. What an intervention like this did was to bridge the gap and bring the debates between different binaries on the stage. The inclusion of folk dance, songs thereby a dancing body on stage complicated the privilege position of theatre body. The text was also complicated as it mixed languages, dialect and stories which created mini narratives of its own based on the given culture.

The women directors also were influenced by this particular method and brought in the 'folk' in their performance in their own way. Neelam Mansingh explored the culture of Punjab whereas Maya Rao brought in her own training of Kathakali in her performances. But the regional performance was not their cultural field of production. They were deeply rooted in ever changing, rapidly progressing metropolitan cities like Delhi. While Neelam Mansingh is based in Chandigarh, which is another planned city, her proximity geographically and culturally with Delhi is maintained with her association with NSD.

Amal Allana in one of her interviews articulates her position vis-à-vis the different theatre movements.

I'd seen Indian theatre as a foreigner, regional theatre as an outsider. Doing a course in East Germany helped me to put things together. Brecht helped me to understand Indian theatre

objectively, analytically. I spent time looking at Kabuki and  
Noh in Japan.” (The Hindu, Dec,11, 2005)

In 1969, Amal Allana received a scholarship from the former GDR<sup>13</sup> government and had a chance to study with various theatre groups from East Germany. Anuradha Kapur completed her PHD in 1980 from University of Leeds and Maya also did her MA in Theatre studies from the same university. So with exposure and experience in working with the in house theatre models, international exposure and academics, they moved to the proscenium (after a small stint with street theatre, specifically in the case of Anuradha Kapur and Maya Rao). The subsequent chapters would be discussing the details of spatial structure and their cultural field of production, it has become evident that these directors felt a need to make an intervention.

### **Feminist Theatre or Women’s theatre: The Process of Naming**

But what did this intervention mean for them? Is this a feminist intervention? If it is so which kind of feminist intervention is this or is it an intervention in theatre history itself? The other question could be that is this a sheer assertion of their individual identity through creating a ‘difference’ from their predecessors and contemporaries?

Amal Allana in her essay: ‘The Development of Contemporary Indian Theatre: An Overview – Part- 2’ written for Goethe-Institut 2009 has devoted a small paragraph on women directors and has named it as ‘Gender based theatre’ In her words:

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<sup>13</sup> German Democratic Republic

On the heels of the folk theatre phase, from the mid-1980s onwards, we see the arrival of two or three generations of women directors who very actively and swiftly made their mark on the theatre scene with some startling new work: (13) Neelam Mansingh, Amal Allana, Anuradha Kapoor, Maya Rao, Anamika Haksar, B. Jayashree, Tripurari Sharma, and from among the younger generation, Zuleikha Chaudhri.

Before arriving to the point I would like to draw from these lines, one needs to also be watchful of the naming of the directors. Would naming herself along with her daughter (Zuleikha) be considered as a self propagation and assertion of self-identity?

Anuradha Kapur in her lecture at JNU in a seminar on 'Feminism and Theatre' also used parallel examples of performances of these women directors who could be called a 'new voice'<sup>14</sup> in theatre. My selection of these particular directors itself is also in question in the given context.

This is a paradoxical situation. At one level there is this constant defying of labeling it on pretext that all these directors are different from each other, yet one can not deny arguably that there is a subtle categorization or naming process which is in progress. There is also a reluctance in calling it as Feminist theatre, in fact even breaking from the conventions of being called 'feminist' a new identity gets asserted, which arguably Amal

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<sup>14</sup> Apart from all these directors she also mentioned the names of Anamika Haksar, Kirti Jain



Allana is doing by calling it 'Gender Based Theatre'. In the same paragraph she says further

Highly articulate and of unmistakable urban sensibility, and exposed to international theatre legacies, these women have adopted an intercultural approach, which makes their encounter with the folk/traditional assume a new dimension. They no longer see the need to be regarded as grassroots 'Indian' as they stand unselfconsciously on the threshold of being propelled into a multicultural internationalism with the folk, tribal and popular theatre traditions feeding into their global consciousness and vocabularies as so many ethnic varieties. It appears that these directors are able to confront the new in their work without resorting to the crutch of tradition to authenticate their efforts. (Ibid)

Thus, there is a constant effort to create a self identity. Judith Butler in her essay titled *Critically Queer* examines the risk of seeking identity categories.

The expectation of the self determination that self naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself : by the history of usages that one never controlled ,but that constrain the very usage that now emblemizes autonomy; by the future efforts to deploy the term against the grain of the current ones , efforts that will exceed the control of those who seek to set the course in the present (*GLQ:A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*)

While one can not predict the future but the exclusionary principle on which this identity has been set is clearly visible. The word 'multi cultural internationalism' and 'global consciousness' seem all-accommodating yet the phrase 'no longer see the need to be regarded as grassroots Indian', 'or without the crutch of the tradition' shows the mechanism of 'exclusionary operation' on which it propounds its identity. There is an effort to detach the 'Gender based theatre' from 'grassroots Indian' or 'traditional performances'.

Would this process of naming many directors who are eligible to be part of this group, might disqualify the few other women directors to be named within? For instance women directors like Moloyshree Hasmi<sup>15</sup> who still works on women's issues through her street theatre or even Kirti Jain<sup>16</sup> who does not appear in this list usually who also has worked on some powerful women's role like Ashapura Devi's *Suvarnalata* or her play *Aur Kitne Tukde* citing story of women involved in partition based on Urvashi Butalia's writings.

Elaborating the naming process further, while there is no direct 'laying claim' (*Critically Queer*, 20) to name with its advantages and disadvantages,<sup>17</sup> but this loosely strung group

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<sup>15</sup> M Hashmi, associated with Jan Natya Manch. 'Wo bol uthi' could be an example of her work related to women's issue

<sup>16</sup> Kirti Jain, Ex Director, NSD and is an important women director. While there has been many instances/citations where in all these names are taken, her name come across more towards Hindi theatre in general. She herself in an essay on women director cites all these names including a discussion on her play "Aur Kitne Tukde" which in many ways is similar to the work of these directors.

<sup>17</sup> Advantage/disadvantage: "in this sense, it remains politically necessary to claim to "women"...lesbian precisely because of the way these terms, as it were lay their claim on us prior to our full knowing. Laying claim...reverse will be necessary to refute homophobic deployments of the terms in law, public policy,...to mobilize the 'the necessary error' of identity (in Spivak's terms)..." (*Butler, Critically Queer, GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian studies*, 20)

of women director's work, can be viewed from the perspective of performativity too. Taking cue from Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler and stretching the Speech-Act theory,<sup>18</sup> arguably the work of these directors then can be termed as explicit performative act<sup>19</sup> where in by the virtue of direction, design, settings, interpolations of many kinds their performance come into being. The utterance in this case might not be necessarily in statements but constitutes of various verbal, non verbal acts, the stage design, light and sound design and others to not just 'perform but confer a binding power of the action performed' (*Critically Queer*,17). This binding power is not attained through the will or intentionality of the subject rather through citational legacy. The obvious question which emerges out of this thought is: What is this citational legacy, which gets cited in the case of these women directors? Which citation of authority do they quote/perform through their act of direction? This echoing of past interpellation brings all the directors (men and women) together who could have been their predecessors/teachers and may be the place which often gets cited is an institutional space of 'National School of Drama'. This could be arguably the accumulating force of authority they cite through which the binding power of their work comes into force.

Despite the conditioning which history does to its contemporary usage, one can not fore go that the every repetition of performative act has the capacity to be unique which could be based on intentionality which stands a chance to succeed as Derrida mentions.

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<sup>18</sup> Austin (1962) Speech act theory in the context of Performative Utterance as a sentence not just has the capacity to passively describe a given reality but also can change the social reality being described. Eve Sedgwick argued that all kinds of speech, word sentence are performative in nature. Also described 'transformative performatives' which create an instant change of personal or environmental status

<sup>19</sup> To utter a explicit performative sentence is to make explicit what act one is performing

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not identifiable in some way as a "citation"...in such a typology the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and systems of utterance. (*GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*)

In this sense the performative act of direction by women director has some agency and the possibility to turn against the constitutive historicity, develop their own identity and contribute to the resignification process.

### **Identifying Subject**

The dichotomy of Subject and Object runs parallel with the binary of Text and Body where in text/subject and body/object create two extremes. Is this intervention by women directors then the intervention of attaining the subject position of a woman through the positioning of the body as text? From the feminist perspective or for that matter, from the context of identity politics also the concept of subject/object has undergone many changes. Radical feminism identified patriarchy as the source of the oppression, i.e. men as the subject, where as women a sheer object to be used by men. Laura Mulvey further explored this idea through her analysis of cinematic male gaze and how cinema

(Classical Hollywood cinema) inevitably puts the spectator in masculine subject position, thereby women in cinema become the 'object' of desire, providing the leit motif of erotic spectacles.<sup>20</sup> Even director Anuradha Kapur in her writings has mentioned the effort which she has made through, "...presenting woman as sexualized persona and not just as a 'sexualized object'" (*Muffled voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*, 32) in her plays. We shall see the efficacy of the same later in this chapter.

The issue of the subject has been further complicated by the inter-mixing of gender and class. A subject which had been a doer/observer has itself been turned into an object by being observed, done and subjected to. This unitary, coherent autonomous subject was challenged by many thinkers such as Marx, Althusser, Freud, Foucault and others. Michel Foucault challenged this modern construction of subjectivity and as per him subject come into being through 'discipline' and 'power'. In other words, subject get produced, shaped and recognized through historical condition, preexisting culture and linguistic practices. This dethronement of the 'sovereign subject' also has implication for gender studies. Simone de Beauvoir goes another step ahead, and argues that it is female body which is 'marked' in linguistic, biological term with an embodied corporeality where as masculine body remains unmarked through negation and disavowal with 'disembodied universality'. Luce Irigaray, takes a different take on it and opposes this idea by showing that both the modes of being marked and being unmarked/marker is the byproduct of the signification process which is phallogentric in nature and therefore 'marked off'. She asserts that feminine 'sex' is a 'linguistic absence', difficult to be

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<sup>20</sup> Taken from her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"

in the present grammatical codes denoting masculinistic discourses. Further the subject is problematized when whole fight for the 'subject position' itself became less important as the idea of 'woman' being a gendered subject which only gets produced by the systems of power, robbed her of her agency. Judith Butler further complicates the subject making process by questioning the biological term 'sex' itself along with gender and shows that they are also sociological 'constructs', mutually dependent on each other, which further compels us to think that the body itself becomes a 'construct' rather than given. She appreciates Beauvoir for depicting the female as 'marked' and 'othered' within the masculinist discourse but she also critiques her residual belief in the hierarchy of 'person' followed by 'gender' and moving back to the 'failed reciprocity of symmetrical dialectic' (*Gender Trouble*, 31). At the same time despite, Irigaray acknowledging the hegemonic influence of the masculinistic discourse, she tends to show this as one, united whereas it could differ as per culture, cast, race, etc.

Discussions are vital to my research as it shows that how the body discourse has been intertwined with issues of class, gender, sex and culture thereby creating a very fluid or a fluid feminine identity which is always in flux. My decision of then using the concept of 'body as body' is also maligned as it seems that the physical body is the result of a deep reification process of gender and identity. Some very important questions which erupt out of these situations are: If the body has been already claimed by the cultural, social and linguistic interpellations, how and how far can one reclaim the body (on stage)? If this 'sex' which is not 'one' (Irigaray), and remains unrepresentable due to its linguistic absence then how can one represent the

unrepresentability of the female body? If the language is phallogocentric, how could one develop or represent the body in the given masculinist signification economy? And most importantly, how and if all of these would precipitate into the physical body which is present on stage and even if it is not, which new or even old idiom would they come into play?

Some direct strategies which became obvious are of 'role reversal', bringing more women to the fore front in terms of more employment, digging women histories/stories, etc. Ebrahim Alkazi brought this visibility on stage. Some of the fine female actors had the opportunity to share the stage with male actors and the prominence was not given just on stage but also off stage by giving them important administrative roles. Both Uttara Baokar and Surekha Sikri have had a chance to run the NSD repertory company. The women directors also continue to have the emphasis on the visibility matrix through various strategies.

Amal Allana dramatizes the story of 18th century Bengali actress, *Nati Binodini* (2007) adapted from autobiography called *Amar Kotha*. She further weaves the stories of Ibsen women from different plays in the backdrop of terrorism in her play *Metropolis* (2009). Neelam Mansingh explores the story of Chand Kaur through her love and life in *Kitchen Katha* (2003). In her other plays like *Fida*, based on Racine's *Phaedra*, she chooses to have full female cast (barring Naqqals) to explore the relationship women share among themselves. Maya Rao, a performer herself makes many allusions in the plays with varied

female characters. In *Ravanama* (2011), she tries to rewrite a mythical history or toys with the possibility of Sita being the daughter of Ravana. Anuradha Kapur takes up the courtesan narrative and deconstructs it in *Umarao* (1994). Not only digging histories but choosing specific plays/stories and adapt them in their own way which allowed them explore and challenge the question of gender and the changing role of a woman. Maya Rao explores the themes of 'passing off as man/woman' through her solo performance *The Job* (1997) based on a short story of Bertolt Brecht. Further in *Khol do* (1993) based on Manto's story, she explores the pain of the losing a daughter wherein the role of father/daughter merge with each other. Anuradha Kapur picks up *Antigone Project* (2003) in the back drop of Godhra riot to challenge the suffocating power regime. Neelam Mansingh uses Ravindranath Tagore's short story in *The Wife's Letter* (2011) depicting the story of Mrinal negotiating with her orthodox Bengali family. Amal Allana picks up Marquez's short story *Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother* (2003) to exhibit the ingrained exploitation of woman as sexual object. These are some of the examples of digging /rewriting histories and I shall come back to discuss the effectiveness of it later, I further wanted to highlight the role reversal which is taking place wherein we have these women directors occupying the chair of the director, which has been always a male dominated profession. Can we call this as a 'success' or some kind of representation of feminine energy which has come on its own? Would this be the reversal of the role in terms of female as 'subject', as 'doer'? One also need to take into consideration the complicated layering by the mixing of the gender with class, not just in the role of women directors but also in the understanding of the concept of 'subject' itself.



From a Social Feminism<sup>21</sup> perspective, where class, capitalism substitutes or extends the opposition of patriarchy, further complicates the situation. One cannot forgo the class or social position they possess which enables them to have a certain negotiating power but at the same time limits their agency. One would need to be slightly critical of this success or visibility of woman directors today as Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana<sup>22</sup> point towards this dilemma of ‘reading’ the new visibility and success of women which could be problematic. All of them have been associated with the premiere training institutes of India called National School of Drama in various capacities. Two of them Amal Alana and Anuradha Kapur hold posts of stature, by being Chairperson and Director<sup>23</sup> respectively of NSD. Neelam Mansingh also holds a position of in department of theatre, Punjab University, where as Maya Rao is currently a professor in Shiv Nadar University and have been the member of many academic councils. Most of them are alumni of NSD and all of them had national/international exposure in the world of theatre. They, along with their regular profession have their own independent theatre group<sup>24</sup> and have been regulars in all national/regional festivals along with annual theatre fest organized by NSD itself called Bharat Rang Mahotsav.

While being the women directors and by being in influential posts of state run institutes they attain arguably a tentative subject position as a doer, as an agent, but this position

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<sup>21</sup> Focuses both on public and private sphere of woman’s life and argues that the oppression lies in the social, cultural and economic condition

<sup>22</sup> In the essay “Problems for a contemporary theory of Gender” (Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society, 1996)

<sup>23</sup> She finished her term in 2013

<sup>24</sup> Vivadi: Anuradha Kapur, Theatre and Television Associates: Amal Allana, Vismayah: Maya Rao, The Company: Neelam Mansingh

brings with it a specific constitutional matrix, social recognition which precedes and influence the 'subject'. This agency is derived through the cultural capital they gain from the institute, (sometimes economic capital too) which will be discussed in detail in third chapter. In other words can one negate the possibility of the very position of subject which could become a deterrent and has the capacity to pull them back to dominant modes of working? Isn't 'the possibility of alliance with other subaltern forces' (*Problems of a contemporary theory of Gender*, 233) becomes difficult to forge in a deeper level and if at all this is happening in the given situation? Anuradha Kapur in her Nataraja Ramakrishna Memorial lecture, 2013 at University of Hyderabad summarizes the deep influence of Ebrahim Alkazi and B V Karanth have had on the institution itself which remain to be a guiding force, a citational legacy for them. Would then, as celebrated stalwarts of theatre and also as directors of NSDs, these two patriarchs remain to be a subtle hindrances?

Maya Rao in her play *Non Stop, Feel Good Show* (2012) states in a confessional mode: 'We are state actors' capturing the limits and boundaries in which they function. These limitations will be more visible as I proceed to the epicenter and begin with the analysis of 'subject' on stage.

With these questions, I am now trying to engage with the works of these directors. The very first play in this context I would like to discuss is Anuradha Kapur's *Sundari: An Actor Prepares* (1998) based on the autobiography of an early 20th century female

impersonator Jaishankar Prasad Sundari, active in Bombay from 1901 to 1931. The play does not have a plot as such and remain episodic in nature which itself is a strategy to defy the realist mode of narratives. Jaishankar Sundari has been portrayed by three male characters namely Jitu Shastri (main narrator), Harish Khanna and Jagat Singh Rawat<sup>25</sup> who constantly juggle between many shades of Sundari. At one level, they are actor themselves preparing for the role of Sundari, who was a male but did female roles, on the other, in the process of being Sundari, they explore the blurred line of distinction between, Sundari, the man, the female impersonator, the actor. Not only that, a play within a play: sequence of Nal Damyanti, Harish Khanna performs the role of Nal instead of Damyanti asserting himself as a male actor. In this way one can see multiple layerings of the character, which create a certain uneasy position for the audience as it is difficult to fix a 'subject'. It seems as though the subject is always on the run and difficult to fix it at a given position. It gets further complicated with the presence of female actresses whose melodramatic woes acts parallel to Jaishankar's style of impersonating female characters thereby raising questions of authenticity as, which one is true or are there many truths existing together. The same gets echoed in the play when Jaishankar (Jitu) says to one of his/her ardent fan/patron that: "Aap mujhe nahi par mere charitra ko chahte hain" (It is not me, rather it is the character I play, you desire.)

Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* mentions, "Intelligible genders are those, which in some sense institute and maintains relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire." (*Gender Trouble*, 50) It is in this 'unintelligibility'

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<sup>25</sup> All of them are NSD trained actors

that the performance questions the reification process of gender and identity and makes constant efforts to deconstruct the set notions. Right from showing the actor's preparation on stage for their role through their make up, draping sarees on the stage, undressing on the stage (thus questioning the biological construct too) with layers of painted curtains wherein some performances are behind and some in front of it, Anuradha Kapur participates in the role of gender making on the stage which remains to be in progress. In another perspective this is the strategy of 'framed bodies'<sup>26</sup> which she uses through various kind of cross dressing, intermixing of different genres like painting, music, play within a play, etc. It seems that it is the norm of preparing, making up, costumes, settings, draping/undraping of saree through which gender comes into play rather than the sex of the character/actor.

Madhushree Dutta's film on the same subject, based on Anuradha Kapur's rendition of Sundari further adds layers in creation of subject/identity by exploring rehearsal spaces, practices, research methodology, the curtain making by (Neelima Sheikh and Bhupen Khakkar) in the process of creation of identity/subjects. This creation of identity has been possible because it does not focus on the finish product rather it is the work in progress which has been captured. The film depicts that how with interaction with director and discussion influences the making of paintings as curtains. In one of the scenes, Anuradha Kapur herself is shown with Harish Khanna discussing few portrayals of women by Ravi Verma, where in, they choose a certain gesture which the actors could portray. This scene

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<sup>26</sup> Coined by H Gilbert and J Tompkins which states that how bodies are framed for the viewer's consumption. Costumes ( cross dressing) being an important tool in framing of the bodies

again acts like a reminder to the normative power of gender making. These already inscribed, written, citational gestures through their repetitions create the performative of the woman.

Amal Allana's position amongst these directors is slightly different. Anuradha Kapur in my interaction with her, commented that Amal to a certain extent has been still aligned with the theatre model of Ebrahim Alkazi, her father. But at the same time she was also exposed to Brechtian theatre in Germany and also studied some of the Japanese forms. Her earlier plays have been based on the text based, realist, modern plays like *Mahabhoj* (1982), *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* (1981) but with plays *Himmat Mai* (1993) based on Bertolt Brecht's play *Mother Courage* and Satish Alekar's play *Begum Barve* (1996) she tried to break the rigid mould of her earlier influences. While her dependence on the play script remained constant, she tried to bring in the intervention in terms of body. In *Himmat Mai* she casts Manohar Singh, a celebrated theatre actor. She takes the example of the same play in her essay "Gender Relations and Self Identity: A Personal Encounter" published in the book called *Muffled voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre* and explores the concept of 'Ardhnarishwara', 'An androgynous character'. She mentions that there was a conscious decision to "not to totally transform into woman rather... demonstrate one". The anecdote by Allana in the same essay of Manohar Singh preparing for the role is insightful as he starts to observe/work on the female body and female activities like the gait, draping of a saree, carrying a child, being pregnant etc and then move into women's psyche vis a vis her mood, relationship with men, desire etc and then at the same time he had to 'play' a woman's role, not 'be' a woman. All these instances perhaps directs

the performative gender nuances which itself define 'woman', almost acting like a set of norms and rules, which if followed could qualify one to be socially accepted 'woman'. Allana calls it a 'stylized repetitions' of acts" through which the gender comes into being within the social order. Probably it would have been interesting to see on the stage the whole process of creating and choosing of these norms by Manohar Singh on the stage, by laying it all cut, dissected to expose the reified, hidden codes, naturalized gender identity, instead what is presented on stage is a coherent, unified role of Mother Courage played by Manohar Singh. Amal Allana herself realizes the limitation of it by calling her performance as "seamlessly stitched" and not as 'raw' as her other performances, but she still maintain her belief in the concept of Ardhnarishwara and find it liberating containing both male and female values together.

While discussing the notions of Ardhnarishwara, Manohar Singh's preparation for the character gives one a chance to look into the process. The anecdote itself is able to depict that the rehearsal process is a detailed and elaborate one with Amal Allana. Her other performance Nati Binodini also had a long gestation period with elaborate rehearsals. One can say that making of the character in its full details could be again an influence from Manohar Singh's style of theatre making as he emphasized on development of character through detailed research and study and method of psychological realism but in Allana's case the influence of Brechtian gestus is evident here. Manohar Singh observes and works towards finding specific actions to exhibit femininity and not become a woman.

Moving back to Ardhnarishwara, this seems to be a problematic as one delves deeper into the myths of it, firstly because of its coherence, a sense of unity which itself could be called as phallogocentric. Any iconography of the same in the form of picture or paintings/sculpture has this perfect balance, defined binary between male and female values in full precision and symmetry. Furthermore, within this perfect balance a certain hierarchy is maintained throughout, which Ellen Goldman in her book *The Lord who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* points out through these lines “The right superior side of the body usually is the male Shiva and the left is the female Parvati; in rare depictions belonging to the Shaktism school, the feminine holds the dominant right side”. Not only that the meaning of the word itself ‘Ardhnarishwara’ has been put as ‘Lord who is half woman’ and constantly denotes Shiva hence male. It seems as though the female values or select attributes have also been appropriated to remove the ‘lack’ by the masculinistic mythical fables and interpretations. In this sense, one would then need to be careful in its usage, interpretation as one could fall back into “failed reciprocity of the asymmetric dialectic” (*Gender Trouble*, 13).

It is probably the same kind of appropriation which continues in *Himmat Mai*, where in a male actor is able to grab a very strong female role like Mother Courage. Amal Allana goes ahead and again repeats Manohar Singh in the role of Begum Barve, again treating the subject in androgynous way. It also becomes a test of his acting skills to impersonate a woman being a man critically and without losing his credibility. Perhaps, the phallic structure seems to be intact and a unity is maintained, thereby the equilibrium of the stage, character and most importantly subject does not get broken rather gets fixed from

one point to other. Arguably, it tends to get commodified too through the subtle exploitation of a 'Star value' of Manohar Singh takes precedence over the character of Mother Courage.

In contrast to Manohar Singh's female impersonations Maya Rao, as a performer and director gives herself a chance to impersonate the role of a man in her solo performance called *The Job* (1993) based on a short story written by Bertolt Brecht. The story revolves around a widow who after losing her husband impersonates him to get a job of a night guard. The story ends on a tragic note as the secret is revealed, the job is lost and she is forced to get into an uncertainty leading her to a life of destitute. Maya uses the technique of storytelling while she continues to do along with the daily chores she does on the stage. It is never clear in the performance if Maya herself is doing these chores as Maya, or as character that will have to go for her/his guard duty in the night. In her interview, she said that the daily chore were vital to her play as she could collect energy and impetus to become a man. The wearing of the overcoat seems to be a *gestus*<sup>27</sup> which brings a shift in her character denoting her transformation from a woman to man. Her wearing of coat also in many ways brings in the notion of Elin Diamond's Gestic criticism drawing from both, feminist and Brechtian theory of alienation. Maya Rao with her household chores is able to retain her subjective position as a working woman in the society and it is through wearing of the overcoat, she make this gestic intervention where spectators are exposed to the social attitudes encoded in the performance Maya Rao. It

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<sup>27</sup> An acting technique, introduced by Brecht, 'gest' to 'read' the social attitudes encoded in the play-text, performance. This could be a gesture or a scene itself



brings in an awareness of the gender making process and its dependence on the cultural signs like wearing overcoat. Interestingly it is her voice which reveals her secret and becomes the reason of her fall.

Another important theme which emerges from this performance and text is the theme of “passing off”. In this context, it is also interesting to note that in most of the citations on Maya Rao, points towards her dexterity to play male roles especially of Bhima and Ravana through Kathakali. This perfection would mean that one could ‘pass off’ as another gender easily without notice. This ‘passing off’ is different for it is neither close to the concept of Ardhnarishwara, nor the concept of Drag (will explore the same later), because here the impersonation is done in full and in such way that appearance becomes a reality and this reality is attained through the careful selection of surface gender attributes which have become performatives with constant repetitions over a period of time. The actor or any person in the process of passing off carefully observes the reification process of gender in making and tried to perfect it. Maya Rao’s performance of *The Job* in that sense is vital to be looked into, though she never tries to pass off as man in its entirety, the character loses her ‘passing off’ mode because of her ‘voice’ but Maya who uses this very unconventional ‘voice’ even challenges that as she could pass it off as a man’s /woman’ voice as per her choice. Her roles of Bhima and Ravana have been perfected by her by mastering those Kathakali codes which denote male figures. In my interaction with Maya Rao she elaborated on her Kathakali trainings and said it was a matter of chance as her guru picked her to do male roles, which in Kathakali dance remain to be valuable/prized roles and this transformation lies in the composition and

usage of energy which would make a man or woman. These energies not necessarily would correspond with the social construct of gender always but there are certain male and female codes within. Analogically, then same codes can be seen as regulatory codes through which gender is governed and made intelligible.

Wittig's argument<sup>28</sup> that in the matrix of the compulsory heterosexuality, the feminine is always marked whereas masculine is unmarked and therefore belongs to the category of universal, further throws light on the issue of 'passing off'. Feminine which is marked then becomes copy-able (therefore we have more number of female impersonation by men and not vice versa) whereas masculine, the universal in many ways eludes its copiability. Hence, Maya Rao subverts this universal by copying the male attributes, whether in *The Job* (1997) or through her Kathakali dance/drama. The 'passing off' also questions the gender attributes which is considered to be natural. It exhibits in open the entire process through which the gender gets neutralized, It also challenges the power dynamics, for if it is the juridical system which produces subjects/gendered bodies in a binary coherence of masculine and feminine (to maintain heterosexual hegemony) then a passing off as a man (specifically as it belongs to universal) has the capacity to subvert and disrupt the binary hegemonic order<sup>29</sup>. Interestingly, Michelle Cliff adds another angle to it, by showing that how 'passing off' is always in need of silence. It is the speech which has the capacity to reveal the supposed true identity. By not speaking then would also mean that one is in support of the present dominant order. While I agree with Cliff,

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<sup>28</sup> Source : Butler, Judith *Gender Trouble*, Pg 24

<sup>29</sup> That is why 'passing off' can come under punishable crime at the pretext of fraud. We already have some laws on 'passing off one's good' to guard the owner's interest

in this given context this passing off (specifically on stage) seems to be challenging the dominant order by reducing it to a copy-able commodity and reveal the whole process of meaning making through performatives.

*The Job* (1997), in the same period was also taken up by Anuradha Kapur and Nalini Malini, where in the whole process of the 'passing off' as a male has been explored. She almost rebukes gender/sex making process through her actress (Ritu Talwar) who uses French bread and onions as genitals in her trousers to become a man. While no video copies of the same is available now, some of the photographs exhibit the dependence on installation and visual media on stage. Can this be called an attempt to break the hegemony of the word (text) by infusing multiple parallel texts through visuality (painting, installation) and body is being forced on the stage?

### **Dancing Body**

Maya Rao amongst all these directors is one who creates her own text through body and the play script too. *Quality Street* (2010) is probably her only performance which takes up a play script directly. On a different plane one can see the exploration of 'subject making in processes' by Maya Rao in her play *Khol Do* (1993) a non verbal, solo dance performance. She uses one of Manto's partition stories of the same name, picks up from it and focuses on the pain and loss of the grieving father who has lost his daughter. The performance uses minimum properties on stage and it is only some bangles and piece of cloth through which father begins to identify the daughter. The portrayal of a man

performed by Maya Rao slowly and subtly turns into female and the issue of pain and agony is central to the performance that the gender of the mourner becomes redundant. The audience members do not get any clear marker to see her as male or female, always in flux.

It also brings in the 'dancing bodies' which was negated in the earlier theatre which was based on psychological realism and is used as another tool to negotiate the set dynamics and as a site of cultural and social identity. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Meyerowitz in their chapter titled 'Body Politics' have found that "...dance often functions as a mode of empowerment for the oppressed characters, particularly when their attempts to articulate themselves verbally have been compromised by the imposition of an alien language." (*Postcolonial Drama, Theory, Practice and Politics*, 240) This has been aptly demonstrated by Maya Rao where she uses Kathakali to express the pain and loss of the deceased (father). It is not just theatre which gets enriched or breaks the tyranny of text but at the same time in order to be accommodated in its theatrical form the form also undergoes a change. Maya Rao in director's note for the same play says, "Kathakali has a codified idiom of mudras with specific meanings. Here however, I am looking for a physical language where every action may resonate with a multiplicity of meanings. The eventual form is not Kathakali, yet inspired by it." Thus authenticity of Kathakali is negated, rather it is the mixing of these dance forms with other theatrical sign-systems which creates a hybridized form with multiple layering of meaning.

Can the use of dancing bodies also not be hegemonic and instead of breaking the set dynamics of the society might just end up confirming it. Dancing bodies have been used by

other directors too. Amal Allana uses dancing bodies in *Erendira and Her Heartless Grandmother* (2003), *Nati Binodini* (2007) and *Metropolis* (2009). She uses Gilles Chuyen<sup>30</sup> as the choreographer for *Erendira* and most of the sexual act is portrayed through dance which allows her to depict the sexual violence on the stage. Though the dance is of no particular genre or not easily identifiable, what is important to note that the dance accentuates more of pelvic movement and focuses on 'lower body stratum'<sup>31</sup> and connects to the core structure of grotesque and carnivalesque. In the same play she used another dancing body wherein all the actresses wear traditional mask of a courtesan and dance to a popular old Hindi song and copy a routine Bollywoodian courtesan dance thereby commenting and exposing the state of women in an Indian set up vis-a-vis the western one. But at the same time, would these dancing bodies of the same kind might become the assimilation of the dominant order which these bodies are actually trying of defy?

Taking examples from other directors such as Neelam Mansingh who uses dancing bodies in form of Naquals and their traditional songs and dance set against her pool of urban actors brings in another aspect of the dancing body. In plays like *Yerma* and *Kitchen Katha* we get glimpses of dancing bodies together in most of the scenes depicting a public space like a bazaar, festivals, etc. In many ways it depicts an attempt to retrieve traditional culture and bring them at par with other canonized dance forms. Interestingly dancing bodies have been heavily appropriated in Indian cinema and have been an

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<sup>30</sup> A French artist, dancer, choreographer

<sup>31</sup> Bakhtin's collective term for digestive and reproductive systems including the orifices and protuberances through which body maintains its connection with outside world ( Body Politics)

integrated part of all Bollywood and regional films. In fact the films have special item songs and dances without any specific relation to the narrative of the story. Therefore, for an Indian audience the use of dance as a device of alienation in the Brechtian sense becomes tricky to handle. What works in *Erendira* effectively becomes in many ways another dramatic intervention in *Metropolis* with much choreographed group of dancers. This is where it seems that dancing bodies do get consumed by the popular culture and become a consumable commodity rather than being a metaphor or the overlapping of dramatic and political meanings.

#### **Split-Bodies and Courtesan Narrative:**

continue to remain with resignification of the body and development of various narratives around it. One of the prominent strategies which has been shared by most of these directors is of 'Split-Bodies'. Plays which I have already discussed contain this technique. Anuradha Kapur uses three male actors to explore the character of Sundari. Anand Allana uses four actresses to explore the character of Erendira/Grandmother/other characters interchangeably and Binodini in her plays *Erendira and her heartless mother* (2003) and *Nati Binodini* (2007) respectively. Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry uses the same technique in *Blood wedding* (2011) wherein all the main characters have been played by male and female character both. The split-body concept primarily challenges the concept of a coherent, stable, central subject, the doer, the hero which has been idolized by the phallogocentric narrative structures. In this context I would like to

begin with *The Wife's letter* (2010) directed by Neelam Mansingh. Based on Rabindra Nath Tagore's short story called *Stree-Patro*, the play depicts the self awakening tale of Mrinal, the woman, wife and daughter in law located in a Bengali household. One of the earlier feminist writings, the protagonist in this play/story designates her life history by writing a letter to her husband. It deals specifically with death of her unborn child and female bonding she establishes with Bindu. Neelam Mansingh casts Ramanjit Kaur, female actor and Vansh Bharadawaj, male actor for the same role of Mrinal. Both of them participate in this episolatory story by portraying the role of Mrinal, there by breaking the importance of the subject. There is this multiplicity of voice which is created through their interplay. There is a certain stubbornness of not just casting a male for a female role but also that one can not see any conscious effort from Vansh to get into or emulate the woman to become Mrinal, (Vansh has stubble on his face, no effort to modulate his voice; dress very sketchy) almost in the lines of *Himmat Mai* in Manohar Singh. This reluctant impersonation is loaded with other subjectivities if one does not take into account this particular performance in isolation rather the whole body of work by Neelam Mansingh wherein she has extensively used Naqqals, but not in this one.

Before I explore this further, let me also introduce Naqqals in words of Neelam Mansingh herself: "The Naqqāls are musicians and traveling bards who sing songs, dance, and improvise while telling a story. In their performances, they lampoon situation in effort to subvert existing attitudes. Along with their repertoire of story-telling techniques, raucous humor, and wild singing, the mainstay of their tradition is dancing which is performed by female impersonators. (*The Naqqals of Chandigarh:*

*Transforming Gender on the Musical Stage*). Coming back to *The Wife's letter*, in my opinion Vansh, the actor through his impersonation not only is impersonating Mrinal, but it could be also read as impersonation of the impersonators (naqqals). So, we have three levels of overlapping, one as a male actor, then the female character (Ramanjit) and also the naqqals, the impersonator. Because of this overlapping the relationship between Bindu<sup>32</sup> and Mrinal becomes ambiguous; the bonding takes heterosexual and homosexual tone all at the same time. Thus audience never gets to enjoy the traditional one subject, one subjectivity on the stage.

Strikingly, Amal Allana also uses the 'split body' technique with varied results which further brings the question of how these strategies like 'split body' after a certain point again get assimilated into the dominant order and subjectivity is reduced to a fixed and objective meaning. I think it is the same which happens to these two plays done by Amal Allana in different ways. In her play *Erendira and her heartless grandmother*, based on Marquez's story of a grandmother who forces her granddaughter into prostitution, she used four actresses to essay the role of Erendira and other characters interchangeably. For example in one of the scenes all the others impersonate the role of men as customers to Erendira and take part in a sexual choreography. While there are other important stage devices which has been used like uses of excess in terms of colour, make up, music, costumes the narrative is more fluid and it seems that in the process of story telling any one could take any role in the play as it proceeds. The only male actor also becomes

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<sup>32</sup> Character of the story 'Stree Patro' who become very closed to the main character Mrinal



Erendira<sup>33</sup> till the time the role of male protagonist is developed. Thus the multiple bodies on the stage cut through any hierarchy and make it a very accommodating space. The subjectivity of these multiple subjects further gets layered with the use of masks which has another referent, pointing towards (almost rebuking, perhaps) the subject making through Hindi Cinema. In contrast Nati Binodini which is more of researched work, chronicling the life story of the prominent actress of late 19th and early 20th century, Binodini which she explores through five actresses to essay the single role of Binodini.

Bishnupriya Dutt in her essay “Actress stories: Binodini and Amal Allana” in the book *Staging International Feminism* has explored that how the same story over the years have been dramatized, generalized find a ‘radical break’ in Allana’s play. She finds the performance ‘multifaceted, dealing with theatrical, feminist, colonialist and nationalist issue’ and yet she is also able to objectify the split bodies mechanism into three distinct voice: ‘literary, the narrative and the voice of the actress’ which attains a certain unity. The performance tries to rinse off its ‘saintly sinner’ narrative, historical details, but in the process also arguably erases the multiplicity in its essence, in its context. The concept of split body gets lost in a very tightly choreographed performance, carefully selected and sequenced texts and overarching sets. The political is lost in this bargain and Binodini becomes just an entry point for these contemporary actresses to explore their personal identity. It makes many references nationalistic, feminist but is not able to get rid of the redemptive tone of an ‘actress story’. Binodini in the end again reminds us of the

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33 A perfect example of passing off as there is no mention, impetus for him to do so.

sacrificing value, which have been idolized. Split bodies then instead of decentering the subject unites the subject in coherence through simplification. From an audience point of view, a split body is a challenge to view and comprehend as it frames many bodies on the stage together thereby the focus of the audience gets challenged. There is always a choice, an opportunity cost which audience pays in watching these bodies. Therefore *Erendira* in that sense is far more challenging than *Nati Binodini* as through *Erendira* multiple bodies despite their rehearsed choreographed movements elude the audience and either give glimpses or give too much detail. Thus, making it more insightful, whereas the coordination and coherence of the *Nati Binodini* is easier to understand and therefore less challenging, thereby more popular. Neelam Mansingh used split bodies technique in *Blood Wedding* where in all the main roles are divided in two (still unity maintained) . In *Nagamandala* (2005) she uses two actresses to portray the main character Rani. While one remains Rani, the other wavers between Rani and the narrator and seems the issue of convenience than exploration of any issue.

Not only these directors, but even others also used the same technique to use split bodies, for instance Robin Das used split bodies in *The Doll's House* (NSD student's production) again to divide the character of Norah into two, one the physical (outer) and the other psychological (inner). This broadens the scope of using a Split-bodies further and apart from an feminist intervention, this becomes an intervention in theatre models which takes up the issues of tradition and modernity too.

This informality of a role played by many people might have been derived from the folk form, where the psychological realism is never looked into. This idolization of a singular, coherent character who is in touch with its reality and who emotes his inner through the method acting singularly, and most importantly, maintains that coherence throughout the play is the product of colonial past and Anglo-American paradigm which has been a continued tradition with Indian theatre, and specifically Alkazi and NSD's theatre. Alkazi's selection and preference of Greek plays like *Oedipus Rex*, *Trojan Women* and others, which contained larger than life characters, but treated with psychological realism was celebration of the individual. The rise and fall of individual seemed to have been of primary importance. Amal Allana's who is also steeped in this kind of realism, but with the exposure to Brechtian theatre in German treats her subjects differently. Their splits then forays into the 'collective' and not the 'individual'. To take it further the Women folk in *Erendira* and *Nati Binodini* together form a collective unit, a women force.

*Erendira* and *Nati Binodini* both in different cultural context, in its content explore the themes of patriarchal oppression. *Erendira* in the hands of her Grandmother gets exploited and pushed towards prostitution whereas *Nati Binodini* is used by her mentor, under the pretext of noble cause of saving theatre. While split bodies allows one to explore the multiplicity of the narrative, is it enough to break the hegemony of the text and therefore patriarchy? There is an alliance with the text already, which a lot of strategies allow one to use. Dancing body might be defying the text but may be the split body is not able to do so. The redemptive narrative which comes out of *Nati Binodini* where Binodini's inclusion in main stream does not destabilize rather maintains the

desired hierarchies of power. Helen Gilbert and Joanae Tompkins in 'Body Politics' enumerate types of body as resistance to colonialism, and consequently patriarchy like Dancing Body, Frames Body, Metamorphic Body but it is in the Derogated Body, I am particularly interested. In my opinion this is most radical and effective bodily intervention and if one puts all these bodies in sequence in terms of their development of resistance, probably derogated body might come absolutely in the end after all the other kind of bodies have been already explored. I say this because, the chances of assimilation of other type of bodies in mainstream, the dominant order through capitalism is higher. I have already looked into dancing body and the way it become conformist to the heteronormative narrative.

In words of Helen Gilbert and Joanae Tompkins:

In the theatre, the derogated body is a potent site of representation since the constraints and oppression it endures can be visually displayed rather than simply described. Moreover, this body plays out a performative contradiction which can be used subversively when the (presumably) powerful physicality of the actor is harnessed in order to convey the disempowered body of the fictional character as colonial subject (Body Politics, 222)

It is difficult to find this 'oppressed, disfigured or derogated body' in the work of these directors. The oppression of Erendira and Binodini gets blurred through decorated bodies rather than derogated bodies.

This decoration of the body through color, costumes and makeup hides the oppression in many ways. In fact Anuradha Kapur, moves towards the deconstruction of the text itself to break the courtesan narrative in her play *Umrao* (1994). It is not just the deconstruction of the canonized text and structure but also digging out textual material which is also being used to disrupt history, specifically in the context of portrayal of woman with mixed results. A performance on historical figure with new treatment or new additions to its biography could bring in new and fresh perspectives but in many ways could also get reduced to dominant modes of the society. I would explore this by drawing parallel between *Umrao* and Nati Binodini. Anuradha Kapur's *Sundari: An Actor Prepares*, has been already discussed. *Umrao* is another play based on *Umrao Jaan Ada*, a novel in Urdu based on Mohammad Hadi Ruswa (1905), adapted by Anuradha's writing collaborator Geetanjali Shree where in they break away from the convention of the courtesan narrative by showing the inner life of Umrao in her failures, mundane routines and dealing with issues of old age, memory, etc. The turning point of the play is the final speech by Umrao herself. Unlike the version of the novel which is didactic and belongs to the redemptive model of sacrifice and forgiveness, Geetanjali Shree make an alternative speech which is not at all apologetic. In fact it also does not become a final word and brings a continuity with the last line: "Ab to hum karwat badalte hain" (Now I turn over). This is in contrast with the redemptive model which does not get underplayed in Amal Allana's adaptation of autobiographical work of Binodini, a late 19th century Bengali stage actress who was recognized and had become famous in a very short period of time. She felt betrayed when the theatre which she had helped build (through her patron) at the promise that it will be named after her name was actually named Star

Theatre. Amal Allana uses the autobiographical element as a base to explore Binodini's story and celebrates her success on stage. There is a special emphasis on Binodini's acting style and her way of approaching a character as against the ways of western style of acting taught by her mentor Girish Ghosh. The play is able to depict the exploitation which Binodini undergoes in the hands of her mentor and patron but at the same time in the end it also takes up a redemptive tone, the confessional voice of Binodini becomes more dominant, negating the fact that Binodini with her success also attain power to negotiate with his patron and mentor.

### **Use of Object, Technology and Other Strategies**

Another strategy which Neelam Mansingh uses in her plays is in the form of 'object-intervention'. Teresa de Lauretis's article on *Technology and Gender* in her book of the same name discussed that how in terms of subject position, which is mainly derived from Foucault's work then denies any agency and gender to the subject. Because we are all in ideology, we cannot change the ideology. Changing this subject position then become key issue for a feminist cause. De Lauretis names her subject as Feminist subject "At the same time inside and outside the ideology of gender, and conscious of being so, conscious of that pull, that division and that double vision". (*Technology and Gender*, 10)

This is possible because the feminist subject constantly moves in and out of ideology.

There has been similar claims made in the work of women directors, specifically Neelam Mansingh with the reference to objectification process. Anuradha Kapur in her interaction specifically emphasized on the role of the 'object' and through object she explored the concept of 'materiality of stage'. In her opinion treating object as actor is itself important and therefore establishing a relationship with the object becomes an important means to explore new perspectives. Because the object can not speak (talk back) it becomes a need for the actor to innovate and communicate differently thus create a new kind of dialogue. The probable question which arises from this phenomenon is that how this materiality of the stage is different than the materiality which Alkazi explored in his works?

So how does this objectification process work on stage? When the starting point is in itself the object and object takes up the focal point of performance, then though Neelam Mansingh's plays might have a heteronormative narrative, the Female actor is pushed against the 'object' itself, thereby breaking the male dominant order narrative. She is then not pitted against the Male rather the object and thus gains subject position in places, not fully though. For example in *The Wife's Letter* the throwing of the plate and the noise of the typewriter gives a certain impetus to Mrinal (Ramanjit) to emote her trauma in the domestic space. In *Kitchen Katha* the spillage of grains and flour on herself gives Chand Kaur a momentary liberation where in she becomes free of the heteronormative narrative. The efficacy of this method still needs to be reviewed.

The object arguably in my opinion would have remained to be an 'object' to be used in play. The precedence of actor and actor's speech could not have been marred by the presence of the object and therefore the objects would turn to be a utility or decoration product. On the other side objects as Anuradha Kapur says had to be used as another actor on stage which means that the role of protagonist who is the primary source of knowledge gets diluted. The actor is forced to establish a material relationship with it. The constant use of mirror in Neelam Mansingh's plays is a good example of it. Ramanjit Kaur in *Kitchen Katha* strikes a bond by painting the mirror in red. In this way object then becomes 'body' and at the same time 'site' in the performance. The material body also helps to explore the sensuality/sexuality of one's own body. Again in *Kitchen Katha* eating of food, squeezing of the pomegranate or cutting it into two halves exhibit the sensual pleasure of Chand Kaur. In my opinion it is the use of the object that brings all of these directors together as all of them indulge in exploring this relationship. Anuradha Kapur uses multi-media, installations, camera to explore this relationship whereas for Maya Rao it could be a small baby doll, to heaps of salt to dummy fish. Amal Allana's use of series of men's trousers as a backdrop on stage makes the exploitation of Erendira more poignant.

Maya Rao, being a solo performer stands in a different position. Her way of challenging the hegemony of one subject is signified through her constant role change. She keeps wavering from one role to the other like in *Deep Fried Jam* (2002) she becomes a young girl, a dancer, a man, herself, etc. Similarly in *Non stop feel good show* (2013) she is a Punjabi woman, South Indian man, a Bengali politician wavering between President of



India, Pranab Mukherjee and current Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamta Banerjee, an American woman, a Navarasa exhibitor, etc. creating a 'metamorphic body'<sup>34</sup>. She says that she has never worked with the binaries and closer she could get to a woman's role was in her latest production of *I Walk* which has been doing rounds in various forums.

With the multiple roles in play, structured in a form of collage, Maya Rao perhaps also hints towards a transgender identity. She herself denies any particular effort or inclination towards a transgender exploration and does not comply with one particular designated gender. *Deep fried Jam* is a good example of it. Her exploration of the girl's emotions through various facial expressions in the title song contrasts with the corporate man she portrays, perhaps act parallel to the role of Femme and Butch respectively. While in her comic performances she keeps shifting from one role to other which is used to combat the hegemony of fixed subject (*Deep fried Jam, Non stop feel good show*), in more serious performances like *Heads are meant to be walked into* and *Ravanama* the identity further gets blurred thereby it does not fit in any conventional gender matrix, thereby allowing interpretations from queer theory perspective too. Maya Rao herself is not very comfortable with any categories and denies any queer exploration consciously in her performance. All these directors use cross dressing as technique and a concept in their performance to explore gender issues, but there has not been any direct linkage with queer identity. *Sonata* by Amal Allana and *Navlakha* by Anuradha Kapur are closest to it, but still it remained limited to male and female bonding.

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<sup>34</sup> Coined by H Gilbert and J Tompkins refers to split subjectivity. Instead of being fixed and unitary, subject position is fragmented and dislocated. E.g. single actor performing multiple roles

The important thing here is to note that cross dressing itself creates openings for slippages which reflects and deconstructs the reified notions of gender identity. Perhaps for the same reason the wrestling scene between two males in the blue light in Anuradha Kapur's play *Navlakha* takes up homosexual tones within the heteronormative story line. Amal Allana uses cross dressing in *Begum Barve*, *Himmat Mai* and up to an extent in *Erendira* with mixed results. I have already discussed Anuradha Kapur's *Sundari* which uses cross dressing as a theme and a technique to explore the performativities of gender. The other important intervention in the same context would be by Neelam Mansingh by introducing Naqqals in many of her plays namely *Yerma*, *Kitchen Katha*, *Nagamandala*, *Fida*, and *Seher Mere Di Pagal Aurat (The mad woman of Chaillot)*. I find the Naqqals intervention very effective in some of the plays like *Nagamandala*, parts of *Yerma* and more importantly *Kitchen Katha*. The latter one specifically, as it uses the space of a live kitchen which is very accommodating in many ways. It is the story of Chand Kaur (Ramanjit Kaur), narrated by herself to her fellow kitchen mates consisting many Naqqals, males, female singers, cooks, etc. The story Chand Kaur (played by Ramanjit Kaur) narrates the story of love betrayal, loss of the woman, a very heteronormative tale, which constantly gets disrupted by the presence of music and Naqqals, who are not just listening but also cooking at the same time. In many ways the kitchen space allows the creation of alternative space, which despite referring to heterosexual relationship undercuts it with another kind of kinship developed on stage between multiple gender/sex identities present. One could draw a sort of parallel between the film *Paris is Burning* as Butler notes in it a 'reformulation of kinship (*Bodies that Matter*, 240A) through the "forms of collectivity, mothering, mopping, reading, and becoming legendary" (*Bodies*

*that Matter*, 240B) as against the act of cooking, cutting, chopping in *Kitchen Katha* where in the whole relationship between all the characters get resignified. The cooking process also brings them to forefront despite the main role/importance given to Ramanjit Kaur. Having noticed that, the presence of Naqqals does not function in the same way in all her other plays, rather at many points it seems as though it gets assimilated into a dominant culture.

Many critics have noticed the power of Naqqals as it disrupts, destabilizes the gender of the main character actress hence female gender identity, but is it possible that by their sheer presence the space or body would transform into something else? Noticeably, in almost all her plays, the Naqqals themselves remain in its periphery and there is very less scope of the intermixing of their relationship, story line with the story of the other urban main actors. In *Yerma*, Naqqals come on their own in scenes of Baazar, dhobhi ghaat used a crowd, local people. In *Nagamandala* they are villagers in night and visible listeners of the story in a forest. In *Kitchen Katha* also they do not have direct participation in the story, but with their active role of cooking in this case gives them a visible chance of interacting and challenging the main actors. I also understand alike drag, Naqqals in many ways try to negotiate the cross gendered identification, through their hyperbolic gestures and colorful female clothes but not enough chance is given for that interaction to materialize. In this context, I quote Anuradha Kapur assessment of Neelam's treatment in the given lines by taking an example from *Yerma* :

Yerma sings and laments, expressing her yearning for child;  
while Yerma tosses on the ground, a rope strung between two

twigs held in the hands of two female impersonators  
(Naqqal) is set alight above her head, the female  
impersonators stay impassive and solid as if made of stone;  
the fire eats up the rope and tracery of ashes crumbles on  
Yerma. The ash, the song, the longing bracketed between tow  
chimera women (naqqals) unsettles many assumption about  
corporeal and illusory women (and men) about love, desire  
and bonding (*Women of India: Colonial and Post Colonial  
Periods*, 491)

The question is that why these female impersonator stay impassive and solid, like a stone? This impassivity then makes them another property on stage. They seems to be 'fillers' with their jokes, dance and songs and thus in my opinion it is not very unsettling as Anuradha Kapur says they are. Their marginalization in the society seems to be akin to their marginalization on stage by being at the peripherals and being passive which is also evident in other plays like *Kitchen Katha* (2003) and *Nagamandala* (2005). In fact I find that Neelam Mansingh attains the success of disruption through the absence of Naqqals in some of her latest play wherein the urban actors tend to 'cite' Naqqals as norms. *The Wife's Letter* (2010) and *The Suit* (2007) is a good example of it. I am elaborating this with the example of *The Suit* (2007) based on Can Thumba's play text. The story of a couple gets disrupted with the presence of the third man having an affair with the wife. In the opening scene there is celebration of a pure heterosexual, blissful life, the husband (Vansh Bhardwaj) gets up in the morning and decides to wear the women's clothes to amuse her wife. He dons a bra, a skirt and red lipstick in his transformation from man to woman which directly refers to the Naqqals' tradition and

functions as a 'gender melancholia'<sup>35</sup> which Butler writes about. In her conversation Neelam Mansingh emphasized that Naqqals are definitely not homosexuals and they have supposedly normal life with wife and kids and use the female impersonation as just their profession which also gets cited through Vansh's act of turning into a woman/drag/Naqqal.

The cross dressing also needs to be seen from other perspective. Anuradha Kapur's direction of Brecht's *The Job* is her way of considering the risk, 'danger and transgressions' of 'subversive masquerade' (male impersonation) stands as counter to female impersonation which remains to be revered in Indian tradition. She takes example of many traditional forms like Bhavai, Ramlila, Jatra, Yakshagan, Therukutu, Raslila, etc. Taking them from their traditional pocket and bringing and presenting them on the urban stage in many ways is also perhaps a subtle critique of the modernity which was adopted through Indian modern drama. Ironically though, the example of male impersonation are very few and rare in the work of these directors with the exception of Maya Rao who constantly switched from male to female roles in many of her plays.

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<sup>35</sup> Butler uses this term while explaining incest, a pervasive cultural fantasy, and that the presence of the taboo generates these desires. Mimicry and Masquerade form the essence of the gender with Freud, she asserts that "gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition" (63) and therefore that "same-sexed gender identification" (e.g., the identification of the boy with the masculine gender) depends on an unresolved (but simultaneously forgotten) homosexual cathexis (with the father, not the mother, of the Oedipal myth). In the given case the mimicry and masquerade which Vansh indulges in similar kind of melancholia

## of/through text and method

Lacanian psychoanalysis deals with 'speaking body', and for him the physical (real) body and the virtual body is same because body is embodied through language. He explains that the subject gets fixed therefore comes into being by its association with unifying structures deeply rooted in language which is phallogentric. Julia Kristeva challenges the phallogentricism by elaborating the concept of the 'subject in process' through 'poetic revolution', a continuous process of reconfiguring language by exploring the heterogeneities between the semiotic and symbolic. I find Kristeva's theory very relevant at this point in the context of these women directors as she tries to maintain a certain level of commitment to symbolic order and social contract. In Anuradha Kapur's work could be similar to 'contemporary hybrids'<sup>36</sup> which is full of potential through negotiations between tradition and modernity, symbolic and social<sup>37</sup>. The 'poetic revolution' is also insightful as it allows a certain method to deconstruct the prevalent structure of the society. The language these directors use for their production is usually Haryanvi (like Jeelam Mansingh uses Punjabi) which is widely spoken in the northern belt of India and happens to be the cultural field of production for these directors. Hindi being the national language of India, in many ways nationalize and subsequently patriarchize the language, therefore it is more important to disrupt, destabilize the use of the language and the language itself.

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<sup>36</sup> Terms she referred to in Natraja Ramkrishna Memorial Lecture, University of Hyderabad, to be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters

<sup>37</sup> But does this hybrid actually has the resistance power against commodification? To be discussed in subsequent chapters

Allana's treatment of *Himmat Mai* is important in the given context. As she recounts that use of Hindi by Manohar Singh seemed to make the performance 'eunuch-like' during rehearsal as he was playing the title role but when she casually asked him to use Himachali accent, it was a revelation for her as *Mother Courage* became more definite and get the right feminine quality. One can infer then the language itself is marginalizing a certain kind of identity and has a place for more heterosexual, mainstream identities. Why does the language of female impersonation by Manohar Singh sound 'eunuch like; and even if it is so, why does it need to be changed? She notes that the Manohar also turned "... hard syllables into soft ones as he went along'. (*Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*, 177) She further used many dialects in the same play like Bhojpuri, Haryanavi, and Northern Punjabi, etc. to give a sense of journey which Mother Courage partakes. By using these dialects she makes her play to act national and regional at the same time. Similarly in *Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother* she uses Rajasthani dialect mixed with Hindi to escape a certain fixed and predictive rhythms of the language. Nati Binodini also in the given context makes an interesting reading. Amal Allana chooses the Hindi language for her performance, gets *Amar Kotha* translated from Bengali and yet keeps the Bengali language intervention live in the play with words like "Mahashoy" (Mister). In fact Swaroopa Ghosh, one of the Binodinis in the play used some of the Bengali dialogues too to protest. At the same time the back ground songs taken from Bengal like "Agun Agun..." all of them create an intersection of languages. The nationalistic impulses of Hindi and colonial impulses through the use of Bengali both are being brought together. Specifically the song based on fire in Bengali brings in the

freedom fight narrative too on the stage. At the same time the Binodini actresses who use English in their daily lives further complicate the layering of languages.

Maya Rao in her interview said that she realized soon after *The Job* she did, the limitation of exploring a story. Story with its narrative structure did not give her room for more experimental or individualistic exploration. She uses a scripted text in *The Quality Street* and *The Job*, where as in all her plays the text emerges from her performances and not vice versa. She also uses the mix of Hindi, English and other languages together. Her way of disruption of the text is through resumption, repetition, reproductions played in her voice modulation. In *Deep Fried Jam* she picks up some common everyday one liner and subverts the same. For example: “Dekhte Hain”, “We are doing Fine”, “let’s shake on that one”, “ I have had enough”, etc. All these phrases are then taken out of the context and played out in various ways, by altering its meaning, or exhausting the meaning it contains. She then makes reference to Dandi March in the end ‘I’ve heard that so much salt has been rubbed into wounds that there’s very little left to cook with” and a little later she sings: “One day we’ll win that salt of Dandi/ I promise you Gandhi”. This is her way of reclaiming history by means of its production. In *Heads are meant to be walked into* (2005) she banished the story line altogether and what we see is a collage of various camera work, documentary footage like the naked protest of Manipuri mothers against the Indian army, etc.



Other directors have tried to combat the same in different ways. Neelam Mansingh uses Punjabi and her writing collaborator has been Surjit Pattar who himself is a renowned literary figure of Punjab and has many plays, stories, novels, essays to his credit. He has adapted many canonized text for Neelam Mansingh like Racine's' *Phaedra (Fida, 1997)*, Lorca's *The Blood Wedding*, Jean Girdoux's *The Mad Woman of Chailot* in *Seher mere di Pagal Aurat* (1995). Neelam Mansingh's disruption then in these cases appears in the form of rites and rituals, ceremonial events which she adds in her plays. Fida's ceremonial death ritual where in she spreads the white piece of cloth, she then yellows her hand with turmeric (use of turmeric is considered auspicious), anoints the cloth piece and wears it. This death ritual stands in contrast to marriage ritual where anointing your body with turmeric is not just done for its medicinal qualities but it also means that post haldi lepan, it is forbidden for the bride to be to go out of the house till the time marriage takes place. This citation of norm in a death sequence seems to be more theatrical in the way it mimes and takes it to a hyperbolic gesture, exposes 'law' which can no longer control the terms of its own abjecting strategies (*Critically Queer*, 23). All this is never the part of the text or scripts but adds another layer of meaning to the dialogue which is spoken.

*Fida* (1997) is also important to study as it banishes men from stage. The original play has a few male characters but they never appear onstage in Neelam Mansingh's interpretation. Neelam Mansingh herself says "I let the husbands and lover recedes and become peripheral. They were irrelevant more like shadows in the narratives than being" (*Ceremonies and Dramatic Text*, 30). Interestingly, Neelam Mansingh does not fully

banish them from the text or performance. In fact, there is a scene where Fida talks to her invisible husband on the stage thereby also showing the silencing process of the male characters.

Anuradha Kapur in her interview with Lakshmi Subramaniam, talks about the relation between body and text and how to locate contemporary body, physically and materially in the contemporary text has been her interest areas. She further adds that it has been vital for her to challenge the hegemony of word by disturbing the 'conventionalized ways of grasping reality' (*Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*, 221). One of the techniques which is being used is the technological intervention through video, audio, live camera work. In *Antigone Project*' (2003) based on Brecht's version of this Greek play, she uses Ein Lal's documentary film on Godhara Riots, without any verbal text creating a visual/imagist text. The role/subject position of Antigone gets extended in such a way that it seems that she is not just lamenting for her brother's death but also all the victims of Godhara riots. It also contemporizes the classic play at once. Similarly in *The Job*, Anuradha Kapur does not change the story text but was recorded and played as a background on the track. In *Deep Fried Jam* (2003), the closing scene has a focus on a feet which is portrayed on the large projector in such a way that it extends her body. In *Heads are meant for walking into* (2005) she uses various cameras to highlight parts of her body, sometimes as extensions of her body, sometimes as body double but remain ambiguous. Even in *Lady Macbeth Revisited* (2010), her usage of technological intervention is at its core, through which a digital/virtual body is created in contrast to the physical body. This digital body has the capacity to alter, accommodate, annihilate and

more so to expand the gender identity but also reduce the power of the word. Maya Rao says that camera challenges her, ignites imagination and its presence is the presence of almost a new character on the stage which she needs to combat with.

There is also a visible trend of not getting into a ready made play script, but novels, essays, stories, newspaper cuttings, autobiographies are becoming source of their adapted text. Anuradha's team took up *Ghare Baire*, *Ghar Aur Bahar* (1989), *Gora* (1991) too for the adaptation. Maya Rao cites example of a comment on terrorism by President of India Pranab Mukherjee which becomes an entry point for her 'fish sequence' in *A Non Stop Feel Good Show* (2013). All this then show that the directors have not been able to banish the text altogether, rather have tried to make favorable alliances with it. They have tried to deconstruct the text with the intervention of body, but body does not replace the text altogether.

### **The Actor's Body**

One recurrent theme which is coming out of the earlier discussions is the actor's body itself. Is there an emergence of a unique or common acting style which is being developed in the work of these directors? The presence of the actor's body along with the character's body, create a meaning together. These directors have often repeated their cast and have liked to work with them again and again. Anuradha Kapur with Seema Biswas, Harish Khanna, Rajesh Tailang and others, Neelam Mansingh with Ramanjit

Kaur and Vansh Bhardwaj mainly, Amal Allana's association with Manohar Singh in the past, Salima Reza, Swaroopa Ghosh at present and Maya Rao using herself. It is difficult to come to a coherent style of acting they adopt but still one can notice few common features. There is a certain homogenization of the actor's bodies on the stage which could be traced to their being products of the NSD. There is a movement towards a very post modern impulse and the actors seem to locate themselves in the city, the urban space, culturally and socially. Even Ramanjit and Vansh from Chandigarh, product of another institutionalized space put them on the similar platform.

One wonders that the English speaking, urban actresses of Nati Binodini, what would they interpret and take from the Binodini's life? Would this become a simplistic case of exploitation and obsession story? While one needs to acknowledge that western education should not be a detriment all the time but it is also to be noted that the audience first comes into contact with actor's body and then moves to character's body and juggles between both during the course of the play. Is this rift between actor and character is so neglected because most of the audiences for their production hail from the urban space and therefore aligned to the actor/character body?

Maya Rao as an actor who has been a teacher at NSD (not a student) poses a different body altogether. Her training in Kathakali and her exposure to world theatre has created an androgynous body which is capable of oozing multiple identities.

In terms of acting style, it is definitely not very realistic and defies naturalism vehemently. Though most of these productions spend a lot of time in research and documentation, it does not precipitate into deep psychological explorations through acting itself. One could get glimpses of it in early works of Amal Allana. Anuradha Kapur deals with it slightly by exploring realism in a sense of true real by capturing the mundane, the routine in her play *Umrao*, the courtesan narrative played by Uttara Baokar. The reality is added here by drawing a parallel between ageing actor (Uttara Baokar) and the ageing Courtesan. The acting then in most of the plays remain stylized sometimes more than and sometime less than life. This particular style belongs to the category of 'excess' or 'surplus' in many ways. If I have to choose a school of acting then it refers to Bertolt Brecht, where through the moments of recognition is explored with an excess of a gesture, voice modulation or expression. In totality, it seems as though it would still belong to the category of 'social catharsis' term (as opposed to psychological catharsis) coined by Elin Diamond referring to the influence of alienation theory by Bertolt Brecht.

Harish Khanna in *John Gabriel Borkman* (2008) delivers his dialogue by taking more time in uttering his words. He stretches the sentences longer than they would usually take. Seema Biswas's lamentations for his dead brother are hyperbolic in nature. Amal Allana's all the last three plays are very stylized and the acting style which is larger than life and in a play like *Erendira* it is in coordination with the theme of grotesque carnival. Neelam Mansingh's actors Ramanjit Kaur and Vansh Bhardwaj use the techniques of melodrama through the portrayal of heightened emotions, stylized choreography and poetic enunciation. Maya Rao, continuously changes from one role to the other and also

technique of surplus in her acting. One can also see the influence of Parsi theatre, which was always ignored for belonging to the category of commercial by the modernist directors earlier. Anuradha Kapur acknowledges the two major influences ‘Theater of the West’ and ‘Parsi Theatre’ in her essay ‘Reassembling the Modern: An Indian Theatre since Independence’ and mentions the attributes of Parsi Theatre such as melodrama, excess, eclecticism which gets reconfigured in their plays.

Anuradha Kapur in her interview mentioned that the materiality of stage and space while exploring materiality has become more important in these plays. Ironically, while she claims made by these directors the primacy of speech remains to be a main element of the play. What it does is to break and fragment the text but doing away of the original language seems to be difficult.

## **Form vs Content**

It is interesting that how this chapter began with different kind of binaries which has deconstructed the ‘other’ yet, there is another binary we need to confront with. All the discussions show how ‘subject position’ has been a central point of contention. Resignifying subject is an attempt to position the female as subject. In this process, body and materiality has been considered as an important means to break the dominant order. While the text was never fully replaced, there has been attempt to deconstruct it, bring in

slippages, ruptures through which the woman as subject could emerge. They try to achieve this with their intervention in forms and some of these interventions have been radical. The usage of dancing body, split bodies, creative use of technology, multiplicity of narratives through interdisciplinary approach all of them are important innovative intervention in the area of form, which challenges the dominant order. But does this kind of intervention allow them to break free from the set notions within theatre history and society? Also, in this process, is there a compromise which is being done on the content? The form itself becomes so important that it precedes the content (text) or the politics of it. We have seen this happening in plays like *Nati Binodini* in many ways.

The binary of form content if gets equated with other binaries which has been discussed earlier in this chapter then content aligns with text, mind and therefore man and modernity whereas form then become part of the other body, woman and tradition. The content being in the domain of knowledge, thereby power remains untouched and fixed. This is not to say that any intervention in form then becomes a futile effort, in fact, form itself has the capacity to change the content. To take an example, Anouih's *Antigone* directed by Anuradha Kapur with the insertion of the film on Godhra is able to broaden the debate and bring in the story of marginalized from a different category altogether.

It is also because of the contemporary urban place where these directors work, the chances of appropriating an intervention in terms of form is always higher through commodification. Therefore the politics of the content gets depleted and it becomes a

product to be consumed. While one acknowledges this. These different strategies in form with its all efficacies issues, still manages to create a 'semi-subject' position in the center of capital city, Delhi as a genre of Women performers/directors but does it annihilate the male subject position? It demand a subject position for itself, but does not challenge the subject position of the male and therefore create a position for them selves which runs parallel to the fixed male subject or in the absence of the male subject.

Taking the same argument further, Does it then belongs to a Nehruvian modernity of nation building through 'unity in diversity'? Has the project has been fully abandoned or they are holding on to it? These productions are still national in many ways, not just through the use of language, but more so by their association with the National School of Drama. Even if all these directors have their own group, they are dependent or in other words 'not free' from the State. Interestingly, Anuradha Kapur in her interview with Lakshmi Subramaniam says that 'subliminally' censorship is present which she did not experience before. She also adds that a theme like lesbianism would still need to be seen/translated into a performance, (though texts are available). In a situation like this then the symbolic order of textual hegemony continues to be maintained and preserved. How does this textual hegemony react to the dynamics of space? How do these directors negotiate with space to create a text of their own? The succeeding chapter would allow us to see the relationship of body and space and how they are connected to each other.





## The Space and the Style

While the 'crisis of historicity'<sup>38</sup> has diluted the authority, legitimization of temporal imagination, it has also opened up a vast unmapped space in front of us. Julian Murphet in his essay, "Postmodern and space" refers to the present epoch being lived more spatially than temporally. It is not just the changing times but more than that, it is changing space one needs to pace up with today.

Theatre and performance studies also have been pacing up with changing landscape in its own way. Any theatre exercise or instruction refers to statements like: 'charge the space', 'fill the space', 'merge with the space', 'create a space', 'get into the space' exhibit that the use of space is not just a utility function but is also the part of narrative, meaning making process, aesthetic intervention. In many ways, the space becomes the battle ground for sometimes real and sometimes simulations of power struggle. Therefore spatial imagination/intervention has been one of the important aspects of devising and directing a play. Performance or a play does not just offer the stage space, audience space but also engulfs very complex layering of spaces (like socio-cultural space, the setting of the play, 'real' space, imaginative space connecting to larger framework of institutionalized, globalized or even market place) which together depict different perspectives of our day to day existence.

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<sup>38</sup> The term coined by Fredrick Jameson, from book The cultural logic of late capitalism

It is then in the context of changing space the 'style' becomes an important area of study. It is often said that it is not 'what' you do rather 'how' you do is important in a given space, which also leads us to the known debates between form and content. While gauging that which is more dominant in the works of these directors, it is equally important to see the relationship of form and content and how do they influence each other. If one may stretch the binary of form and content, one would also be able to reach out the debate pertaining to modernity and post modernity. Philip Auslander calls postmodernity as 'a stylistic descriptor'<sup>39</sup> in relation to its function in aesthetic performance. It would be interesting to see then in an Indian context where the modernity and post modernity are still in the process of being redefined and constantly changing, how style plays a role in their development.

It would be appropriate to begin from where the last chapter ended and examine the idea of body which is not used as body on the stage but also as space. Though it comes as criticism against Foucault from Daniel Punday when he points out that for Foucault "the body is [couched as] a palimpsestic space" (*Foucault's Body Tropes: New Literary History*, 514), it still shows us some potential to challenge the set notions of the body and consequently gender/sex and create/add fresh perspectives to it.

Helen Gilbert and Joanna Tompkins in "Body Politics"<sup>40</sup> have discussed that how body as a site has been used as an important intervention in postcolonial theatre. In their words "post colonial body disrupts the constrained space and signification left to it by the

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<sup>39</sup> From essay "Postmodernism and Performance", *The Cambridge companion to Postmodernism*

<sup>40</sup> From book *Postcolonial drama, theory, practice and politics*

and becomes a site for resistant inscription” (“Body Politics”, 204). In many ways, when body becomes space and vice versa and the line of demarcation between them become very blurred. Because of this characteristics, post colonial theatre has used the body in particular the actresses’ body as a space intervention. The whole concept of *Mata*<sup>41</sup> summarizes the power of the body as space and also that how in a text like this might not become a site of resistance but a site of conformity, tradition and nationalistic picture.

### **Fig Space-scape:**

In this context this dilemma between resistance and conformity can be witnessed in relation with debates between tradition and modernity which became a problematic for most of the early (post independence) playwrights and directors. To extend this further in post colonial context, I would like to take the Parsi theatre as an example which was flourishing in the early 20th century in parts of northern belt, Maharashtra and other cities. Based on the western model of using proscenium, and western text, later on mythologies and history, Parsi theatre used female characters on stage leading to a homosocial space where there was hardly any scope for men’s presence but with the increasing middle class audience and thereby primarily female audience as Kathryn Hansen mentions in her essay “Making Women

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<sup>41</sup> Mother India, national personification of India, eulogized during Freedom struggle and still used as

Visible: Gender and Race Cross Dressing in the Parsi Theatre”<sup>42</sup> the homosocial space started to break up by late 1930’s. The Theatre companies were divided then on the issue of casting women for female role under the pretext of morality, middle class values etc. Some of the earlier female impersonators like Bal Gandharva (1889-1975) from Marathi theatre or Jai Shankar Prasad Sundari (1888-1967) from Gujarati theatre “excelled in embodiment of feminine sensibility and decorum, creating prototypes of ideal Indian woman” (Making Women Visible, 8). Kathryn Hansen further elaborates that these prototypes were based on ‘respectability’ of woman through which women could enter the public space and men could claim their modernity as a response to the British colonial discourse of backwardness of Indian women. The growing success of female impersonator meant that women’s opportunity to come on stage and employment was curtailed. It kept them off bay by asserting that they could do women role better than women themselves. The Padambhushan citation for Bal Gandharva said that it was in fashion for the ladies in Bombay to imitate him in their daily lives.<sup>43</sup> This kind of assertion in many ways marginalized the women and female body on stage. The citation also brings in the issue of class here where the imitation of woman by Gandharava was aligned with upper class of the society (ladies). Hansen also mentions that Gandhrav would use a very refined language which was rooted in the upper class.

Amidst all this while the homo social space was broken but not by Indian women rather Anglo Indian actresses like Mary Fenton and the concept of ‘passing off’ from man to woman and now from an Anglo Indian woman to a middle class Indian woman

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<sup>42</sup> Theatre Journal, Vol. 51,, No 2, ( May 1999)

<sup>43</sup> Third Highest Civilian Awards in India, Bal Gandharva received it in 1964

continued. In totality, visibility of women was felt but the corporeal signifier remained to be the same and always defined by men (female impersonators). Parsi theatre continued to flourish in its given scheme post independence and later got assimilated in the upcoming Bollywood cinema.

What is important to note here is that there is no continued tradition or history which was passed from Parsi theatre to other subsequent theatre. Probably Indian Cinema could be said to have the continued legacy of Parsi theatre as it not only used many Parsi theatre plays but also all the important plays of the same were made into films and theatre companies turned into film companies. This will be further discussed in this chapter vis-a-vis the way Delhi directors have tried to trace genealogies with Parsi theatre.

The new nation state claimed a new modernity with industrialization, urbanization all along with the theme of development and progress. This is also the time when these institutional spaces were set up like Sangeet Natak Academy, Sahitya Academy and later National School of Drama. These institutional spaces will be discussed later. Post independence, the National School of Drama played an important part in training theatre directors and designers which began to make its impact under the leadership of Ebrahim Alkazi. Amal Allana, his daughter comments in her essay about this era and Alkazi's approach:

“Alkazi was conscious that the direction in which he took the National School would fundamentally affect the nature and course of the theatre movement in the future. Assessing the theatre

scene, Alkazi saw that traditional theatre, though rich and vibrant, had no immediate relevance for the present. On the other hand, Alkazi's post-Independence generation had already debunked the commercial aesthetics of Parsi theatre and was searching for a new idiom." ("Indian theatre-II"  
<http://www.goethe.de/ins/in/ip/prj/kus/dat/en5104126.htm>  
[Accessed 6/3/2013])

This ascertains that there was nothing similar or carried as residual past from Parsi theatre, in fact it was pitted against it. A RADA<sup>44</sup> product, he was active in Bombay with Theatre Unit in his initial years, joined NSD as director in 1962 and remained so for the next fifteen years. During his tenure, he trained a pool of fine actors and actresses and produced many important plays in Hindi, Urdu, and Hindustani. He brought in many western plays, classical and contemporary as well as Indian plays, however, his underlining model remained to be rooted in western scheme of structure. Some of the famous actresses like Uttara Baokar, Surekha Sikri and Sudha Shivpuri have been his students who were exposed to the approach of psychological realism<sup>45</sup> which was also popular with British theatre. The new translations and plays both from the west and India did open up a space for Indian actresses to get important female roles. Plays directed by him such as Ibsen's *Gudia Ghar* (1962), Anouih's *Antigone* (1962), Kalidas' *Abhijana Shakuntalam* (1963), Mohan Rakesh's *Ashadh ka Ek Din* (1962), Euripedes' *Trojan*

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<sup>44</sup> Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. London

<sup>45</sup> Techniques of realism and naturalism to attain greater loyalty towards 'real life', systemized by Constantin Stanislavsky (Moscow) to train actors

*Women* (1966), Balwant Gargi's *Sultan Razia* (1974), Shudrak's *Mrichkatikam* (1974)<sup>46</sup> etc had important roles for actresses. One important tool as mentioned earlier was of psychological realism which provided a means, an agency to the actor to explore the characters, which also in its process, arguably, has the capacity to break the given stereotypes.

The question is that whether these actresses' bodies on stage were able to create a space of their own or were they assimilated once again in the hetero-normative structure and narrative of the stage. How would one recuperate the subject position of colonized body when the structure, text and even strategies remained to be borrowed from the colonizers by using still an Anglo-American paradigm? It is true that it also in other ways gives you a chance to disrupt or create a counter discourse or counter space within the structure used but was this happening in the works of Alkazi or his contemporaries? Did the technique of psychological realism help the actresses to explore a counter identity or space?

These questions are difficult to answer without viewing the performances, however there are reasons which point out that it might not have been easy to break or disrupt the colonial space with these interventions. One reason could be Alkazi himself who remained in control of the performance. Keval Arora, articulates his love for canonized text and despite all its precision and strength, it did have flaws:

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<sup>46</sup> Source: Arora, Keval "Ebrahim Alkazi" *Theatre India, National School of Drama theatre's journal, May 2003, No:7*



“For instance, a consequence of Alkazi’s working through and towards the cannon is that the classics were played straight. Rarely interrogated, let alone subverted, these were at best mere personalized and that too a manner which tip toed around the ideological and political. Playing the modern classics for their intrinsic meaning, valuing them for what they ‘teach’ us rather than taking from them what we wish to learn...” (“Ebrahim Alkazi”, 80)

These flaws also depict perhaps, that the techniques of psychological realism was able to bring in some ‘fine realistic acting’, some very strong and powerful females roles but no rupture in Indian or European conventions. Additionally, one also needs to think that his focus on Greek plays (as discussed in previous chapter) and up to an extent Shakespearean plays with the techniques of psychological realism would lead him to what kind of exploration? Considering that psychological realism would bring in the realist understanding of the contemporary time, how this method would be used to portray Greek tragedies which have been our immediate reality? More importantly what would be achieved by it? If one takes Keval Arora’s comment on its limitations as it hovered around the political and ideological, then it becomes the celebration of an artistic achievement of an individual. In a process like this, it then creates these narcissistic bodies which exist in its own reality. Taking this argument further, the space created out of it is about an individual who is usually male, sometime female but it is limited in creating the space for women specifically as collective.

To understand another possible reason, one would need to take into account the social scene of its time. Moving ahead, the disillusionment with Nehruvian modernity became more visible on both public and theatre scene. Nirmala Banerjee in her essay “Whatever happened to the dreams of modernity?: The Nehruvian Era and Woman’s position” articulates that how the space for women in public, education and other spaces continued to shrink with the subsequent Five Year plans. The important document prepared by the Congress committee called ‘Women’s role in Planned Economy’ (WRPE) which had many radical recommendations such as equal wages for women, various facilities to be given by the state in lieu of her domestic work at home etc. All of them were suppressed and more and more budget was allocated to economic development programs. Nirmala Banerjee quotes from one of the speeches given by Nehru at a girl’s college emphasizing that education for women meant “making better homes, better family and better society”<sup>47</sup>. Increase in poverty, income disparity, unemployment, lack of facilities, education all of these attributed to general disillusionment and the gap between organized and unorganized sector, tradition and modernity. This binary opposition also worked in the categories of men and women wherein men moved towards modernity but for women the traditional construct was further endorsed.

Girish Karnard’s play *Tughlaq*<sup>48</sup> was a critique of the Nehruvian times but the women’s position was hardly taken as a relevant question on stage. The new playwrights and directors dealt with this change and questioned the efficacy of both tradition and modernity but did not rupture the gender related issues. For instance, Mohan Rakesh’s

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<sup>47</sup> Whatever happened to the dreams of modernity?: The Nehruvian Era and Woman’s position

<sup>48</sup> Directed by Alkazi, Ebrahim in 1967 and 1974 at Purana Quila

*Aadhe Adhure* (1959), *The Half way house* has been directed by many directors such as Om Shivpuri, Amal Allana, RG Bajaj etc exposed the myth of family and family values set in a nuclear urban family and its issues. Savitri, the main protagonist of the play is a working woman with a dysfunctional family comprising of invalid husband (Juneja) and three kids, seeks out an escape in an outsider, Jagmohan. The play tries to figure out the reason of the failures and enumerate many of them but one of them is also that Savitri is a modern woman who is more free and aware of her desires, which in subtle ways have been shown as the reason of conflict in the play, thereby almost pinning her down to more traditional role in the family. It was Tripurari Sharma<sup>49</sup> who rewrote the play much later from Savitri's point of view and brought fresh perspective to it.

It also raises questions of what were the alternatives available for women actors to explore when the play itself was limiting and the social scene also did not offer any solution. Perhaps, psychological realism for an actress was leading her to the same traditional option within which they were functioning within and outside the stage.

At this juncture, it is to be noted that body as site is created through the relationship between body and space which could also function vice versa, therefore it is important to note the particulars space creation on the stage which not only influences the 'actors/actresses' body' on stage but also it has the capacity to become 'body' itself. Here, once again Alkazi brought European conventions of the stage.

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<sup>49</sup> NSD graduate, playwright and director did her version of *Aadhe Adhure* in 1991 which is said to have put Savitri in different light, where modern Savitri was no more an emerging entity of older times, rather more confident, less mysterious and a woman next door. Interestingly, Tripurari Sharma mentions in her writing about this play that she wanted to make some structural changes but did not do so at Ram Gopal Bajaj's insistence who is a director, translator and has been a NSD director (1996-2000)

“Set Design was his forte-classical lines, proportioned volumes, strong but never in your face, and imaginatively balanced in its use of space. Symmetry was perhaps overly emphasized; in that sense Alkazi’s designs were of old school”  
(Ebrahim Alkazi, 29)

These symmetrical sets and heavy focus on straight lines must be also limiting in defining the actors/actress’s body along with it creating adherence and not rupture of any kind.

In psychological realism and European conventional theatre another theatre change which became more recognized from mid 70’s and continued to make its presence in the next two decades, widely known as Theatre of Roots. As the name suggests, the theatre of this kind specifically delved deeper into the indigenous, regional performance forms from different parts of the country, moving away from west, it could be called as a localization process. Habib Tanveer in Chattisgarh, B V Karanth in Bhopal and later in Karnataka, KN Pannikar in Kerala, Ratan Thiyam in Manipur are some of the directors who explored the idea of regional and therefore Theatre of roots. They not only used regional forms but also the local actors along with urban actors on stage which has the tendency of dismantling the set subject position of the colonizers. The urban actors were merged against the folk performers/actors creating an intercultural hybridized form. The inclusion of urban actors also meant that the performance from its root could move to other locations as in many ways became a medium for larger and varied audience to communicate with the local actors and their performances.

This opened an alternative space which allowed more interaction and mediation between the audience, performers both rural and urban. Literally, the stage space also underwent a drastic change. While it was not a full break away from the proscenium theatre, it tried to use more informal space of fields, market place, open space which blurred the lines between audience and actor.

Another important aspect of this theatre was that how space was infused with style, more so in a direct way. Suresh Awasthi in his essay “Theatre of Roots: Encounter with tradition” discusses that “Stylization is the essence of Theatre of Roots”<sup>50</sup>. After Breaking away from the realistic mode, in its search of roots, the new theatre embraced stylization—“the hallmark of Indian theatre for centuries” (Theatre of the Roots, 51)

### **From Street to Proscenium:**

This is also the entry point of the select directors who in their respective spheres had begun their own directorial work. Amal Allana was directing her own plays. Neelam Mansingh initially was associated with Bharat Bhawan and was working with B V Karanth. In 1984 she moved to Chandigarh where she was busy establishing her own theatre group *The Company*. Amal Allana was active in the field of theatre but her work was still following the trajectory of her father, Alkazi mixed with some of the Brechtian

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<sup>50</sup> TDR,(1988-),Vol 33, No 4, (Winter, 1989)

intervention<sup>51</sup>. Some of these play were *Miss Julie* (1974), *Spring Awakening* (1975), *Aadhe Adure* (1976), *The House of Bernard Alba* (1982) etc.

This was also the time of great political upheaval (late 70's) as Indira Gandhi's Congress rule failed on many fronts, aggravating issues of unemployment, inflation, price rise, drought etc. The mass protest against such regime not only came from political parties but from other fields too including the middle class women but did not last for long and was suppressed in the emergency period (declared in 1975). As a result the new active space for women in terms of women's association, groups, trade union activism, newly formed women's studies department (in Bombay) either had to shrink or had to curtail their activities thereby aligning itself to the law of state<sup>52</sup>.

Just such a scene, Stree Sangharsh approached Maya Rao and Anuradha Kapur who started the street play called *Om Swaha* (1979) dealing with dowry deaths. The play did not find much audience in Delhi NCR region with a slow response initially but later had more audience as it spread to other parts of the country. This was followed by a few other street plays but it died very soon. Maya Rao says that it was the need of the time to go to the streets then<sup>53</sup>, whereas Anuradha Kapur says that she continued longer than others with street theatre. One of the other plays she took to streets was Gogol's *Inspector General* in the same period. She says that the street plays have been rigid in their structure almost like a formulae, which is not a

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<sup>51</sup> While source unknown, one of the direct Brechtian input, one can talk about is from her play *Aadhe Adhure* (1976) wherein she used a chorus to speak out the instruction given in the script while changing scenes, description of settings etc ( to be validated)

<sup>52</sup> Source: Bishnupriya Dutt's paper: "The political and the Women's/Feminist Theatre in India (1970s and 1980s)"

<sup>53</sup> Personal interaction with Maya Rao

detriment but she wanted to explore different levels of spectatorships, structure which street theatre might not have provided.<sup>54</sup> Anuradha Kapur and Maya Rao were active with theatre groups and their university jobs but had not ventured into their own productions so far, while Amal Allana and Neelam Mansingh by 1985 had established their own theatre groups.

Neelam Mansingh continued the tradition of Theatre of Roots to which she was already exposed to by her association with B V Karanth and her work in Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal. Neelam Mansingh had participated in one of the seminars on Theatre of Roots in 1988 in New Delhi (convened by Richard Schechner and introduced her work to other members).

“For past few years while working in Chandigarh, I concerned myself with rich folkloric theatrical tradition of the Punjab. I found immense possibilities of lively forms of recitation, ballad singing and storytelling...My production of *Raja Bhartari* for this festival represent the second phase of my work. For this production I used Naqqals, comparatively most developed form with narrative, storytelling, music, dance and mime, currently the form is most degenerate condition and their repertoire contains series of smutty jokes and vulgar songs. The female impersonators use names such as Miss Thunder, Miss Hurricane. They also perform cruse dances such as *Hijras* on auspicious occasion such as wedding or births”<sup>55</sup>  
(“Theatre of the Roots”, 65)

Talking about the space dynamics she comments in the same conference:

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<sup>54</sup> Personal interaction with Anuradha Kapur

<sup>55</sup> One can notice a distinction being stressed which opens the debate of high and low culture. The selective picking of the art form so that while it connects to the low and folk, it should not contain something ‘lowly’ in nature. The ‘degenerate’ here would also mean a decline in the contemporary time where they had to stoop low to perform in wedding and birth. To be explored later in detail

“I have always felt uncomfortable working in a proscenium theatre-especially in productions using folk performance and conventions of folk theatre. It just doesn’t suit my production design and does not allow the some of the most vital and primary conventions of folk theatre. The actor-audience relationship is fully destroyed in proscenium theatre. Nek Chand<sup>56</sup> and I designed a most imaginative open air theatre in Chandigarh in order to meet the demand for the the special kind of space for my productions. It has ravines, rocks, waterfall, flowing streams, terraces, staggered levels, trees and the glorious sky above. Seating is in tiers. The theatre lends itself a wide variety of treatment and approaches. The rocks make the perfect acoustics. (“Theatre of the Roots”, 66)

One can notice the hybridization of space which in many ways takes the element of proscenium and an open air theatre. It is open and yet it is closed, though would allow more and different kind of permutation and combination. Neelam Mansingh’s spacing of the stage is also not very hierarchal rather it is flattened by a horizontal space except *In Blood Wedding* (2010, in proscenium), she uses vertical space by adding two levels of the stage and she stages her female protagonist on the upper dais/stage thus breaking male convention of high and low. In other plays, this horizontal space is not bare but full of objects. The space is also divided into many compartments but they constantly merge with each other and yet remain distinct. *The Wife’s Letter* (2010) has four distinct spaces. In *The Suit* (2009), we again have three to four distinct spaces but they are intermixed.

The other level of intervention is in terms of the imaginative space which is brought into through materiality on stage. For Neelam Mansingh, it is the space of ‘Kitchen’ which

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<sup>56</sup> A famous designer and builder who designed Rock Garden Chandigarh



she keeps revisiting in most of her plays like *The Suit, the Wife's letter*, and most prominently in *Kitchen Katha* (1998, 2003).

Anne McClintock's viewpoint explored in *No Longer in a Future heaven: Gender Race, Nationalism* becomes insightful. She shows that how 'family' as a metaphor has been appropriated by nationalism always by deriving single genesis narrative for national history and at the same time excluding the metaphor of family from national agency. "National progress which is male, public domain is considered to be familial while the family itself which is the domain of female and private is figured as beyond history" (*No Longer in a Future heaven: Gender Race , Nationalism*, 93).

Therefore one of the feminist interventions was to bring this 'female and private' space itself into limelight so as to break the dominant history which was devoid of these spaces and perhaps *Kitchen*, thus became the natural choice for Neelam Mansingh.

This negation of family which was earlier idolized by earlier male playwrights seems to be another common ground wherein the work of these directors merges with each other. Anuradha Kapur's choice of her plays totally de-prioritizes the family space in almost all her plays like *Antigone Project* (2003), *Cenaturs* (2006), *Sundari: An Actor Prepares* (1998) etc. Some of the plays which have taken up the family space have been able to show the repression of women within the four walls like in *Sahib Biwi aur Ghulam*<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> This was a NSD student production and not Vivadi's, Anuradha Kapur's Group

(2005), or her latest play *Virasat*<sup>58</sup> (2013) which aptly exposes the amount of daily domestic labor women get into. Maya Rao being a solo performer rarely moves into family domain and tangentially and satirically touches the topic by making allusions but not delving deeper into it. Amal Allana in her later plays also takes up gender issue and outside the family matrix and throwing her actresses into public sphere thereby critique the larger framework of society. Her trilogy *Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother* (2003), *Nati Binodini* (2007) and *Metropolis* (2009) all of them do not directly explore the family space. Could this be also linked to their negation of Psychological Realism which had eulogized family drama, the theatre of the house?

This kind of negation allows them to explore the alternative spaces where the subject position is not as fixed as it is in the family space. The power of this space is seen in two plays namely *The Suit* and *Kitchen Katha*.

*The Suit* is a good example of body as site which brings out the oppression within the family space. The play deliberately uses the body as site by the cuckolded and jealous husband who treats the suit left by the wife's lover as a guest and uses it to torture his wife. He constantly involves the guest/lover's suit in their day to day activities like the wife needs to feed the coat, introduce the suit to all her friends etc. The final stroke comes when husband asks her to make love to the suit. The wife reluctantly starts to wear the suit and in the process gets bolder and bolder in depicting her love/desire for the suit.

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<sup>58</sup> It is important to note that *Virasat* is not her in house Vivadi production rather it belongs to NSD Repertory Company. Interesting to note that how the selection criteria have been done here. Perhaps, NSD Repertory Company who comes under the genre of Hindi Theatre has a demand of family drama which is being catered to

The husband finds it so grotesque that he asks her to stop. So within the mnemonics of the play, the female (Ramanjeet Kaur) creates a rupture so acute that the husband is not able to accept it. The entire oppression of family space gets concentrated in one gesture of wearing of the suit which gives power, autonomy to wife and makes her a subject. Importantly, she remains to be unfettered despite the pleas of the husband and determined to have the sexual freedom breaks the notion of being 'symbolic bearer of the nation'.

In *Kitchen Katha*, the story sets in a Kitchen and therefore moves out of the conventional drawing room space which has been idolized in many western and even in some of the modern plays by Indian writers like *Aadhe Adhure*. This space is also important because unlike other spaces, probably this space is still not hegemonic in a sense that it is not taken over fully by men or male order. Thus importance is given to a conventional space which is usually regarded as female space and what is important to be noted here is the inclusion of Naqqals in kitchen not as passive onlookers but more of active workers who are also helping the other female folks to work together. The kitchen space gets transformed into a fertile space by collective cooking, culminates into the production of food which gets consumed by the audience and the actors, binds all of them together giving a sense of social collectivism hence an alternative to much hyped family space. In symbolic sense, Naqqals become producers/creators of the food which they offer to the audience. The focus shifts from 'acting' to 'doing' (to be discussed later) and by manufacturing commodities which are instantly consumed by the audience, they move from margin to the center. Max Silverman refers to Phillipe Sollers who in her tongue in cheek reply says that "the best way to be on the margins on the system which devours

...being is to be at the center...the subversive act par excellence is the avoidance of 'totalization' (*Facing Postmodernity*, 123).

...this what is intriguing is the story which is being narrated in the process of ... remains to be a story of victim (Chand Kaur). The story does not find space enough for an alternative autonomy in women rather once again idolizes the sacrificial and motherhood. In terms of space again the different kind of aromas of food, ... oil supposedly confirms the familiar roles of mother and therefore the ... of kitchen.

...logy which Neelam Mansingh uses also shows her inclination towards Theatre of ... is her usage of folk songs and music. There is live music and the musicians sit in ... and not just sing but also participate in some of the scenes. In *The Wife's letter* ... singers become the part of a boat and sing songs at the same time along with ... actors. In *Little Eyolf* (2008) and *Kitchen Katha*, the story is constantly ... by these folk singers and Naqqals. Aparna Dharwadker<sup>59</sup> brings to our ... that how the tradition can enter the realm of 'political' through songs, idioms, ... etc. This subversive act is realized through the cross communication between ... urban and the rural actors. Despite being in the corners, their music breaks into the ... tone of the urban actors which they possess because of their gained ... ledge. It can also be seen as another step to modernity and a sense of materiality ... (will discuss in detail later) on stage in terms of their 'body-presence' like two singers ... enter stage and with a piece of cloth the lead actor create a boat.

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<sup>59</sup> ... *Theatre of Independence: Drama, Theory and Urban Performance in India since 1947*

This creation of a boat is in itself a part of creation of scenographic space (in this case it evokes the rural villages of Punjab) merging with real stage space where multiple activities continue at the same time. There is a certain simultaneity which is maintained. There is no change of a scene in *The Wife's Letter* which brings in certain continuity. While at one level actors who continue to work rather act during the course of the play like Bindu with her sewing machine, Mrinal (Ramanjit with her typewriter, Mrinal (Vansh with the feeding of cattle) bring in the notion of different space stories together and on the other level there is the movement of the story where each actor make a performance space and enact their roles.

While horizontally there is no hierarchy, Neelam Mansingh in all her plays create multiple sub-spaces which merge with each other from time to time and a certain space politics of its own. The placing of Ramanjit Kaur in the backdrop and Vansh who covers the performance space for the maximum time brings in the hierarchal politics of gender. This juxtaposition of stage space, scenographic space with objects and the performance space intersect with each other and the actor's body tries to achieve the reappropriation of the space.

### **The Stylistics of Space:**

Over the years a template has been created which is visible<sup>60</sup> in Neelam Mansingh's plays but the number and involvement of Naqqals have been diminishing. Her latest three

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<sup>60</sup> Is it a deliberate strategy to create a brand or signature of own? ( to be discussed in next chapter)

*The Suit, The Wife's Letter and The last tale* (2013) all of them have negligible rural intervention. Even if they are present, they seem to be helpers in the process and remain to be absolutely in periphery. While Neelam Mansingh attributes this change due to economic reasons, it raises questions about the mediation process which Theatre of the Oppressed has tried to claim. Bringing the indigenous performance to a larger/different and urban audience needed a mediation process which was fulfilled by the urban actors. Both are intertwined in such a way that the hierarchy is destroyed between the two. A very good example could be Habib Tanveer's *Kamdev ka Apna, Basant Ritu Ka Sapna* (1993) wherein he has brought the regional actors along with the urban actors that the local idiom gets full scope to develop on stage. Perhaps this mediation process in which the mediation is simultaneous or happening through urban to rural is a successful process which is able to open up the debate of tradition and modernity together to the audience.

However, the process of mediation, many a time seems to lack in the works of Neelam Mansingh in her opinion. Probably it still has the capacity to work in places wherein she has used Naquals cast, (*Nagmandala, Kitchen Katha, Yerma* etc) because despite not having a substantial role in the play (they are never part of the story line), they tend to create a space and in their improvisation give the audience a touch of their real life. *Yerma* is a good example of the same. The play has few crowd scenes such as *Community dhobi ghaat*<sup>61</sup> wherein all the cast (except Ramanjit, the protagonist) including Naquals are present indulging in a banter against *Yerma* or the bazaar/mela<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> In Indian context it has caste implication too as certain caste (Dhobi) washes clothes as profession  
<sup>62</sup> Mela is a fair

scene where again everyone is present to see a nautaki (play). In the latter scene, Naqqals are the ones who perform as the actors/players within the play, which is exactly what they do in their real lives, travelling and performing in different villages.

In plays like, *The Suit*, neither the narrative nor the structure of the play allow them to assert their space. This becomes clearer as one notices the approach or purpose of this kind of intervention.

"For far too long, Punjab was associated with the balle balle culture. As a language, Punjabi was perceived dismissively, especially in films where it was spoken only by truck drivers and dhabawalas," points out noted theatre director Neelam Mansingh. "By the late '70s, writers and directors began to attempt an encounter between tradition and modernity. Thus, theatre in Punjab developed a distinct flavour of its own," ("Punjab Theatre comes into own" Pawanpreet Kaur, <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/artbeat/punjabi-theatre-comes-into-own>, (accessed 1/10/2012))

What is important here is to note the mediation process, where the rural or tradition was not just picked up as against the Anglo-American paradigm instead to modernize the tradition and bring it in the national cannons. This is why we hardly get to see the story of truck or dabbawalas in these plays.

Amal Allana candidly talks about how authenticity towards a certain tradition is not taken into consideration in Gender based theatre in the work of these directors but then what would this inauthenticity signify? The quote below from Neelam Mansingh in a different forum throws light on these issues.

“Chandigarh, the city where I live and work, is a faux pas French city designed by Le Corbusier. The city was generated from the middle of the nowhere, with an artificial lake and park made of waste material. This became its history and ritual. I felt that most of the actors were like city itself, floating in a concrete soul, searching for inspiration in a city of stasis. The work I make exists neither in the village from where the musician comes, nor from city, from which I try to escape and come back to every day. The hybrid work I create makes me weave my own mythological worlds, a series of images that come from everyday world. Grain, fire, water, mud, blood, sand become the leitmotif of my displaced imagination. The city for me flows into the village and village flows back. This concrete jungle is the space, the memory and history that Naqqals bring transform it into a space. A place we gather to transcend the logic of the rural versus the urban  
(“Ceremonies as Dramatic Text”, 35)

The mediation process here seems to use the indigenous form as a ‘testing ground’ to make the urban actor complete, holistic in their approach with a cultural and regional identity. This could be the possible reason that why the presence of Naqqals has reduced over the years. Another crucial word she has used in the above lines is ‘hybrid’ which continues to



shadow the work of all these directors. Before discussing more about hybrids, it would be insightful to look into Amal Allana's work in the same context.

Alike Neelam Mansingh, other directors have also used traditional space, culture in their works but it is more diffused and inconsistent in its usage, interpolations and interpretations. Maya Rao says that her performance after a point is no more based on Kathakali and it goes beyond and creates its own grammar. With Anuradha Kapur there is no fixed cultural landscape which can be associated with Amal Allana who has a larger tenure and production to her name, her work can be divided more clearly in phases. Since this research specifically shifts on production which had come post 1990 her later works as she herself says have been about gender identity. Again there is no particular cultural background and it remains to be diffused and ambiguous as in other director's work.

Interestingly, any discussion on space for Amal Allana's work will be incomplete without discussing the scenography and light designed by Nissar Allana (her husband) who has been associated with almost all her plays. Nissar, a medical doctor by profession, trained at Schaubuhne in Berlin in 1975 has designed over 50 productions, has been the Art Director for Television series, designed events and exhibitions in India and abroad.

Talking about his own spatial intervention in Amal Allana's plays, he says that his construction of stage space undergoes distortions, contractions and expansions<sup>63</sup>. In other words it is no more inclined towards realism and tends to move towards abstraction. While in terms of structure on stage, he, alike Theatre of Roots has moved away from

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<sup>63</sup> Source: "Redefining the Actor" By Nissar Allana in Theatre India, NSD journal, No 1, January 2012

using heavy sets, hierarchies platforms (considering that he specializes in monumental light design<sup>64</sup>) but the grammar of symmetry, synchronization, coordination between actor and stage still seems to be a driving force.

*Nati Binodini*, for instance, a devised play has a puritan white look with vertical moving strips of curtains along with white floor which is made of glass like<sup>65</sup> and the actresses on stage all fully clad in white faceless complement each other in terms of creating an image on the stage. This kind of image could be called an ostensive one, which Jean Baudrillard would define as an “image which asserts its powers by sheer presence, without signification”. Thus it creates its own power regime by claiming to be the piece of ‘art or ‘artistic’ and therefore to be historicized and discussed. This does not correlate with the narrative but in its abstraction becomes more approachable to a larger audience as there is anyways no fixed meaning attached to it.

Would this then not go against the main devised play acted by four women, directed by the other. It seems that the phallic settings of erecting monumental vertical sets like pillars, emphasis on straight and clean lines, heavy sets of earlier times disguise itself in this image making process and especially through media. The moving white strips particularly give this impression. One is not sure that if there is a particular logical decision to move the strips from one place to other. In *Sonata* (2002), for example, the setting is of a study and living room of a house where the play is set. Along with it, there

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<sup>64</sup> He has designed Son-Lumiere at Golconda fort and Port Blair, his resume in DADA mentions about this specialization

<sup>65</sup> Jean Ranciere, in *The system of Objects* identifies Glass as an ideal modern recipient. He says:” It does not ‘pick up the taste’, it does not change over time as a function of its content as do word, metal, nor does it shroud the content in mystery. Glass eliminates any confusion in short order”

is a constant display of variety of images (paintings by women artists) which keep coming on the screen. This could be called as expansion, distortion but it could also lead to distraction. The larger question remains that why would a devised play like *Nati Binodini* would need a male scenographer with an agency<sup>66</sup>?

One can contrast the professional alliance of Amal and Nissar (who are also spouses) against other professional relationship such as Deepan Sivraman and Anuradha Kapur or Maya Rao with her collaborators such as Asim Ghosh, Surajit Sarkar. While this itself could be an area of study, few things which stand out here is that the latter two of them have not got stuck to one scenographer in their plays. Anuradha Kapur has worked with Vivan Sundaram<sup>67</sup>, Bhupen Khakhar<sup>68</sup>, so one can expect a change in the pattern thereby change in the narrative/structure/interpretation with the change of scenographer irrespective of the efficacy of the production. Additionally, Anuradha Kapur uses an interdisciplinary method wherein she creates her style of 'surplus' through various other art form by adding parallel narratives and therefore parallel space which is therefore not fixed. Her alliance with Deepan Sivraman is also because he has been a visual artist alike Vivan Sundaram or Bhupen Khakhar.

In Amal Allana's case, the performance seems to be more 'stitched up' and coherent with the scenographic intervention.

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<sup>66</sup> A rehearsal observer's of *Nati Binodini* noted that the presence of Nissar Allana, how it came in the end and also the first scene blocking of women clad in white and their contacted bodies, their unfolding was based on some photographs he had brought in

<sup>67</sup> Designed plays like *Nayika Bhed*, *Ghar Aur Bahar*, *Baby & Gidh*

<sup>68</sup> Painted for *Sundari: An Actor Prepares*

While this is just a case in point, one also wonders the male agency which has been working around her. Firstly having Alkazi as a father who created a theatre history of his own, also taught her when she was with NSD and then her alliance with Nissar Allana since the age of 15 who not only becomes a professional collaborator but also a husband, both being progressive and yet with strong male influence. How does she negotiate a subtle dominance like this specifically in her plays? Is scenography still a domain of male and costume of female? Is being a producer a domain of male and being an artistic director being a female<sup>69</sup>?

Also, important here to note that Amal Allana has vehemently opposed any inclination towards the women's issue and have variety of work which do not necessarily fit in any gender perspective. In her own words: "...whereas the work of some women artists is defined by its defiance to the hegemonic dominance of the male point of view, others can be identified as voices which resonate with feminine experience" ("Gender relations and self identity: A personal Encounter"<sup>70</sup>, 166). Discussing her work closer to the latter one, this seems to be a class position wherein women of upper class with more mobility have always supported the dominant line of thought. Perhaps collaborating solely with her husband rationalizes her detachment towards a gender issue as it might need another kind of strategy or commitment.

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<sup>69</sup> Nissar Allana is the producer and Amal Allana is the Artistic Director of their theatre group: Theatre and Television Associates

<sup>70</sup> From *Muffled Voice: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*

It is not the male intervention which is problematic rather it is one single voice or presence intervening the space of the performance which perhaps could be detrimental to the opening of new explorations in performance.

Amal Alana's own writings in part of essays which has autobiographical musing very subtly discuss the repression of gender she experienced earlier in life, which is important to bring in here as it could depict the struggle and very subtle nuances of forging and demanding spatial freedom in the given scheme. Talking about her childhood, she says that it was an extremely progressive one yet the gender roles were defined right from having specific toys/dolls which are fit for girl child, allowed to participate in plays but was not allowed to step on stage so she says: "I moved around the periphery of the stage-backstage-in what could be regarded as safe woman's domain of theatre life" ("Gender relations and self identity: A personal Encounter", 168). She further remarks on the comparison drawn between herself and her brother. "In fact the space was securely earmarked for my brother who it was felt exhibited a great sense of poise and self-confidence on the stage from the age of four years! He continuously did children's roles, whenever required in my father's plays" ("Gender relations and self identity: A personal Encounter", 168).

By the age of sixteen, she was determined that she wanted to do what his father was doing- be a director. In many ways, being a director is to ask for the front stage, being visible and in control. It also perhaps rationalizes the fact that despite doing theatre for many years, it was in 90's that she moved from specific gender identity themes in her

because earlier she was also trying to adhere to the Alkazi school of thought and things which might not have allowed her to use the technique of devising<sup>71</sup> at all. While from the direction point of view there seems to be a break away from the earlier school but there are parts of the production where the older school of thought is fully followed. The Space under Nissar's hand seems to be one of them, which has great emphasis on symmetry, lines and in many ways the scenography 'stitches up' the whole into one coherent event.

To draw the parallel between Karnard's *Nagamandala* directed by Neelam (2005) and Alana's (1999) both in different times. Neelam Mansingh uses a bare stage full of people without any levels. The space is filled with Naquaals who are the spectator themselves but they are not cornered in one part of the stage rather have filled the space and participate in scenes occasionally. No demarcation of any particular space and everybody together merge with each other giving the sense of myth, reality, play and play, all of them together whereas in Amal Alana's play, though the stage is still bare but has levels of structures. The central platform is the designated house with a platform behind signifying a street, alley opening up to higher platform which is used for stylized choreography and the location for Shesh Nag's (the head serpent, male) habitation. The hierarchy between male and female gets more emphasized than being blurred. A method like this does remind one of Ebrahim Alkazi.

On the other hand, Anuradha Kapur acknowledges her disagreement with grammar of devising. She not only directs but also designs her production, has used multi collaborators, and will be discussed later

designers, painters in her team which creates more plural, inconsistent and conflicting voices. The effect of this collaboration is also seen in the space arrangement on stage.

One of her less known works (because it was a NSD student's production ) called *Baby Gidh* based on Tendulkar's plays totally eradicated the need of realistic sets as per the text, instead a bouncing boxing ring<sup>72</sup> (designed by Vivan Sundaram) was made where both the texts were performed. The violence of the text and the male characters both were at play. Because of the bouncing nature of the surface of the ring, actors also needed to improvise. Walking or moving on it was not as easy as it would be on normal concrete floor, thereby negating the 'balance' which could be used as synonym to consistency and symmetry.

In *Sundari*, she uses multiple layers of painted curtains with motifs from Ravi Verma's painting and by not one single artist rather two noted painters Like Neelima Sheikh<sup>73</sup> and Bhupen Khakhar which in the process gets juxtaposed with actors who are playing multiple roles (male, female, female impersonator etc) creating a space which is constantly moving, illustrating dissolution and decentering of known central space which is given importance.

### **The Technological Space**

Another crucial aspect of Anuradha Kapur's work, which also connects us to the fourth director Maya Rao, is the use of technology in their work. Neelam Mansingh has

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<sup>72</sup> Reminds one of *Trafford Tanzy* (1980) by Clare Luckham which used a wrestling ring as a performance space

<sup>73</sup> Both Sheikh and Khakhar are noted painter, artist

refrained from using technological interventions fully whereas Amal and Nissar Allana's work use technology in *Nati Binodini*, the white background of the stage is used to project 19th century historical settings of Bengal to depict Binodini's time. Anuradha Kapur and Maya Rao's work too have gone beyond supplementing the core performance itself in terms of understanding and runs parallel to the other stage narrative. In fact technological intervention in many ways makes it far more ambiguous, layered sometimes even confusing. Maya Rao says that technology serves as a co-actor. "It challenges me and working with it can get really exciting"<sup>74</sup>. Anuradha Kapur says that technology is another way or mode of expression which one could use by choice. But what are its implications from the spectator's perspective? Are they also challenged or feel excited about it?

Most of these projections and technological intervention are projected on actor's body thereby using body as an available space which arguably has the capacity to produce 'treated bodies' thrown in everyday life through advertising, media, television, film etc. How does this equation changes when technological interventions are used as part of theatre aesthetics?

Anuradha Kapur collaborated with film maker Ein Lal<sup>75</sup> for her play *Antigone Project* (2003), based on Anouih's version of *Antigone*, the title role played by Seema Biswas. In the first scene, Antigone laments the death of her brother at the heap of sand which

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<sup>74</sup> Personal interaction with Maya Rao

<sup>75</sup> Documentary film maker



moves to a ten minute movie by Ein Lal on Godhra riots<sup>76</sup>. The film begins with a nude male body resembling perhaps the dead brother and at the same time Gujarat victims itself and goes on to cover visuals of destruction, personal and social loss. It is important to note that Creone (Harish Khanna) continues to stand in the performance space almost creating the juxtaposition of the film and her body. While through the mixing of two varied texts and performance Anuradha Kapur creates a certain space arguably where Antigone becomes a mouth piece to lament the victim of riots, the mediatization mode adds another angle of it. Antigone's subject position and the unity of the text both are challenged at the same time through the film. Katherine Hayles' post human perspective helps me to explore this further. Through her book, *How We Became Post Human* (1999), she examines the post human as a point of view constructed within and by historically specific and emergent configurations of embodiment, technology, and culture.

The discussion on post human perspectives have been developed more in detail by theorists like Catherine Waldby, Katherine Hayles etc taking to an extent that they talk about the replacing of human with machines/cyborgs and therefore the loss of sovereignty of human being etc but in my opinion in Kapur's play it is not the post human condition in which she is interested in rather it is used a strategy to critique the present concept of nation and nation building. The post human subject allows her to critique the hegemony and cruelty of law, uniform, corporatization and thereby she draws a comparison between pre-modernity and modernity (not post modernity).

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<sup>76</sup> The 2002 Gujarat violence was a period of inter-communal violence in the Indian state of Gujarat which lasted for approximately three days. Following the initial incident there were further outbreaks of violence in Ahmadabad which lasted for approximately three weeks; statewide, there were further outbreaks of mass killings against the minority Muslim population that lasted about three months

One of the indicative assumptions by Hayles which can give an entry point in Anuradha Kapur's treatment of her play *Antigone Project* is that "the post human view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life" (*How We Became Post human*, 2). This means that there is a hierarchy which is maintained wherein the information and its cognition takes over the materiality of body. If this is so then 'death' which Antigone laments or the deaths that film laments of Godhra riots become less important. The informational pattern of Antigone's dialogue and the visuals of the film enable us to shift the focus from the lamentation of death to the critique of the power regime responsible for the situation. On the other level, the technological production (the play never makes a direct reference to Godhra riots) of so many bodies on the screen along with the lived bodies of the actors constantly challenge the comprehensibility of the subject.

While this would still remain to be a primarily a docu-drama, another of Kapur's production *Centauris* is a step ahead in this field. The play is based on Heiner Muller's text interspersed with some text from *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* by Mahmood Mamdani. Here the main character (played by Harish Khanna) is not even human and is reduced to an object who can be accessed through a remote control. He becomes a piece of furniture and merges with gadgets. The supporting actor Rajesh Tailang continues to draw attention of the audience towards the bigger screen which not only captures the actor's action but also exhibits the process of archiving through the continuous stamping and

stapling of paper. In this way, technology reconfigures and reconstitutes the human body and transforms human to a post human subject. The lead actor also comments on Dastavej (archivization) of life which is portrayed through the stamping and stapling of the paper. Catherine Waldby's argument that technology has the capacity to ascertain "the human not as inventor but as invention" and further she elaborates that "the very category "human" owes its coherence to technologies which configure bodily morphology according to the medium-specific qualities of the archive itself – the book, the photographic archive, the computer archive and so forth" (*The Visible Human Project*, 161). Thus *Centaurs* and its thin space of office along with rigorous documentation procedure are able to transform the human subject into an object (a piece of furniture). Interestingly, the narrative style of the play is also very archival in nature as it keeps moving from Mamdani's text to Muller's.

Another important aspect of the play is its attack towards 'Zameer', the Conscience. The lead actor rejects and laments at the same time on its death when he says "Zameer Ka Kya Hua" (What happened to the conscience" and "Aaj Ki Zarurat Hai Dushman" (Today's need is an Enemy) which again moved towards a post human perspective which negates the free will or agency of the body and mind rather it is the camera work (machines) which takes the center stage by producing the human form on the stage and not vice versa. This rejection of the autonomous will of human is a radical break as it annihilates the concept of the subject totally therefore there is a constant uneasiness which one feels as an audience

Maya Rao has also used the technological interventions in many of her plays like *Where Are You Lady Macbeth?* (2008), *Hand Over Fist* (2007), *Heads Are Meant For Walking Into* (2005) and others. The latter one itself create a mind space in its name by referring head as place/space which one can walk into. As Maya Rao herself says that the conception of the play was not based on a story but on random improvisation. The play draws many allusions from everyday life and runs parallel to informational pattern over the material substantiation. In one of the scenes, she walks with a suitcase in her hand and it is on the suitcase that the film footage of the nude protest of Manipuri women<sup>77</sup> gets projected. Alike Anuradha Kapur, Maya Rao also has tried to use technology to draw the attention to the present rather than going beyond the existence of human and thus critiques the labor law, cultural policies etc.

Her works come closer to the post human perspective more in many ways. The projection of her body parts on multiple screens simultaneously through multiple sources seems to be a recurrent feature in her plays. In *Lady Macbeth*, she uses the movement of her hands which is portrayed on a big screen with two variations and she is being juxtaposed with her movement along with the screen. In another sequence, her leg movements are projected on the screen with graphic and visuals using animation technique which seems as if the camera has penetrated her body to get these visuals.

In *Deep(er) Fried Jam*, she begins with a very ambiguous sound effect from back stage (as if someone is beating someone, comically) whereas the performance space is empty, one can see unclear picture of her feet on the screen. It is quite obvious that with these

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<sup>77</sup> July, 2009 Group of Manipuri women participated in naked protest to protest rape by Indian BSF

interventions the unity of the body is being challenged (again a reference to body as machine with various organic parts and multiple agency) but it is not just that. Maya Rao says that whatever is being projected then becomes another character for her which constantly throws a challenge to her as a performer<sup>78</sup>. It is vital to note that there is neither psychological interaction nor relationship which is being shared here nor it directs the audience towards transcendentalism, instead all of them together create a multiple sign system through their interaction and continuously displaces and also articulates the ever changing subject. Jacques Ranciere in his book *The Future of Images* takes the example of Bresson<sup>79</sup> and his close shot of hand and comments on the fragmentation of the body. He says that “by separating hands from the facial expression it reduces action to its essence” (*The Future of Images*, 5). In Maya Rao’s performance, this is further complicated as there are two fragmentary images along with her own body in front of the screen together produce discrepancy and dissemblance and resemblance. The question of what/who is real or is virtual real and vice versa continues to be posed by these technical interventions.

The question remains that why get into a technological space and thereby the virtual space and what does it offer to the director and audience? Interestingly, it needs to be noticed that all these plays have very limited actors. Maya Rao is the solo performer and Anuradha Kapur also works with limited number of actors. Does that mean that technology also is replacing actors in many ways? May be this is the post human condition wherein technology is actually able to substitute actors. *Centaur* has two

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<sup>78</sup> Personal interaction with Maya Rao

<sup>79</sup> French film director, reference made to films like *Pickpocket*, *L’argent*

actors, *Antigone Project* has three actors and *Sonata* has three actors. Maya Rao is the only actor herself in her plays.

On another level, use of technology brings to us various association altogether and in its varied and chaotic juxtaposition constantly challenges our way of viewing a performance. Various technological inputs like live camera, TV, film, documentary footage, laptops, microphones, wires etc on stage together conjure a contextual association as varied as reality TV episode, a film studio, a radio programme to internet surfing all together create an ambiguous space which does not have a privileged center or subject. Therefore there is no fixed meaning as its construction is continuous. It is this annihilation of the unity of the body and therefore state and nation which is being enabled by the technological interventions. Post human perspective in that sense becomes a tool than the themes itself of these plays.

In the above mentioned work, the potential of technology on stage has been noted specifically from the perspective that technology becoming a medium of transforming the body as site, there is still a larger debate on how the use itself be interpreted specifically in the context of virtual space, cyber space which has taken the world by storm in conflict with tradition. The constant use of camera which also in many ways is symbol of surveillance penetrates through a performance and what does it signify? The other vital aspect of technological intervention in performance is that either it assimilates the production into mainstream or it completely becomes non decipherable?

Maya Rao's *Ravnama* is a good example of it which is again based on a thin narrative of a woman who wants to play Ravana and tries to find out how she can do so. Maya herself acknowledges that despite few revisions, audience did find it difficult to receive it and she would further improvise this production. Some of the spectators who saw it in its original form in Pondicherry found her later production of the same play in BRM more approachable. This idea that the engagement between technology and performance will reveal itself might not be fully true and therefore might need more openings, linkages so that one could try to receive it if not understood.

### **The Object in Space:**

The second recurrent feature of Maya Rao plays is her importance given to the 'object' in the play, which would also allow us to connect Neelam Mansingh in the given context. The objects on the stage and their use have been a familiar site but what is striking in Maya's work is the way these objects take center stage through their fusion with multi media. For instance in *Deeper Fried Jam*, Maya Rao uses a very close and high resolution camera to capture her pouring of different objects like jewelry in water. A very small gesture or an activity which could have gone unnoticed then becomes larger than life situation as technology is used to highlight it in a larger magnitude. This stand in opposition of the function of technology or technological objects which through their function conceal the mechanism, labor used behind it thereby leading to a naturalization process whereas in performance, the technology deconstructs the naturalization process of other entity along with showing its own way of working.

To further elaborate this, camera on the stage usually escapes the category of being an object by virtue of being focused on other objects. Similar examples can be seen *Heads are meant for Walking into* wherein she plays with the shadow of a miniature cycle man. This privilege of object over humans itself brings in a hybridized subjectivity which is ever floating. Her own body in action on the stage continues to be challenged, ruptured by the intrusion of these objects.

The intervention through object has multifarious functionality and interpretations on stage. Strangely, it first begins with negating its basic function and creates a super or alternative or multiple functionalities<sup>80</sup> on stage. This can be termed as style apparatus but one cannot draw it out fully from the content perspective on the stage. In previous chapter, one of its functions discussed is objectification process which has the potential of cutting through heteronormative narrative and consequently destabilizing the subject position in Neelam Mansingh's work

Neelam Mansingh has refrained from doing multimedia production, instead she prefers to use objects from everyday life to create another kind of space. That also does not mean that the performance become pre modern sans technological input. As cited already, a play like *The Wife's Letter* contains various kinds of objects (mostly household) like plates, clothing, sewing machine, pots, water, sand, some plants, paper, typewriters, etc. Maya Rao also in her plays improvises with different kind of objects. In *Deeper Fried*

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<sup>80</sup> The brass plates in *The Wife's Letter* becomes a toy for play, a paving path, and an instrument to make noise



*Jam*, she uses salt, piece of cloth, a doll, water, bangle etc. What is insightful about this process is the choice of the objects. Neelam Mansingh finds inspiration from everyday life which she calls as a ‘valid theatrical subject’<sup>81</sup>.

“The hissing of the kettle, the gurgle of children, the joys of quotidian, life became significant objects to be scrutinized, examined and interrogated. It was important to state that what is dismissed as the ‘little parts of life’ could be made luminous, equaling those climatic events that are usually associated with high drama” (Ceremony as Dramatic Text, 28)

But one also needs to be aware of the paradoxical situation of everyday life: “Separation of the theatrical from the everyday, in framing the activity in certain specific ways is a transforming activity from ‘unmarked’ to ‘marked’”. (39)

In this context objects themselves then depict a certain ‘marked’ performance through the spread of materiality on stage which is also reminiscent of Alkazi’s emphasis on materiality of the stage and the property used. Neelam Mansingh chooses to use certain objects which are usually referring to a certain era (definitely not today). The brass plates and pots which she uses are no longer a part of everyday life even in rural areas it is used for special occasion. The manual cereal grinding machine made of stone used in *Phaedra* is mainly used in part of rural India but not as much as it used to be earlier. All these objects on the stage convey a history of their own. They not only ‘represent’ by becoming a part of the production and therefore change its meaning but also illustrate a social

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<sup>81</sup> From : Ceremony as Dramatic Text, NSD Journal, No 1, January 2012

history of its own in terms of nation, gender, race etc. Important point to note is that most of these objects refer to a 'past' but used in 'present context'.

Donald Preziosi though discusses in the context of Museology and Art history in his essay "Performing Modernity", his argument is relevant in the above context.

"Modernity is thus the performance of the ethics and politics of identity, at every scale from the person to the race. It exists as a virtual site constituting the edge between the material residues, relics, and dreams of the past and the adjacent dream space of the future. It is what is perpetually in-between two fictions: origins in an immemorial past and the destiny of its to-be-fulfilled future. The fundamental labor of the nation and its parts (that cyborg entity conjoining the organic with the artifactual) was to use the image of its (future)" fulfillment as a rear-view mirror oriented backwards, so as to reconstitute its origins, identity, and history as the reflected source and truth of that projective fulfilled destiny—a room all of whose walls, and whose floor and ceiling, are mirrored. What is thus realized in the history of the nation-state and of the nation's citizens and material objects is not the past definite of what it was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what it has been in what it currently is; rather it is the future anterior of what the nation-state and its subjects and objects shall have been for what they are in the process of becoming." (Performing the body, performing the text)

Therefore an object with its own past mixes with the story of the present in such a way that the past gets superimposed, produces pre modernity (earthen/brass plates, pots, grinding machine) and it functions independently yet simultaneously it fuses with the present with which it is able to perform the modernity.

Another example from Neelam's play is the use of typewriter in *The Wife's Letter*. Mrinal the protagonist of the play writes her letter to her husband and details her life in an upper middle class Bengali family. Neelam Mansingh chooses an old rickety typewriter with the help of which Mrinal on stage writes her letter instead of paper or other mode. In my opinion, paper would have lost the sense of extinctive quality which a typewriter possesses. Its constant sound from typing and the movement of the bar both create a pre modern past or in other words the typewriter becomes a predecessor to more advanced modern technology in the days to come (computer) and becomes 'objects of memory' which also signifies a certain kind of museumisation through these plays. Not always necessarily through the presence of the object on the stage but also the costumes which in itself perform a certain modernity. Amal Allana herself designs costumes in her plays which also work in the parallel lines of the object of the past. She describes the costuming of her title role in her play *Himmat Mai* (Mother Courage) and intermixing accessories such as women's attire, war clothes, Jootis etc from Himachal Pradesh.

One can notice that how the performance gets nationalized by making various references to nuances of the regional culture of India overlapping with each other and transforms

of "Courage to Mother India. In other words what these directors are doing in process to create power of the traces of shared history through/in this object.

The use of objects also connects with creating moments of hyper reality in these plays as Anuradha Kapur points out, which also connects to the new way of making plays through "Devising" or "Collaborative Creation" particularly technique of Happenings. It is the "Event-ness" which means an event which happens 'here' and 'now'. This concept of 'here and now' then focuses on action rather than acting. What a performer 'does' is more important than how the performer 'acts'. The 'Happenings' snubbed the traditional focus on plot development, characterization, rather it dealt with the traditional elements of an event. Therefore in 'Happenings' all the elements like character, space, objects are treated equally. It tried to create a 'collage' of the events on stage through juxtaposition of 'diverse' materials. Kaprov also calls it as an organic form. Organic here would mean that it is just not the arrangement or sequence of objects with a definite form in mind, rather it is the unique property or material itself which admits a certain form. The act of stitching clothes, draping a sari, undraping a sari, planting a tree, making fire, cooking real time on stage are part of these actions which give a sense of not just a story progression but also it is a process of completion of many actions (jobs) on the stage. Happenings also heavily draw upon "everyday life" because of which the objects we deal with everyday and our relationship with these objects become an integral part of our existence.

There is always a chance of 'accidental' in happening which gives it the characteristics of hyper realism, thereby a sense of materiality. The obvious question which gets raised here is that then if /how this is different from earlier school of theatre. The materiality which seems to be more stressed word today has actually been present throughout both in the Anglo American paradigm and even in Theatre of Roots but in different form. The difference in my opinion lies in the prioritisation. Materiality which today precedes over the spoken and written text is itself a different phenomenon. From Gender perspective too, negating the word which is always phallogentric and finding nuances of body and object, thus engaging in materiality has the capacity to get into some of the 'unmarked' territories and assert one's identity. On the other hand, one cannot negate the implications of efficacy as well and there could be cases where inefficacy would lead to a making of phallogentric text. Anuradha Kapur's *John Gabriel Borkman* (2008) which uses a metal structure in the middle of the play where John (Harish Khanna) stays most of the times and from where he delivers his dialogues gives him an elevated position. Despite, the play is about critiquing the notions of masculinities perpetrated by industrialization, engineering etc, it confirms to it by making John a hero. The other aspect is that it is materiality which gives hyper reality to these performances and considering that actors usually do not use the technique of psycho-realism and depends on stylized, oratory or surfacial kind of acting, then one definite way of clinging to a realistic mooring gets attained through the relationship creating through materiality of stage.

With object intervention, we also delve deeper into domain of style and post modern consumerism. The kind of objects which we have discussed certainly point towards a past and connects it to modernity. What it also does is that it negates the core utility value of the object and creates a new functionality of its own. Baudrillard, in *The System of Objects* writes:

“The stylization of forms is invariably a corollary of the growing autonomy of the functional world and the optimized organization of space in its extension” (*The System of Objects*, 55)

### **The Politics of Style:**

So far we have looked into the space dynamics along with different kinds of stylistic interventions which have been used by the works of these directors. All of these do lead us to a certain convergent structure and aesthetics of the play. It is striking that all these directors have maintained a distinct style of their own and yet they are able to connect with one another than the common grounds of style itself.

Anuradha Kapur in her memorial lecture at Sarojini Naidu University at Hyderabad 2010 vehemently defends the importance of style in the work of these directors which has been an area of regular criticism specifically coming from the same region, Hindi theatre. She adds that any performance with less or more stylistic inputs will always be a new performance, a new story, which is quite correct. In fact Style or Aesthetics has always

been part of the performance whether it is the modified adapted version of Anglo-American or a regional/vernacular paradigm the aesthetic intervention has always been present, however, from Theatre of Roots the focus on the aesthetic aspect has significantly increased. The music, dance, décor, costumes do take equal importance (if not more) as the characterization, plot or the written word would have in the play.

The latter influence is more visible in the works of these directors who in fact are using style as a 'differentiator' from the other kinds of work supplemented by the discontinued and thin of gender issues underlying their performances. I say thin and discontinued as not all of their works are gender issue based.

Style as a subject can be researched from multiple perspective. For example from postmodernist aesthetics, it has its own purpose, interpretations and need (which shall be discussed in the next chapter). The other aspect could be from gender perspective itself where style becomes an important determining factor in identity politics. Judith Butler discusses the same in detail in the given paragraph:

“ If the boy is not a being, but a variable body, a surface, whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality then what language is left for understanding the corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its interior signification on its surface. Sartre would have perhaps called it as “ a style of being”, Foucault-“ a stylistics of existence” and in my earlier

reading of Beauvoir I suggest that gendered bodies are so many “ styles of flesh” ( Gender Trouble, 139)

One of the aspects of stylistic intervention in these works is to create alternative models of styles and bring it in the open, the way earlier interpretations have reified the concept of ‘the ideal or real woman’. The split bodies as a stylistic intervention allow them to explore this and show the cause and effects of the reified gendered body. While it is true that the alternative aesthetics might not be successful all the time and the alternative model itself might assimilate into the dominant reified natural gendered body endorsing the power of patriarchy, this approach in my opinion has the potential to explore, disrupt and create ruptures in the given male order. This also depicts that how style being the subset of form which is so tightly fused with the content that it has the capacity to transform the content itself.

The Theater of Roots also initiated a new kind of production, which has often appeared even in my research, is to do with hybridization of the performance by mixing genres, text, tradition, modernity etc, assimilated in new concepts of interculturism, multiculturalism etc. Anuradha Kapur’s new name for such hybrid termed as ‘contemporary hybrids<sup>82</sup>’, ‘mixed parentage<sup>83</sup>’ has widened the scope of mixing, and interweaving new materials in it.

So, the question is ‘what is distinct about the aesthetics in the works of these directors’?

One common aspect which has been articulated by Anuradha Kapur herself is the

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<sup>82</sup> Term used by Anuradha Kapur in her memorial Lecture, Hyderabad 2013

<sup>83</sup> Term used by Anuradha Kapur in her memorial Lecture, Hyderabad 2013



aesthetics of surplus, (excess) in performance. Her own work is in a way in excess of parallel narratives which is framed by her multiple collaborators. *Sundari* has multiple spatial narratives made through the paintings of Neelima Sheikh, Bhupen Khakhar and her own set design. Neelam Mansingh uses multiple objects and her inclusion of water, fire, ice bodies create a surplus which also connects us to another crucial aspect of the style as emphasis on visuals. Amal Allana too in her later works has used excess as metaphor to signify grotesque, carnivalesque, specifically in *Erendira* with the use of bright lights, costumes, face masks, paints. Maya Rao too through her layering of one episode with another creates tangled narratives along with her Kathakali nuanced acting, video installations, all overlapping with each other to create an excess.

Surplus as an aesthetic intervention also works in many ways, which is why it also leads to confusion, chaos further adding up to the making of an incoherent language as against the phallogocentric language which is more structured, undergone a reified process thereby making it seemingly simple and comprehensible. It acts against the idiom of 'less is more' which hints towards a certain 'control' of the director and the overemphasis on subtlety. While surplus as a technique also uses subtlety but what it does more is to intermix many narratives, text, spatial objects, actors and characters, a criss crossing which does not allow one the 'voila' moment. The climax is totally negated. So by doing so, the directors are defying or complicating the over hyped Anglo American tradition, popularized by E Alkazi. Perhaps, it also helps these directors to break away tangentially from Theatre of Roots, which depended on style but did not complicate it too much may

be because it was also meant for both village and urban audiences whereas works of these directors do work mainly in urban centers with aware audience.

What is ironic here is the consistent effort on rationalizing and creating a discourse around Parsi Theatre being a close cousin of their work. Anuradha Kapur has also tried to articulate how the subsequent theatre genres and films have assimilated the concept of melodrama and other aspects from Parsi theatre. Judith Butler says that the styles are never self styled and they need a bit of history which could limit or condition the possibilities, however, I feel a little bit of history with all its limitation will already give you a certain residual identity which one would like to cling to. So, it is not the historical genealogies but a strategy to appropriate and rationalize some of the common features which is being used here. Associating oneself with a mainstream commercial theatre genre which merges with Bollywood movies also allows or makes it permissible for them to take their performance in mainstream or borrowing from mainstream. This itself could add a kind of 'surplus' to the show.

There are still some doubts about the efficacy of the technique in my mind. If less is more, then is it not possible that more could be also less? In other words, are the techniques of surplus and this strong emphasis on visuals themselves capable of hiding something from the audience? Is this not the reason that in *Nati Binodini*, despite using split bodies (a body surplus if that is a technique to explore many nuances of Binodini and create a subject position) fails to show the bargaining power she enjoyed as a

successful theatre actress? The notion of victimization with all grotesque bodies takes precedence in the stylization in such a way that Binodini as a victor is lost.

While style will be discussed from postmodernist perspective in the next chapter, it is necessary to comment on the category of 'contemporary hybrids' which as per me connects very well with 'coalitional politics' as a strategy articulated by Judith Butler. She finds problems with 'unity' which would also stand for 'one common voice' because of its totalizing effect as opposed to coalitional politics which allows 'dialogical encounters' and alternate or incoherent or unheard voices to join in too. In my opinion, contemporary hybrid as a different aesthetic has the capacity to open gaps between different cultures, sexuality, modernities etc. What a hybrid form does is without knowing, lays open and unfolds the power structure of the play and the society. Some of them are already worked out by the directors carefully whereas some of them just show up. Despite the high claims of staging the hybrid in a non hierarchical way, it clearly shows a hierarchy which gets played on its own. For instance, Neelam Mansingh's use of Naqqals who neither develop into characters nor do they provide their own story of daily survival shifts the focus to two lead actors Ramanjit and Vansh. The naming of the plays itself shows a power play of catering to the certain class of audience. Despite being associated with Hindi/Punjabi theatre, the constant reference in English<sup>84</sup> creates a barrier between high and low distinctively.

Even with all this, the contemporary hybrid still show new promises, challenges, ruptures and interpretation, which also gives me an entry point for my next chapter.

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<sup>84</sup> Many of her plays in the recent past have English names, while they have used Punjabi language. E.g *The Suit, The License, The Last tale, the wife's Letter etc*



## **The Reception and Spectatorship**

The notion of hybrid is not a novel concept, and one can find its traces in the way race, culture, and identities have evolved temporally and spatially. What is new about this concept in contemporary times is the way hybridization as a process is being used as a deliberate strategy for different purposes. From Biotechnology (new dog breeds, cloning), communication technology (latest gadgets with multiple features), manufacturing goods (hybrid cars), economic sphere (mixed economy, mergers and acquisition), political sphere (coalitional government) to the world of Art where different genres, forms, materials get fused with other to create a new hybrid.

Theatre of Roots appears as a direct example of a hybrid product where the folk tradition comes into alliance with the other methods of theatre, signifying a conflict/congress between tradition and modernity. It opened a forum to discuss the contemporary issues in the like regional vs. national identity, rural vs. urban, and debates on interculturalism etc.

The work of women directors has borrowed heavily from Theatre of Roots, but it does not necessarily interweaves the folk always, rather it moves beyond the boundaries of regional, national to international and multinational. The use of technology, the new spatial changes, interdisciplinary approach towards all kind of art, feminist intervention are few new ingredients which has complicated the notion of hybrid. Anuradha Kapur calls it 'Contemporary Hybrid'. So, how does one react to this contemporary hybrid?

the politics behind it? Considering that these works can be seen as a feminist intervention, also claimed by them, as gender based theatre (if not feminist), what does this hybrid offer? With these questions we have entered the domain of reception which is a crucial part of a feminist discourse/intervention. How is it being perceived by the audience and how do these directors negotiate with the audience in the reception process?

The audience/spectator's position also allows the understanding of the 'efficacy' of a given performance. Are they able to achieve, what they intend to achieve? The question is far more pertinent as some of the strategies used by these women directors is presently becoming a diluted but can be appropriated to apply to different 'school of thought' for many other directors and students to follow. While there will always be the unquantified factor of 'individual talent', the strategies in form of legacy which is being passed on has the capacity to further complicate the question of efficacy.

The previous two chapters have also dealt with the question of performance within specific context of body, space and style within the frameworks of relations between tradition and modernity, feminist theories and theatre history of North India, the focus of this chapter lies in connecting these framework to the larger context of the globalized space in which these works can be located. The preceding chapters have also dealt with the historical and political scene from independence to 1980's, along with the changing theatre history out of it which did play a great role in influencing and shaping

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Shantash Pillai, NSD faculty and Theatre Director uses some of the techniques in his acting classes which has borrowed from Anamika Haksar. D. Shivraman, Theatre designer and director mentions the influence of Anuradha Kapur in his work.

these directors. Moving to 90's wherein the select plays which have been chosen for discussion do fall, was a crucial time for India economically.

### **The Post (modern) space and NSD:**

1990's have been called a historic decade in India for very obvious reason that India opened its doors to globalization. The new phase of the economic reforms, new industrial policy favoring more international trade, foreign investment, and technological improvements played a significant role to support Indian economy which was under financial crisis of 1991. This meant that there was inflow of capital, entry of multinational companies and deeper urbanization of metropolitan cities like Delhi, Bombay etc and also emergence of new cities like Pune, Bangalore, Jaipur, and Hyderabad etc. This also meant that the older power structures of State and Nation or institutions were challenged by the neo capitalism. Globalization indicated that the entire world had turned out to be one singular market, yet another strategy through which the hegemony of the west could be played under the banner of postmodernism to sell McDonald and Pizzas.

1990's cannot be referred as a historic decade by just introducing the economic reforms itself. In fact it is full of contradictions. Two major events which would leave an indelible impression on national scene are: firstly, politics of social justice based on caste

followed by the implementation of Mandal Commission<sup>86</sup> and secondly the politics of religion based on Hindu religion followed by demolition of Babri Masjid<sup>87</sup>.

These are important events as they bring back the debate of tradition and modernity to its core and evidently make the emergence of postmodern redundant. The word postmodernism is important here as it has been also used as a marker by some of these directors to define their work which will be discussed in detail later.

Before taking this argument further one also needs to locate these directors in the given time and space. By the early 90's all these directors had come up with some of the productions which were going to be the 'landmarks' of their work. The Kasauli meet of artists and theatre practitioners delved deeper into portrayal of women on stage culminating in a production called *Nayika bhed* (1989, 1990). Maya Rao had established her theatre group called *Vismayah* and had come up with *Khol Do* (1993), Anuardha Kapur's *Sundari: an Actor Prepares* (1998) along with *The Job* (1997), *Umrao* (1993) was produced under her own banner of *Vivadi* comprising artist from different field. Neelam Mansingh and Amal Allana had already done many productions by this time with their respective groups.

The important issue which one has to confront is that how does one gauge the reception of these performances without taking the audience response in consideration? This

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<sup>86</sup> Headed by BP Mandal, the mandate was to identify the socially or educationally backward class and bring them up the progress line by seat reservation and quotas for lower castes, OBC, SC, ST etc. PM V P Singh, tried to implement the recommendation which caused a massive protest by students

<sup>87</sup> Situated in Ayodhya, UP, it was destroyed in 1992 when a political rally developed into a riot involving 150000 people



question poses another problem, i.e. how does one access the audience to these performances, considering that there is no set audience pattern one can find in theatre scene in Delhi? Probably, the only audience pattern which one can trace is through National School of Drama which has managed to create a set of audience of its own with continuous staging of performance year after year. Additionally, one of the convergent points with all these directors has been their association with National School of Drama either in the form of being a former student or teacher. Therefore can we not use the allegiance of these women directors with NSD as an opportunity to theorize the debates on reception and spectatorship? NSD has been playing an important role in shaping Indian Theatre by developing different kinds of 'strategies' and 'trajectories'. Pierre Bourdieu has developed the key concept of strategy and trajectories which are very relevant here. As per him, Strategy could be called as a specific orientation of practice, a product of habitus<sup>88</sup>, it might not be based on conscious calculation rather could also be formed from unconscious dispositions whereas trajectory describe a series of position successively occupied by a writer ( in the present context, director as writer) in the successive state of literary ( performance) field. With this definition, Bourdieu's another important concept of 'Field'<sup>89</sup> is being introduced which can be used aptly to understand the institutional space of NSD which in many ways forms the part of the field of cultural production. If one takes one step further, once can further define NSD as 'field of restricted production' as it is fully governed by ministry of culture, India and not aimed at economic benefit. What it has earned in its fifty years of existence is sanctification,

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<sup>88</sup> Bourdieu defines it as the system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures i.e. principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without conscious aiming

<sup>89</sup> Any social formation is structured by way of hierarchically organized series of fields like education, political, cultural etc

prestige, artistic celebrity accumulated in the form of symbolic capital<sup>90</sup> and cultural capital<sup>91</sup>. It is a field where different directors (agents) are investing their respective cultural, symbolic and academic capital and the change in the position of the agent has the capacity to change the structure of field. Historical fact make it more evident that though there has not been a radical change in the structure of the field, it had few important shifts as it moved from the hands of Satu Sen to Ebrahim Alkazi to B V Karanth.

As mentioned already it is fully state funded institute without producing any economic benefit would position NSD as self-sufficient entity altogether which further means that it did not need audience. It could still survive without the audience's support.

While Bourdieu mentions that the field of cultural production tries to attain autonomy<sup>92</sup> by its ability to reject the external factors and adhere to the specific structure of itself governed by the symbolic capital, it is still structurally homologous with others. There are other fields like political field and the economic field which is influencing its structure, through the agents involved within the structure by changing their positions. So, even if it remains to be state funded and not an economic profit making organization, one still needs to consider if it is possible to detach itself from the impact of globalization? Perhaps it would be impossible to do so because the State, which in many ways creates the field of power, has the capacity to control, influence and regulate the

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<sup>90</sup> Refers to degree of accumulated degree of prestige, honour, celebrity

<sup>91</sup> Refers to form of knowledge, an internalized codes which equips the social agent empathy towards deciphering cultural objects, artifacts etc

<sup>92</sup> A case in point as NSD also was recognized as deemed university since Oct 2011

functioning of it. This argument becomes clearer if one concentrates the 'interest' factor of a field. Producing cadre of trained actors and directors as goal for NSD seems more of a means, or strategy than the core goal itself. After all, what would these actors/directors who would become social/cultural agent produce? It is the 'produce' which is the interest factor here. A produce from nation building perspective, back in 60's and 70's was to create narratives of progress, development and story of the perfect balance between tradition and modernity. But agents themselves produced by NSD shifted their political and cultural positions in its course and therefore brought a certain critique of the progress which was idolized earlier.

It is interesting to note that Maya Rao's and Anuradha Kapur's intervention in street theatre is a shift in the position which had the capacity of changing the structure of the field. The power concentrated within the concentrated space of NSD was dispersed and along with it the audience base<sup>93</sup>. Probably, it was to attain the cultural capital which was needed to establish themselves which NSD could easily provide to them. It was like entering the game and investing one's own academic and cultural capital in the most advantageous way to get the maximum benefit (not economically). In a period of time, these select directors and others like Anamika Haksar create their own narrative, aesthetics which Amal Allana terms as Gender based theatre, hence 'create history' by introducing a new or abridged position and try to 'displace' the earlier artistic movement.

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<sup>93</sup> One also needs to note that till then Maya Rao and Anuradha Kapur had no direct affiliation with NSD. It is with their affiliation with NSD and post-their studies abroad that they come to proscenium space

Where is this 'interest' derived from, which creates this displacement of the field? Is it because the new director (agent) tries to make a position for himself by ousting the other (director)? The source of the interest arguably lies in the habitus of the director and also through the overlapping of different fields or in other words the external demands and sanctions which needs to be considered with in the field. In the given context, perhaps it comes from the 'social field' from women's perspective. Perhaps , that the interest was derived out of the late 80's and 90's feminist scene when feminist intervention<sup>94</sup> started to die down, specifically with NGOisation of these autonomous groups which aligned themselves to subtly promote the policy of the state. Regardless of the new feminist intervention and new strategies they tried to bring in, their allegiance with NSD also meant that they were also self-sufficient and did not need audience to sustain themselves.

There was also a growing interest and developing studies which continued during this time questioning the category of 'gender' and 'class' and problematizing many feminist positions. Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana in their essay " Problems for a contemporary theory of Gender" brings in the alliances feminism formed with other contemporary movements such as agitation against Mandal Commission, Dalit rights movements, politics of contraceptives etc and examines the problem and potential of the evolving feminism in a globalised space. In a landscape like this, the 'interest' of the women directors in forging an alliance between feminism and the other past theatre genealogies was a natural impetus which is evident in their work. 80's and 90's are also the time when there was general disillusionment with modernist project, which people from different spheres of life felt. Fredrick Jameson, articulates that the cultural evolution

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<sup>94</sup> Feminist street theatre like Om Swaha etc were not happening anymore

of the late capitalism (which could be the product of globalization) has created catastrophe and progress simultaneously. Modernity, which did boast of higher progress actually turned out to be far dangerous. There was a constant struggle to repress, control, assimilate or expel the opposite's extremes in each binary and in order to create success story of human progress, civilization and order, inferior elements in the system were de-rooted. All this must have made that change possible in the cultural field of production by some of these directors. Their accumulative strategy then seems to be that of creating a subject position for the female actor and space in general and disrupt the hetero-normative narrative

How would then globalization, change the equation further in the given field? By the mid 90's and 2000 these directors had already attained more of symbolic and cultural capital. As discussed earlier, globalization does not directly influence the functioning of the field of NSD and its agents but it certainly makes its presence in subtle ways. One of them would be the symbolic goods it produces in the forms of plays itself which would be discussed in detail later. One of the other important change globalization brought was that of changing the urban landscape. It has not only brought some of the small towns to prominence but also it has been able to change the face of metropolitan cities. Julian Murphet mentions in context of USA, but is applicable to India too that this new urbanism has been conceived "as a relief from the stifling monotonies of state monopoly control over urban form. It implies that the relative decline of state investment in the urban renewal, and rise of international capital in the construction and control of urban space" ("Performance and Space", 122). This holds good for India too and one can take

Delhi as an example here where vast indoor supermarkets, corporate offices, new residential buildings in new format is not just being here for functional use but also brings in new aesthetics of consumerism. Globalization or late capitalism as phenomena then seems to be developing, regulating, changing, positioning and privatizing the urban spatial structure. While NSD remains to be owned by the State, the other theatres like Kamani, Sri Ram Centre, Sri Ram Bhartiya Kala Kendra, FICCI auditorium, Sapru house, Triveni Kala Sangam all of them are part of the capitalistic framworke common people. The charge to hire them for an evening is expensive for the small theatre groups who would not be able to perform in these spaces and would be silenced eventually.

Anamika Haksar in one of the interviews comments on this phenomena:

“I don’t think that cultural spaces are shrinking. Monetarily, theatre will not die. What is happening is that funds are being handled by corporates and they control the outflow. Naturally these centres decide how the cultural spaces will function in a capitalist economy,” explains Anamika. (The Hindu, Oct 19, 2007)

Despite the flow of capital and towering city skyscrapers in the city, one cannot say that these urban centers with all its development are already creating a postmodern condition alike many of the European countries or cities. One could call certain pockets and part of some urban centers which have attained a postmodern status, for instance Select city walk, the Saket mall in Delhi within itself contains a post modern condition but can one say that Delhi is a postmodern city.

## Postmodern Strategy

So, this is the urban space in which these directors are performing apart from other festival space with in country and abroad wherein they constantly confront the nuances of globalization. As already mentioned it is the symbolic product in the form of plays they produce is where their participation in the liberalization/globalization process lies. While all of them have their independent groups, their close affiliation with NSD is not only giving them easy access to cultural capital but also the economic capital ( in terms of funds, grants) which is important. When one looks into their productions (symbolic product) one finds that there is a deliberate addition of postmodern sensibilities. Not in all the plays, but it acts like an undercurrent motifs in most of their plays which brings them akin to the influences of neo-liberalization. There could be two strands to postmodernism in given space, firstly when it becomes a condition, a set up under which one has no choice but to function and adhere to dictates of postmodernism or the other where postmodern is used as a project as a strategy for various purposes. In my opinion it is the latter one which seems to be functioning here.

Maya Rao's performance can be cited as examples of the postmodern strategies which is being used in her plays. Phillip Auslander has collated various feature of a postmodern performance which aptly fits in Maya Rao's performance. The long monologues, the death of the character, no psychological character, collage structure, intermixing of genres and most importantly mixing of high and low culture. If one takes the example of *Deeper Fried Jam* (2003) , it is a collage in structure with many interchangeable

episodes, independent of each other and mixes genres of dance, performance art, standup comedy and live music together. Maya Rao is never a single cohesive character throughout the play. She constantly moves from the role of being Maya herself, from being an actor, dancer, performance artist, to a Delhite, a victim etc, she perform all of them in an episodic format. The mixing of high and low culture is evident the way she fuses the classical dance of Kathakali with popular western music. This kind of features gets repeated in her other plays too. Anuradha Kapur's use of clipping from the original film by Guru Dutt's *Saheb Biwi aur Ghulam* for her play of the same name is also one of the examples of how popular culture is used as postmodern strategies. Amal Allana uses Bollywood songs in her play *Metropolis* (2009) and *Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother* (2004) both are part of the postmodernist intervention. Amal Allana in her essay on Indian theatre articulates the same view when she is referring to these women directors along with others under the common banner of 'Gender Based theatre' which contains 'unmistakable urban sensibilities' and "Intensely personal, their work is often combined with the related aesthetics of cinema as well as video technology. Such an eclectic approach to their performance constructions signals the arrival of post-modernism in Indian Theater"<sup>95</sup>

One can say then it is through the use of the postmodern strategies that they participate in the process of globalization and become the harbinger of neo liberalization.

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<sup>95</sup> Allana, Amal ("Indian theatre-II"<http://www.goethe.de/ins/in/ip/prj/kus/dat/en5104126.htm>  
[Accessed 6/3/2013])



But what does it actually mean in terms of the features of the field of cultural production. How does it get displaced? How does it confront with the political? A political play genre usually tries to represent a counter culture and also depicts the shades of the utopian state it believes in but the same does not have the scope in the postmodern strategy wherein it is the part of the same culture which it constantly critiques by being within and not outside. One good example for the same can be taken from Maya Rao's *Quality Street* (2010) which critiques the effects of globalization and interculturalism. The story revolves around Nigerian mother who is still loyal to her colonial residual past whereas the daughter who against her mother's wishes plans to marry a Kenyan boy in her native village is product of decolonized but Americanized upbringing. It is the preparation of the wedding, through which Maya Rao explores the problems of globalization in conflict with the residual colonial past. While there is no particular side she favours, she critiques both the perspectives. She continuously shifts from one role to the other and keeps questioning her own identity. While there is reconciliation in the end between mother and daughter the whole play continues to question the political and social framework of postmodern culture. For instance her love for imported English tea in Nigeria and her hatred for student wearing slippers to an American university where it become 'cool' to do so. The postmodern lingo like 'whatever' which can be used at any point in time to evade a direct reply. In this way she puts a doubt or suspicion in the minds of the audience without resolving it. But one is also doubtful of the politics of it. In fact, in my opinion the humor here validates their colonial and American identity and their reconciliation in the end makes it a story of universal mother and daughter who would remain to be closed to each other despite few differences. She does not bring in

any scope of an alternate or counter culture but within it, she shows the functioning mechanism of it.

Connecting it to larger framework of the postmodernist strategy is its celebration of freedom

## **The Audience**

The discussion on postmodern strategies and the politics would continue to appear as we proceed ahead and take up the issue of audience more directly. The field of cultural production does not just get structured to influence and get influenced by the agents working within it but it also creates an audience for this cultural and symbolic goods it produces. NSD here then does not just become the producer of the agents (theatre practitioners) but also the audience for itself. Aparna Dharwardker in her book *Theatres of Independence: Drama Theory and Urban Performance* in India covers the effort which was made to create the audience base in Bombay by Alkazi for his Theatre group and Theatre unit. She mentions that over a period of time they were able to create an regular audience base of 3000 persons. Alkazi as he moved to NSD as director, had consecration, prestige and artistic celebrity in mind when he began to develop the audience base in Delhi. His distaste for 'commercialization' and 'corporatization' as Dharwardker mentions means that there was always an effort to make NSD production as seemingly 'High Brow'<sup>96</sup>, art. What is interesting here is that it is the English speaking Delhi culture is what made it a 'Cultural Desert'<sup>97</sup>, therefore he focused on Hindi speaking middle class

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<sup>96</sup> High art which needs training or certain degree to high cultural capital to decipher

<sup>97</sup> Quoted from the book *Theatres of Independence: Drama Theory and Urban Performance*

population as target audience and apart from tuning his symbolic good as per the 'taste' of the audience and vice versa, he also enhanced the number and quality of audience by expanding venues<sup>98</sup> and more importantly his productions in open space like Purana Quila, Ferozshah Kotla which Dharwadker finds as the turning point in the experience of spectatorship in Delhi. What is also important here to note is that the number of spectators dwindles to 5000-6000 post 1977<sup>99</sup>, though remain stable at that. What does this 5000-6000 audience consist of? Is this a homogeneous group with a particular aesthetic taste? Questions like these would need solid data analysis, bigger sample size which is not in the scope of this research for now, but I would certainly try to draw inference here as an observer who has been part of this audience group for over a decade now and had a chance to see different kind of performances and also interact with fellow spectators.

While there is no empirical data here, the number of the audience must have remained to be the same overall for NSD productions even now (or even lesser). This can be also easily deduced by the fact that a given performance which runs in the city in different auditoriums in Mandi house mainly have the maximum capacity of 600 to 700 seats. A successful performance (specifically referring to the select women directors in discussion) these days do not run more than three to four days which means that a given performance must be getting viewed by maximum of 2500 people approx. This number would increase in case the play starts to moves in festival circuit.

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<sup>98</sup> Opening of Meghdoot Theatre, improvised open theatre etc

<sup>99</sup> The calculation method of the figure arrived is not available. I think it could be by the number of shows done and the capacity of the auditorium could help to determine this number

Although the Bharat rang Mahotsav, a festival space does boast of more than 50000 viewers in a three weeks' time, this remains to be a onetime annual affair , but crucial in developing the 'taste' of new audience which would then begin to see more performances of the same nature. Apart from festivals, NSD's publishing house with number of books creating a genealogy of its own, brochures for each production and the most importantly the circulation of the cinematic photographs of the productions within and outside the premises, all of these play an important role in shaping the audience. The audience base largely still remains to be middle class, Hindi speaking till today but has undergone changes as per the changing socioeconomic state which strongly influences their aesthetic taste.

Moving slightly backward, Alkazi's Highbrow theatre would have equally required an audience of developed taste, which is partially dependent on audience's habitus and also the producer's (NSD) influence on them. The 'cultural object'<sup>100</sup> in the form of performances which NSD produced then differentiates itself with other object in hierarchal way to become legitimate<sup>101</sup> which meant that the spectator had to have a certain training or education to decipher it. This brings in the framework of class in this context for in order to decipher the legitimate cultural object one needed to have an exposure which a high social status is more likely to provide. This also means that the audience also had to have a certain 'cultural capital' to receive these performances. That is why, one of the observation here is that out of 2500 a major portion of them do consist of fellow theatre practitioners, interdisciplinary artists, critics, theatre students from NSD

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<sup>100</sup> Term used by Pierre Bourdieu equivalent to cultural commodity like painting, art work, film, performance

<sup>101</sup> Legitimate by asserting the possession of the cultural capital

and other institutes, students of drama, cultural studies, humanities etc who over the period of time with training in their respective fields are able to decode the performance and understand the legitimate cultural object. For instance, Delhi Ibsen film festival, which had its run for five years brings in commissioned projects from India and abroad based on Ibsen plays and its corollaries. It seems as if there the audience population is internally built in giving it a status of self-sufficiency.

While one can easily become the viewer and make sense of it, but to get into the secondary subject one needs a certain familiarity with work of Ibsen. For understanding and getting into the 'sphere of the meaning of the signified'<sup>102</sup>, of the play like *Metropolis* directed by Amal Allana for Ibsen festival, a spectator would need to know that Noora in the play is Nora who appears from the play *The Doll's House* written by Ibsen and more importantly in what circumstances she decided to leave the house. That is why the brochure on the play and the photo exhibition around the festival space, a brief history which revolves around Ibsen are there to develop and educate the audience in the given perspective. The festival space also creates interactive forums in terms of seminars, informal meeting sessions, and meet with the director where again an audience with adequate cultural capital can participate, although these forums can create an illusion of a free, democratic space.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Bourdieu's term taken from book *The field of cultural production*

<sup>103</sup> Though an extreme example Just to give an instance in Bharat Rang Mahotsava inaugural ceremony for 2012, where post the speeches of the ministers, directors, chairpersons, an audience wanted to ask a question but was stopped there and then with the reason that he was out of context.

the forum seems to be a very open and democratic space where freedom of expression is respected, it still has the subtle ways of controlling the discussion. It could be attained by inviting the specific favorable audience. To share one anecdote<sup>104</sup> Rustam Bharucha vehemently criticized the play *Metropolis* (2009) on various parameters in a forum where Amal Allana with her team and other critics, scholars and theatre personalities were part of a seminar. The initiation from Rustam Bharucha catapulted into heated debates, almost dividing the audience into two. What is important to note here is that the group who spoke against the play, was never invited again for similar forums in the festival.

#### **with a Difference:**

This chapter continues to shift from audience to the cultural object, as it is difficult to talk about one without the other. They are so correlated to each other that it is almost as if one talks about them together. At this juncture when festivalisation is being discussed it is to be noted that alike in music industry where festivalisation has also reached a peak in commoditization through PR, marketing, good exchange and finding buyers, retail, distribution channels, theatre festivals remain to be slightly aloof. There are still no corporate sponsors' sought or any economic capital is earned, it is only a big investment to create a specific kind of cultural capital which mutually benefits each other. While this is not in the scope of this research the festival management can be looked into the perspective of strategies which get devised through

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<sup>104</sup>The incident took place in Anandgram, in a seminar organized to discuss Ibsen plays and dances staged in Delhi Ibsen festival in 2009

the selection process itself. Taking example of Delhi Ibsen festival again, it has tried to bring in the experimentative, the international productions from India and abroad and also evokes the notion of prestige, consecration it derived from getting some reputed directors. Women directors like Anuradha Kapur, Neelam Mansingh and Amal Allana have showcased their performance in this festival. There is almost a celebration of viewing cultural objects by star directors. In Bourdieu's term they have attained a symbolic capital which has created a set of specific audience base for them which will come to watch the play but all this whether it is the festival or any other space certainly depends on the kind of cultural object they produce.

This cultural object is also synonymous to the notion of contemporary hybrid. 'Hybridity' as a notion and as an application has been there in different fields and for a long time now. A number of examples have been enumerated earlier in this chapter. It would be insightful if we further locate the importance of 'hybridity' in contemporary times and how it is appearing in different forms in the civil society.

1990's in India started another trend along with other aspects which have mentioned earlier and i.e. the emergence of coalition government and continues to be a trend which is being followed till today. If one moves to some of the features of globalization, another trend which has been recurrent in the last 10-15 years is the increase in the numbers of mergers and acquisitions of different brands, firms, companies etc. Amidst this, how does one read the hybridized cultural object which is being produced by these women directors?

There have been explorations in the area of contemporary hybrids and one can notice the words which revolve around it such as adaptation, assimilation, reconciliation, plural existence, variation, intersection, appropriation. These words do not give further insights in the functioning ability and the structure of hybrids, they seem to be sheer descriptions but what can be derived from these words that it is 'power relations' between the mixing of the two and many which allows us to read the hybridity in a certain way. What equation does these ingredients share and how do they exhibit or give an opening to an audience in its combined form and the relations they carry? Judith Butler's concept of coalitional politics in my opinion then would allow us to look into the power relations this hybrid consists of. In order to avoid the universalizing and totalizing effect of female identity and masculinist oppression, Butler prefers dialogic encounters of different women's position to articulate their respective identities. Butler's concept at one hand allows us to look into the power relation's through the portrayal of women on stage which has been discussed in previous chapters in detail; on the other hand it also allows one to see the dialogs the various components of the theatre do have in their intermixing of a hybrid. One needs to be aware of the fact that there is no one homogeneous singular hybrid which is being produced by these directors but there is few converging point across their productions.

Lets take few examples and try to read their hybridized form. *Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother* (2003) is a good example. It has been adapted from Marquez's short story of same name, done in Hindi which is similar to some Rajasthani dialect and is done most



of the urban centers like Delhi, Mumbai etc. One needs to note that while it is performed for urban centers, there is an element of folk which has a loose structure and can be placed in multi context. The power relations in this case can be understood through the relationship folk art shares with high brow element such as use of canonized text like Marquez's and its staging in an auditorium like LTG or Kamani which attract a certain kind of audience . It creates a geographic dissolution by referring Latin America, India and unidentified part of Rajasthan by mixing Hindi with a Rajasthani dialect. These are not just the two theatre elements, the choreography is done by a French artist named Gilles Chuyen which is again a mixed version of Bollywood and other kind of dance with the background music which remains to be Latin American interspersed with old Bollywood song. What does this kind of borrowings from popular culture signify? Is it that the performance is being assimilated in the domain of popular culture or is this a method through which the binary division of high and low is resurrected by bringing in the notions of contrast and comparison? What would this comparison and contrast achieve, I case there is one happening here?

In my opinion, it is the former one which is more likely the reason to insert the popular in it. It mixes both of them to create a hybrid product which is coherent, complete and does not show cracks, slippages, rupture it could have contained. This kind of plural existence while dilutes the political in a given context by making it universal, it is able to expand its audience base from parts of India to Latin America. In fact, the play did its international tours and apart from UK also had a chance to be performed in Latin America. One instance which can be quoted from the same play is pertaining to a dance sequence.

Erendira's sexual exploitation has been shown with much imagery. One of them happens to be the display of the male trousers of different sizes, in the backdrop, in a series probably depict vividly the extent of sexual exploitation Erendira must have gone through however one is not sure of the same about a particular dance imagery referred here. The dance sequence shows Erendira coming forward towards the audience and the rest of the female cast (including one male) approach her, grab Erendira and take a half round and position themselves behind Erendira, both again move in synchronization and with a spank on her bottom move away. This is repeated individually by the rest of the cast and has been done in dance form, with a very peppy and rhythmic music. The dance form is very readable and one can see that all the cast who have turned into her customers are having a sexual intercourse from behind. The issue here is that the music and dance all together with perfect coordination shifts the attention from any mental trauma, or a sense of loss into a tableaux which is more colorful and beautiful, a tableaux which falls under the domain of popular by virtue of which it commodifies the cultural object, ready to be consumed. The political perspective of the sexual exploitation of a woman gets lost in music, dance, and colour, costumes which divert the attention towards sensations, feeling and pleasure instead of critical examination. It seems as if Amal Allana is trying to depict 'magical realism'<sup>105</sup>, as a movement or genre in theatre<sup>106</sup> rather than the story itself.

Neelam Mansingh's plays are more rooted in Punjab and have consistently used folk songs and have inserted Naqqals and she has been also most consistent in using the

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<sup>105</sup> A literary genre mainly where magic, fantasy gets mixed with reality

<sup>106</sup> In 'meet the director' day after Erendira was shown in BRM, there was lot of talk about Magic Realism. The discussion dealt with how magic realism of the story was converted in the performance through colour, costumes, design etc.

similar templates/structures denoting a rural vs urban hybrid in almost all her plays compared to others and her many plays have toured in international theatre festivals. Isn't it the metaphor of hybridity which allows the marketing and consumption of tradition of indigenous identities? Neelam Mansingh's performance like *Yerma* (1991), *Sheher Mere Di Pagal Aurat* (1995) (*The Mad woman of Chailot*) have gone to theatre festivals organized abroad and have represented India. Apart from playing and depicting the notion of 'exotic', one can also notice a fascination of the making the spectacle of everyday life here.

Anuradha Kapur's version of hybridity is derived out of parallel and independent narratives through painting, sculpture, installation and other art forms fusing with the actors. For example *Sundari: An Actor Prepares* (1998) has two reputed artist curtain paintings, there is a play within a play and there are multi roles of the same man Jai Shankar Sundari. Building on Bhabha's interpretation of hybrid it is not just the play but even the audience in his terms are "neither one, nor the other but something else besides, in between" (*The Locations of Culture*, 219) but would Bhabha's positivism in postcolonial hybrid which stands in resistance, instantiating identity at the same time which gets subverted would be applicable here? The issue gets further complicated when hybrid becomes a separate genre itself in any form rather than a system where different genres intermix. Bakhtin's viewpoint that the notion of genres is to show the worldviews and ideologies raises question on the relevance of hybrid in contemporary times. One important entry point which one gets from Bhabha articulation is that it shows how 'new' enters the world through the hybrids from which two inferences can be drawn. Firstly,

and this newness encompasses style politics within, which becomes the differentiator. Secondly, this difference puts this cultural object in a globalised space to be commodified. The hybrid as genre itself has been commoditized by various good in the name of customization and pleasure of consumption.

Why a subtle use of popular music or Bollywood music in a play like *Erendira* or even *Metropolis* commodifies the cultural object. Maya Rao and Anuradha Kapur heavily use technological intervention in their productions. Technology has a major role in the process of hybridization as it is able to create the newness or give an aura of newness which then becomes a differentiator and unique selling proposition for that particular object. Technology works both ways by making the object highbrow like in *Ravanama* (2010) the camera projection on the screen are abstract and is open to multiple interpretations or in *Head are Meant for Walking* a series of actor's interaction with the camera which does not have any direct point (asking for greater cultural capital to decode) whereas it can be also low with inclusion of popular music with various treatments like mixing or fusion of music in *Erendira*. Thus it is able to commodify itself at one go and yet keep a calculated distance from the market.

The next big question is that what kind of relationship does contemporary hybrid share with reception? By introducing this hybrid through the binary of high and low culture what happens to the feminist reception? What would a close, tight and coherent hybrid

offer in terms of reception? It is to be noted that how the discussion on hybridity merges into postmodernist strategy, by creating a collage, a *mélange* of different materials in such a way that it pleases in such a way that aesthetic value precedes over political value. In that sense the directors move the debate from reception to consumption.

The performances become another commodity in the market, which needs to be consumed. This movement from reception to consumption is able to bring back the discussion on the producer of the commodity and therefore authorship. Certain hybrid forms then become trajectories on which they develop their respective principles of differentiation (branding) which makes them distinct from each other in the restricted cultural field of production and because there is a convergent point which is derived on the basis of the gender based theatre, the competition is also kept in control. Thus the authorship in the end becomes the area of focus, which consequently develops into the emergence of Star directors with their distinct style. For e.g. Neelam Mansingh difference lies in using Naqqals and Merasi singers along with the use of signature elements of earth, water, fire etc. Amal Allana, if one looks her in last few plays, the subtle inclusion of popular culture and collective identity in terms of split bodies is here forte. Anuradha Kapur's difference lies in dealing with interdisciplinary art form and fusing together with special reference to technological intervention. Maya Rao's difference lies in being a solo performer herself and use of technological intervention. These difference also allows them to keep their 'star status' alive.

‘hybridity’ and ‘difference’ both become the important markers of consumption and modernity. Lipovetsky calls post modernism “ is the moment at which the avant garde is no longer incites indignation, the search for the new has become the norm and the pleasure and the stimulation of the senses have become the dominant values of society” (Lipovetsky, 1994, Postmodernity,151). Hybridity and difference thus become dependent on each other and while the economic capital is not involved directly here, it allows the accumulation of the cultural capital.

It is helpful to look into some of the reviews of the performance where the features of hybridity is depicted more vividly. The below one is for Deeper Fried Jam.

“ [...] is a rock concert. But here “song numbers” are more like episodes where dance, music, theatre and video are woven together around themes that are on a city's mind – survival, war, food, power, love and nostalgia for a long-lost time.”  
([www.narthaky.com](http://www.narthaky.com), the other festival, 2003)

Yet in another scenario it is called as:

“... a dark urban comedy, a Faustian ride through the infernal side of the city’s soul.”  
(STQ, 2003)

In this example the focus shifts to the body:

“Set up as a rock show, the central performer Maya Krishna Rao, ... weaves together stories, some nostalgic and poignant, some political or satirical, some simply playful and funny... they can

also be appreciated at a purely visceral level, responding to what the ears feels, the eyes hear and the heart sees..." (www.audiovisionary.net [ Accessed 14 Oct 2011).

These reviews themselves depict that how 'political' or 'satirical' can be swallowed up by the emphasis on the interweaving different genres pleasures on visceral level, sensation of ears and eyes. The reference to Nostalgia in the above review is equally important to be noted. This sense of loss when looked into collectively can be transformed into a kind of social memory. This is exercised through culture as culture itself carries elements of nostalgia, giving rise to consumerist culture where nostalgia is kept alive through the manufacturing of memories or past in for of a product. Taking this line of thought further, *Deep Fried Jam* itself turns into a commodity which needs to be consumed for its nostalgic appeal. Important point again to be noted is that it remains a classic product or commodity which has the capacity to be consumed in the global, international market. The different version of *Deep Fried Jam* (2002) which turned into *Deep Fried Jam* (2003) is far more customized and tailored for a particular kind of audience<sup>107</sup>. The usage of technological innovation right from attached mike ( again reminiscent of a rock singer), video installation, usage of camera, electric music instruments all of them ties in with the concept of globalization and how there is a homogenized 'urban' market wherein *Deep Fried Jam* works as the text product or commodity, ready to be consumed.

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107 Quoted by A. H in SQR, Maya Rao mentioned in Director's meet post the performance that how play keeps changing and it does not have any specific sequence to it and there are many on the spot improvisations with her collaborators

One can rightly ask then that Theatre of Roots in its structure and content is more hybridized than any other form. Does that mean that hybridization as a strategy brings it in the domain of Postmodernity thereby a silent affiliation to neo capitalism? In my opinion, Theatre of Roots did not get assimilated in to the mode of Postmodernity. The difference lies that the notion of 'social' which was maintained. Most of them were rooted in regional centers and was working with the space around. This 'social' in many ways has moved to the notion of 'aesthetic' in these works. Unlike the former one, they are not rooted in regional centers rather urban centers like Delhi and Chandigarh where culture of 'consumerism' is prevalent and still growing.

Neelam Mansingh's play amongst all these directors has been deeply rooted in her experimentation with tradition and folk and all her work revolves around Punjab and collaborates with Naqqals. While the 'social' of it was able to get Naqqals in forefront thereby giving them space in theatre and constantly in society which is more readily evident in some of the earlier plays like Nagamandala, Kitchen Katha and Yerma where they are present in high numbers and have more stage presence, but slowly and slowly within the stage space they have been marginalized by making them sheer support function where they become part of the chorous or a worker to move props on stage from one place to the other in some of her later plays like *The Wife's Letter*, *The Suit*, *The Last tale* etc. There is a spatial fragmentation which emerges out of these performances and creates a new kind of 'exclusion' principle<sup>108</sup>.

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<sup>108</sup> An example of commodification. Naqqals presence and absence from the play runs parallel to the concept of use and throw



Anuradha Kapur, Amal Allana and Maya Krishna Rao's use of technology in their plays gives further insights into the notions of Postmodernity which is in play. Technology as a means, a style quotient and as content, a politics both have been used in their work. One important work which was referred in previous chapter was *Centaurs* (2007) which took issues of surveillance and critically examine it, and found that how the new technologies which is ideally invented to make life better, also has the capacity to govern and regulate them but technology is also being used as a style apparatus in many of the plays. It has been discussed in detail in the previous chapter that how it tends to blind the audience by information overload. *Metropolis* (2009) and *Sonata* (2008) both use multiple projection behind the drama of the stage and this constant shift from one picture to the other along with the drama unfolding in front can be distracting. It is not the same point which is being made here rather what is important to note here is that technological interventions/inventions/improvements all of them have close association with high capitalism in its sheer economic capital investment which is needed for them and Postmodernity in the form of consumerism allows consumer to use it.

Technology plays a dual role in the process of reception. By making the production technical or high end in such a way that the audience is not able to consume it whereas on the other hand use of technology can just play with the main narrative and becomes functional and decorative in nature. Before even getting into its use, method, appropriateness in a given performance, the word technology itself has to be dealt with audience. Taking *Ravanama* and *Heads are meant for walking into* as examples, where audience has to continuously make an effort to understand the projections on the screen

as they remain elusive and constantly shift from one coherent narrative thereby it defies the instant consumerism of the performance. Alike Postmodernist condition where everything is ready to be consumed instantly, here is an item which one can not do so, however technological intervention have also become hallmark of postmodern performance and i.e. for some other reason. It allows another level of 'contamination', 'intermixing' of genres which are the features of postmodern performance. The issue is that if it stop the process of consumption, it also stops the process of reception. It becomes so abstract that it becomes highly individualistic, self-referential treatment.

### **The Feminist Spectator, The Urban Spectator and new Readings:**

The essence of a feminist performance lies in its active spectatorship. The impact of the same can be directly seen in grassroot performance where in the spectators also in many ways become participants in the cat. It creates an acute awareness in the feminist spectator about the social attitudes in the given environment. Even in the proscenium set up, the role of feminist spectator vis-à-vis feminist performance is equally important. The level of engagement with the politics on stage and connecting it with one's immediate environment is very high in such performances.

In the work of these directors it seems that the audience is more 'passive; the audience despite sitting together collectively is fragmented and reacts individually towards the play. While the intention of the directors cannot be doubted, there lies a gap between their intent and the output which gets generated through this procedure. In a context like

this , How the postmodern performance negotiates with feminist politics in the work of these directors? Anuradha Kapur is the only director amongst all of them who seems to be more comfortable with the label of 'feminist' where as others have always moved out of any specific name tag. Amal Allana in one of her interviews said that she is now engaged with 'Theatre of the City', 'Theatre of the Metropolis'. Maya Rao through her satirical take on contemporary issues also deals with political issues. Neelam Mansingh brings in the politics of tradition and modernity but 'gender issues ' remain to be a common theme which keeps coming again and again in their work? So, does postmodernist approach to a play fully kills the politics of it? Feminism as ideology and action seems to oscillate between subversion and recuperation or marginality and mainstream. Considering that all of them are theatre of the city, one cannot neglect that there is an impact of globalized economy in urban centers like Delhi, Chandigarh, even if it has not reached to the higher forms of capitalism , it does create a milder or diluted form of postmodern condition. There is already a paradox, their association with NSD cannot be negated too which still works on the notions of modernity and development and gendered favour of patriarchy. Therefore it is a much layered space in which they are producing the cultural object which is an intermix of tradition, modernity, technology, and is inclusive of the popular. This 'popular' which also denotes 'hegemonic' and 'commoditization' and therefore commercial and mainstream has been often written off because of his close association with the dominant mode of production and representation. Jill Dolan in her later writings have regretted the fact that her own work materialist feminist<sup>109</sup> in the book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988) itself has

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<sup>109</sup> It highlights capitalism, the material condition and patriarchy as central in understanding women's oppression

participated in the “critical disavowal of liberal feminist theatre practices” (Theatre Journal, 60.8, 435) and asserts her fresh position towards popular theatre which should be part of the critical analysis.

Interestingly, the work of these directors do not fall in the domain of commercial rather they could be termed as ‘middle brow’ in Pierre Bourdieu’s term as it mixes the high brow art which NSD has championed over a period of time with the popular from the cityscape , the folk, hence low brow. In fact feminist theatre criticism itself has been criticized for distancing and enhancing the gap between high and low by its preference of one than the other. Jill Dolan quotes Laurin Porter, a critic who mentions that “a popular success is obviously not a reliable index of artistic merit and worthy objective on in and of itself, it is one measure of work’s potential for making an impact... and reaching an audience”

It is because the above reason that it has been possible to examine the work of these star directors as it evokes multiple responses. Even in its failure, it has the capacity to show the point of failure, rupture, assimilation and break from dominant narratives etc. As it has been already mentioned that the work of select directors are not ‘commercial’ and despite the privilege class position of themselves, it still continues to have its association with debates on modernity and contemporary politics.

With this background, one can now forge into some critical framework through which one could receive these performances but before that one also needs to be aware that the

audience is part of the social milieu which has undergone changes brought through the phenomena like globalization and liberalization. The audience base as targeted by Alkazi still remains to be the same in its structure i.e. they are middle class, Hindi speaking, have a certain amount of cultural capital along with the economic one but over the years it has evolved in its taste. This itself is a vast area of study in term of finding the evolving taste, distinction parameters of audience, one can at least comment that the audience population has been diffused in its character but few characteristics which still stands out is that it is largely middle class, mixed gender, Hindi speaking but a product of global culture and definitely urban. To locate the feminist spectator in this crowd is very difficult and alike the directors the feminist position of today's population is also diluted. As Amal Allana puts it that it is the 'theatre of the city'. Therefore instead of finding a feminist spectator it would be interesting to see that how an urban spectator reacts to these performances who is also victimized or marginalized and constantly fighting in the global competition.

Elin Diamond's theory of 'Gestus' and Jill Dolan's concept of materialist feminist are very relevant here as these frameworks gives a chance to examine any marginalized history and not just feminist history. Considering that the field of theatre poses more complication as 'realization' of the given play text undergoes many changes in the hands of director, producer, collaborator, designers and performer, thus becomes difficult to create a coherent feminist argument, Elin Diamond came up with the 'theatre specific' theory called 'Gestic Criticism'. Drawing from both, feminist and Brechtian theory of alienation, she focuses on Gestic Brechtian gest of the feminist

performer, particularly in the way that Gestus creates a specific relation with the spectator. By retaining her own historical subject position separate from the character and using 'gest' to 'read' the social attitudes encoded in the play-text, the feminist performer enforces an awareness in the spectator of her own temporality. Through the triangular structure of actor/subject, character and spectator each position is historicized. "No one side signifies authority, knowledge or law" (*Unmasking Mimesis*, 94). Her conclusion is that "...[a] gestic feminist criticism will be able to 'alienate' or foreground that those moments in play (text) in which social attitudes about gender could be made visible"( *Unmasking Mimesis*, 90). In fact, Paul Connerton mentions two mnemonic ways to social memory, one through existence (which could be directly correlated to Actor/subject) and the other through acquisition (which could be referred as character). So this overlap of bodies opens up an entire gamut of interpretations. The important point to note is the third angle which Diamond introduces by getting spectator also at an equal space with alienation dichotomy of actor/character. She says "woman reading as Woman" not getting affected by the "male gaze and through gestic moment getting rattled/disturbed sufficient enough to politicise the issue". (*Unmasking Mimesis*, 94). This feminist tool is not necessarily a tool which needs to be used exclusively to understand feminism. One can also substitute this equation with any marginalized voice in the audience, reading the voice of marginalized on stage.

With this framework, let's us examine *Nati Binodini*, directed by Amal Allana which has been a huge success. It was hailed by critique and the same time was able to attract

a larger audience. Being an audience myself, what I particularly noticed that it was not just the regular theatre viewers, it actually attracted Hindi speaking<sup>110</sup>, middle class, family audience which might not have seen or would have preferred to see a Maya Rao's play. The play brings in story of struggle, not a subaltern story, but a tale of marginalization, compromise and also negotiation of 19<sup>th</sup> century popular Bengali actress called Binodini. The play undergoes many changes to make it accessible for urban audience. If one refers to any gestic intervention here, it seems very difficult for me to point out a scenario or a gesture or a monologue which does that. Binodini's disappointment of losing the battle of naming Star theatre on her name is very well compensated with the coveted role of Chaitanya, the Male God-saint. The power which Binodini asserts then by firstly getting a coveted, male, Godly role in front of a closed heterosexual, largely male and middle class audience, shows the bargaining power she enjoyed. It destabilizes the class and gender position both which is transformed into a humane and godly quality in Binodini which gave her a saintly status, thereby canonizing her to the respectability matrix. The gestic intervention in this case become impossible to attain, also because of linear, chronological narrative which does not give much scope for a gestus to develop. From a materialist feminist point of view too, the class and gender position is simplified too, where there is constant connotation of her being a 'prostitute' who is looking for redemption, negating the negotiation power she did possess with her commercial success.

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<sup>110</sup> The other population of Delhi based Bengali audience also needs to be taken into consideration. This demands a separate discussion which I have dealt with here

What is interesting here is that apart from attracting larger audience, the play also was appreciated by critics and won few awards<sup>111</sup> too. So, what did audience love about it? One simple reason would be that it had features of the popular ingrained in it through a realist narrative, comic scenes through parody of acting styles by Binodini, a story of struggle and victimization which brings cathartic moment in the end. In the last scene where Salima Raza reached out to audience by moving in the seating area with an appeal gets a great applause from audience

Bruce Mcconachie's concept of 'Embodied Realism' borrowed from Lakoff and Joseph adds in an interesting perspective here. He says that human being who makes meanings on basic level, spatial relations and bodily action which depends on the projection of the value system of the spectator on the actor and character. It is the constant blending (with actor/character) and unblending (with real world) through which he oscillated between the value of the actor as if " I am experiencing your life with your value but projected by my subjective experience" Considering that *Nati Binodini* must have been largely viewed by a middle class audience, what must be going through them? Four women enacting the role of Binodini, perhaps must have needed constant blending and unblending from the audience. Their middle class, (who is part of the dominant culture) values of respectability and notion of celebrating girl power ( part of the urban postmodern culture) both must be working together as they engage with the play. The value system of the stage and events on stage is also not very different. It is liberal feminist position layered with eulogies of being 'victim'

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<sup>111</sup> META awards.2007



and its redemption. In this way it endorses the subjective experience of the audience by making the narrative of respectability and thus does not destabilizes its position.

To elaborate this further, the audience probably sees an interesting dichotomy of a subject which has been looked through real popular culture and its renditions. For Bengali audience it would be jatra, professional theatre as well as the political theatre and the progressive theatre movement in Bengal. *Tiner Talwar* written and directed by Utpal Dutt could be an example of the same which takes up Binodini story which is radical in its approach by showing the agency and the bargaining power Binodini asserts. Even the audience in Delhi, who might not be very well versed with Bengali theatre, would draw the parallel from any other actress stories<sup>112</sup> where content and form indicates an analysis and reception as a liberal feminist perspective where destabilization is not always achieved.

Amal Allana's interpretation of Binodini might remain to be a redemption story in totality and specifically the way play ends with Salima Reza reaching towards audience, yet in terms of the radical forms and the gestural performative utterance metasized by the presence of four Binodinis create an immediate radical impact which an apparent overall analysis cannot justify.

In a scene where one of Binodinis (Swaroop Ghosh) tries to kill and shake furiously the other Binodini by strangling her neck, can be considered as an act of violence which breaks the notion of passivity of the domesticated body. It deconstructs the

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<sup>112</sup> Meena Kumari, the Hindi film actress, perhaps her story also could work on the same lines

notion that victim cannot be perpetrator of violence. Considering that the audience anticipates the docile representation of the domestic space, can receive a jolt on the sheer power of the body in its violence. In another example where Binodini improvises with the mirror, it is an important act of taking control of her own life. She becomes her own mentor/patron/author and rejects for that particular moment any male agency. She herself becomes the agent of her own destiny. Even when she puts a grotesque make up to show her displeasure, she seems to assert her own agency in that protest. While Amal Allana is able to deconstruct the set construction of domestic space by creating bodily gestures, her ideological position still gets trapped in the notion of respectability and redemption narrative.

In contrast to this, Maya Rao's latest play *Non Stop Feel Good Show* (2013) is supplemented with the *I Walk* gives us another perspective. Before getting into the analysis of the performance, it is to be noticed that how 'Queer identity' has been running parallel to her other identities. While she does acknowledge this position at all, neither through her performance nor through her discourse, a limited but a group of audience has put some of her performances in alignment with radical, lesbian group like Split Britches. It is interesting to note that the way market dynamics can appropriate a cultural object for its benefit of consumerism; here a marginalized group appropriates a female, heterosexual performer who has nothing to do with alternate sexuality and creates an iconic figure out of it. But the question still remains that what makes it akin to Queer identity? Is it her constant pushing of the style and form and bring an alternative narrative? Even if it remains to be in the domain of

heterosexuality, it can precipitate into a 'residual culture' which could be claimed by queers community. Her constant movement from a role of a man to woman and never being fixed can be also interpreted as a parallel to Butch/Femme dichotomy. In *Deep Fried Jam*, she becomes a coy dancer and creates a very classical, feminine pose and expression whereas at the very next instance she transforms into corporate honcho striking a deal. Even in *Khol do* where she begins the play as the saddened father moaning his loss of daughter, it is in his pain that daughter and father become one. It is ironical, it is never directed towards any reference to alternative sexuality at all.

Coming back, to *Non Stop Feel Good Show* supplemented with *Walk* is another important play which has been hugely popular. *The Walk* which is independent piece created in reponse to December, 2012 Delhi rape case in bus has been touring in various forums and festivals. It started from Jawaharlal Nehru University where it was the part of the protest named as " Lets claim the night", moved to Bharat Rang Mahotsava'12, was also staged in literary festival 2012, Open frame Film festival, foreign universities in US, open space in Shipra mall Ghaziabad and on streets of Cannought Place.

*The Non Stop Feel Good Show* is full of episodic snippets which range from arts to politics to beauty tips, to the obsession on reducing weight etc. Maya Rao's performance is known as 'self referential' in many ways in her many plays where she poses as Maya herself but here she seems to break this concept herself. Interestingly, she brings in the 'autobiographical' in picture which is of course fictional, comic but

at the same retains a photo album which is real and belongs to her. She uses her own pictures and her family photographs to delineate the story of the woman with all ups and downs. Despite the elements of autobiographical the play does not become self-referential, which is the strength of the play. So, there are two parallel autobiographical narratives which are running here, one which is real and an informed audience would even recognize that the pictures have been taken from which plays and at the same time the comic, fictitious story of Malyali girl and her relationship with her family and social environment. The parody which is again appropriated by postmodern performance feature functions effectively and is insightful. One of the issues which the autobiography takes up is the issue of matriarchy which has been prevalent in part of Kerala but has been subtly marginalized. The reference to her grandmother, mother and herself as a strong woman character who not only are responsible to run the family but also take care of their husbands is perhaps the product of the same matriarchy which allowed them agency.

The snippets in the play subvert many kinds of dominant currents in the society. It critiques the consumerist culture through the woman who is obsessed with beauty tips and cars. The subversion continues when she parodies Mamata Banaerjee, current chief minister and comments on the current Bengal politics and later she ridicules the cannonisation of Navrasas. This political satire where she moves from Gujrat (attacking BJP government for having the least income paid to the labor with all its progress) to Bengal (attacking the current politicians and the power play) breaks into

her own style of not being diffused, abstract and individualistic. It evokes a certain collective response with the issue she takes up.

The radical break comes in the form of 'The Walk', a monologue which Maya Rao performs through variations and constantly breaks the phrases she uses through pauses, repetitions, stress. The monologue moves from assertion such as right to claim public places in the middle of the night by women, rape conviction which remain pending, the awareness on the sexual abuse within the closed circuit to a democratic appeal to ask, take the permission to have sex, touch and marry and finally the *I Walk* transforms to 'Think'. Strikingly, it is a piece which had its genesis in activism, politics and then it moved to the domain of performance. It was performed as mentioned earlier in JNU campus as a protest against Nirbhaya rape case and soon moved into the festival circuit of Bharat Rang Mahotsava.

The audience was attracted to this instantly post the rape case which had built to a furor in the country and many pertinent questions were raised about the women in society. While it was acknowledged that it is the mindset, a deep rootedness in patriarchy, the debates shifted its focus on anti-rape laws, sexual harassment laws. Maya Rao's performance which begins with an assertion very soon demands a right to walk and she says "Give me 635 conviction", "Give me one cop who would listen", "Give me one politician who could stand for me" Whom is asking this? It is the state, which has been hailed as protector, the guarantor and also the harbinger of social change, thereby modernity. How would state perform this role? Judith Butler notes the

possibility of the negative implications of Liberal feminism when it decides to legislate the feminine as universal. In her essay "Burning Acts", she quotes from Robert Cover's essay and exhibits that violence of legislation, legal interpretation through judges, the instrument of modern nation state, with the use of punishment has the capacity to cause violence, pain and death. Would it also not reduce the political discourse to a juridical discourse thereby the political struggle can be easily prosecuted.

Not only 'woman' is being juridically produced through the different laws and legislations but also it is through the legal interpretation of these that the stress on 'respectability' and controlled modernity' comes into being. By bringing stricter laws against the abuse against women, once again the feeble status of women as they need 'safety' gets iterated. Maya Rao's activist performance is on an ambivalent position. She initiates a debate on rights of women and asks them to join the walk but at the same time ask a secure, safe atmosphere through state intervention also in many ways. Her interest in applied theatre also has motivated her to the piece. The audience reception of this piece has been phenomenal and has attracted large number of audience; however the application of the piece remains diffused. Also the spaces in which it has been staged is also problematic. It started from an activist, politically charged space from JNU and has found its place in different festivals. It is evident that audience connect to this very quickly because of the social memory it shares. It is staged in Jaipur literary festival and other festivals. What it does in the process is that it robs the radicalism out of it in a space which is hegemonised through celebration

and commodification of the cultural objects. Maya Rao in her interaction did mention that a woman's group had approached her to do this piece with them. What was interesting about this intervention was that the women were supposed to join in 'The walk' as participants and it was going to take place in a crowded place like Cannought place. This has the radical potential and openness where it connects with the audience directly and even if it does not the women who were spectator themselves turn into performers and thereby a change agent and diluting the gap between the author and spectatorship.





## Conclusion

As I write these final words of my research, NSD has already announced the arrival of 2014 Bharat Rang Mahotsava. The list of plays, for the forthcoming festival has only one play from the select directors I have chosen and i.e. Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's *The License*<sup>113</sup>. She will be accompanied by her main actress Ramanjit Kaur, who has been off stage for quite some time now. By the look of the e-brochure it looks like a performance of two women and I wonder where are those Naqqals who once upon a time, became an integral part of Neelam Mansingh's plays. If the decision of not casting them is because of financial reasons<sup>114</sup>, then it confirms some of the dangers of high Capitalism which in its own shaping is also subtly trimming the underprivileged and creating a homogenized and clean space. The Naqqal intervention could have been an important intervention here, considering that *The License* is once again using Brecht's short story *The Job*<sup>115</sup> and claims to take up the issue of androgyny (read footnotes) which is a daily narrative of Naqqals

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<sup>113</sup> This play is based on Manto's story 'The License', with certain references from Bertolt Brecht's story 'The Job'. Both these stories talk about the implication on people in an economy that is industrializing at a fast pace. A man unemployed finds a place as a watchman in a factory - parallel to this is the story of a self employed tongawala. The sudden death of the provider in both the stories drives the family to the brink of starvation. The only thing that matters now is to salvage the job at all costs. Both in *The Job* and *The License* the women adopt a plan that becomes as desperate as the situation. To slip into the male identity and take over the husband's job disguised as the man/husband, becomes the choice available to the protagonist as a survival tool. Wearing her husband's clothes clumsily, she practices his walk, his way of sitting, eating etc. ( source: NSD portal, <http://www.nsdtheatrefest.com/BRM16/license.php>)

<sup>114</sup> In my interaction with Neelam Mansingh she acknowledged that it becomes difficult to work with bigger cast due to financial constraints

<sup>115</sup> Anuradha Kapur along with Nalini Ramani used the same text for the play with same name in 1997. Maya Rao also did a solo performance of the same text under the same name

The play also brings in another aspect of current trends in theatre and i'e. shrinkage of the number of actors from stage. Theatre which has always been a community centric group event is also becoming a very personal, individual exploration of the self. Is it that NSD grant of Rs 45000<sup>116</sup> is not enough anymore in today's time and therefore shrinkage of actors? This brings me to another important question that why some plays are being produced specifically for festivals and do not have any independent runs in any other forum? For e.g. *Metropolis*, *John Gabriel Borkman* had limited shows.

The arrival of 2014 also makes me think that the plays and performances I have discussed have also grown older and how the focus of debates has been shifted from one point to the other. The diffusion of the feminist debate is evident and perhaps it was necessary to make alliances with the forces of globalization. Amal Allana's movement from treating the play 'androgenous way'<sup>117</sup> to her later interest in 'Theatre of the City, *Metropolis*'<sup>118</sup> confirms the alliances which have been forged subtly. That is why; it would be incomplete and unfair to look into the workings of *Metropolis* from just the feminist angle just because all the important female characters of Ibsen plays have huddled together, rather one would also need to take into account the city under attack of terrorism which brings in the new debates on globalization and multiculturalism.

It would be interesting to take up their latest work so far and trace the genealogies of their work and notice the subtle shifts and new trends which have come up now but

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<sup>116</sup> Neelam Mansingh and Maya Rao confirmed about the grant till 2013

<sup>117</sup> She uses this term in her essay 'Gender Relations and Self Identity': A Personal Encounter' from the book *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*

<sup>118</sup> She uses this term in one of her interviews given to Gowry Ramanathan in 2005

before that it would be useful for us to look into some of the feminist updates which have been opened up by the work of these directors.

## **Feminist Debates**

The very direct intervention through the work of these directors which has been discussed in preceding chapters is the way women directors have moved from margin to center. These directors along with others have dominated the theatre scene, which is thriving in the center, the capital city, New Delhi and near by areas. One also needs to consider that the visibility attained is also the product of their privileged class position which has given them access to economic and cultural capital both, privy to their success.

While it is difficult to create a category of their work, I would still say that their work loosely fall under a liberal feminist frame work and therefore there has been a focus on 'feminine experience', a search and assertion of their identity without rupturing the dominant narrative of patriarchy. For this, they had to reinvent the performative form of their own which could redefine the female codes. The woman' body therefore became a crucial area of investigation. The body-text dichotomy was challenged by creating the text through the body which could provide speech and thus a subject position to woman. This brought in the conflict of form vs content wherein the 'style' was used to rewrite or challenge the hegemony of written/verbal text. For example cross dressing in *Sundari: An Actor Prepares* (1998), or *The Suit* (2007) Soliloquoy of women in *Umrao* (1993) and all Maya Rao productions, Split bodies in *Nati Binodini* (2007) and *Erendira and her*

*Heartless Grandmother* (2003) are few of the interventions through which they have tried to challenge the subject position. In terms of Body too, there is a collapse of earlier feminine codes as it tried to break the codes of Sapphic subservient bodies which can be seen in *Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother* (2003) through the choreography which focuses on the movement of the lower part of the body or even *Deeper Fried Jam* (2003) wherein Maya Rao ridicules the Classical dance codes and its meaning. Surplus is another technique through which they try cut the conventional style of storytelling and layer it with excessive uses of stage props, materials, narratives etc. Anuradha Kapur uses interdisciplinary approach to create the surplus of the multiple narratives she weaves through the fusion of paintings, installations, technology etc. Amal Allana on the other had creates this surplus through visuals, colors in her last trilogy. In terms of space, the use of objects become an important intervention in itself as it brings a certain materiality on stage and is part of the scenography itself. It also allows a movement from psychological realism to hyper realism where the 'doing' takes precedence over 'acting'. The question remains, if these strategies really precipitate into radical break or get assimilated in the process of commodification? How do the aesthetics and politics negotiate with each other?

In all, it seems that there is semi-subject position which is created for the woman performer and directors themselves without disrupting the existing dominant codes of heteronormativity. I say this because the emphasis has always been on 'Woman's body' which in the process of experimentation gets variety of meaning which asserts for an identity of its own whereas the male body or male subject's position is never destabilized.

It remains fixed, undeterred and static at subject position, while the woman's role in its breaking and making is able to bring a subject position. For instance, the process of objectification (In Neelam Mansingh's plays) through which the female actor in parallel to the object on the stage attain the subject position is problematic and has its issues of efficacies. *Nati Binodini*, is another example which introduced many gestural action<sup>119</sup> which gives a certain agency to the female actors and Binodini. By the end of play Binodini through the role of a Godly saint, is able to get the social acceptability (from audience too) which is much eulogized, bringing in the notions of respectability.

The notion of respectability opens up the debate between tradition and modernity, which also connects us to the theatre history associated with National School of Drama. In a globalised space, the concept of tradition is also undergoing changes; constantly negotiating with the modernity. The 'role of a woman' therefore has become larger in the narrative of progress and development which modernity in terms of high capitalism introduces in urban centers like Delhi, where the collaboration with women has become indispensable. It is interesting to see that new phenomena of celebrating girl power keeps its distance from being feminist and creates subtle alliances with the patriarchy. In the given context, Would this success of the women directors not be part of the individualistic explorations which raises pertinent issues but is not able to evolve as a political engagement then? Consequently, would this visibility of the women directors be not seen as the feminization of the modernist project?

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<sup>119</sup> Discussed in chapter III

### *Metropolis, The Last Tale, Virasat, I Walk*

I have chosen the above plays as a starting point for new debates which are emerging out of their work and how it connects to their own body of work and contemporary politics. To start with *Metropolis*, which is the oldest of all as it was staged in 2009 and Amal Allana has not come out with any new production after that. *Metropolis* is the last play of the trilogy which consists of other two, namely *Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother* (2003) and *Nati Binodini* (2007). The actors present in all the three plays have been more or less same. While the portrayal of women and their oppression has been an important theme of all the three plays, one also needs to see a certain effect of commodification which has risen from one play to the other and in *Metropolis* it reaches its maximum. Melodrama as a technique has always been negatively received by the modern day critic. What is interesting to note here is that Ebrahim Alkazi distanced himself from it and used psychological realism instead. Brecht on the other hand found the use of melodrama insightful and used it as a technique to expose social attitudes. Amal Allana who is exposed to both the schools of thought uses it too. In *Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother* the Bollywood influence is subtly present in the form of an old Hindi film song number<sup>120</sup> and the inclusion of popular Latin American music both bring in the notion of melodrama. Similarly, in *Metropolis* the synchronized choreography in the beginning with the music and even the acting techniques used by actors seems to be subtly steeped into the melodramatic style. Does this have the same effect? The register of the melodrama does not seem to create the gestic criticism, in these plays; rather it

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<sup>120</sup> Song: Saakiya aaj hamein neend nahin aayegi from Gurudutt's film Saheb BIwi Aur Ghulam

comes from the traditions of Parsi theatre<sup>121</sup>. Melodrama as a technique can be used as a critic to bring the radical break but at the same time it also has the capacity to be conformist by endorsing what it was supposed to critique. In *Metropolis*, it seems to do the latter one as there is no particular politics behind the use of the same. What it does instead is that it hastens the process of commodification. It become accessible to more number of people (including Latin America ) as a product and the focus from critical reception is shifted towards the sensation and pleasure created by music.

*Metropolis* also raises question on patronage in the form of sponsorship which has started to steep into urban theatre scene. Nissar Allana, in his essay “Demistifying Patronage and Looking Ahead”<sup>122</sup> discusses the current trends and finds that how sponsorship always wants something in return, not necessarily in the form of economic capital<sup>123</sup> but other kinds of capital. This association with capital itself brings it to the domain of a capitalistic space which provides a certain degree of cultural expression but also eradicates the grass root sites in Delhi and NCR.

Moving to the *The Last Tale* of Neelam Mansingh, the debate opens up another level of commodification. In its look, with a tinge of rural setting, with the regular presence of earth, water, fire (also ice, this time), folk live music (Merasi), the play could easily pass off as a direct product of Theatre of Roots but if one delves deeper, one would find

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<sup>121</sup> The book *The Act of Becoming-Actors Talk* which has been edited by her has series of Actor’s portfolios from 1880 to 1980 includes parsi Theatre actor too. There is subtle play of creating a linearity in terms of how theatre has evolved, not showing that NSD style was totally disjointed from the other

<sup>122</sup> From NSD journal, Theatre India No 13,2006

<sup>123</sup> Sources say that *Metropolis* invested a huge amount of money in its production and had only one show

significant departures from the given model. Firstly, the entire play's focus on Vansh Bhardwaj , who gets to play both the important roles ( male Udham/female Behaag) which itself is questionable. It is difficult to find any specific implication of an intervention like this; rather it seems to be a makeshift arrangement.<sup>124</sup> Naqqals have disappeared from the scenes, and the one who is present becomes the support system on stage, but what is most striking is the selection of the play itself.

The brochure given in Bharat Rang Mahotsava, 2013 claimed that story used had its inspiration in multiple texts such as some folk text from Punjab, Shakespeare's *Othello* (mainly) and the new play written by Toni Morrison called *Desdemona* which is factually untrue. Some of the reviews which have come on this play have totally ignored mentioning the name of Toni Morrison's play *Desdemona* which is the core of the Neelam Mansingh's play. In fact, if one reads *Desdemona*, one would find that *The Last Tale*<sup>125</sup> completely follows the given text and the some of the changes which have been done is in sequence<sup>126</sup> of the scenes (making it more linear, reductive) and the inclusion of Punjabi folk songs. A review in one of the national newspaper reads like this about the play:

“This is a drama that has emerged out of the desire to have conversations with lost stories, songs from the past, dynamics of love, and feelings of loss and forgiveness. The Last Tale, Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry's play, does not come from a

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<sup>124</sup> Neelam Mansingh in her interview expressed the unavailability of the actress Ramanjit Kaur

<sup>125</sup> The name itself is a rip off from one of the songs written in the play *Desdemona*

<sup>126</sup> The scene where mothers of Behag (*Desdemona*) and Udham (*Othello*) moan their children death and converse is in the middle of the play in *Desdemona* whereas in *The Last Tale* this is the last scene giving it a perfect cathartic ending



script or text, and that's why the director says it's been a challenging journey.

The Last Tale is a production that has been with her for some time, and came together during workshops and improvisations set around Punjabi love stories, traditional songs of mourning, loss and forgiveness, and Shakespearean tragedies. The narrative has been done by poet and author Surjit Pattar, who has brought together many seen and unseen layers.”

(<http://www.dailypioneer.com/state-editions/bhopal/national-drama-fest-concludes-with-the-last-tale.html>, Accessed 1/12/2013)

Not only Surjit Patar, takes the credit of writing this piece but also Neelam Mansingh makes it her own by asserting that it has been with her sometime and it has been the product of various workshops and improvisation. This brings in the concept of Plagiarism which has once again become diffused and chaotic in a multicultural society. In fact, some of the writings on plagiarism has given it a new angle altogether. Marilyn Randall, in her book *Pragmatic Plagiarism: Authorship, Profit, and Power* finds the power of plagiarism in challenging the capitalism and commodification. She elaborates by showing that how the concept of commodification of art is dependent of the value creation by the labor used and the difficulty in the process of production, which plagiarism tries to subvert. By producing the same, which was exclusive earlier, not only brings the profit margins down but also exposes the nexus of power relations and breaks the authority of the hegemonic art forms.

Neelam Mansingh's case is a different one, it does not break any hegemonic notions of the text by plagiarizing and making a new copy of the same without acknowledgement, rather it creates an alliance with commodification process which is engrossed in marketing strategies like packaging the same product in different form, style to be sold as a new commodity. The discourse surrounding the play that it is the story of memory, loss, Punjabi love stories, dynamics of love, derived from folk songs all these then become an exotic package wrapped around the play to make it more substantial.

*Desdemona* (2011) as play written by Toni Morrison and directed by Peter Sellers is an important play giving voice to *Desdemona* which seems to be suppressed in original Shakespeare play *Othello*. This in my opinion could have been a platform to explore the unheard voices of Naqqals which still remain marginalized.

*The Last Tale*, also exhibits that how Theatre of Roots which started with a hybrid genre of mixing tradition and modernity has not been able to resist the process of commodification and have added the exotic, the Indianism to make it marketable. Have these women directors in many ways hastened this process of commodification through their intervention?

Anuradha Kapur's and Maya Rao's latest work move in opposite direction and is much different from their earlier work. *Virasat* (2013) which has been discussed in length in preceding chapters, is based on Wada trilogies and brings all the three plays together, stitched up in a single format. Although this is a different kind of work when compared to

her other bodies of work, but does not break away from the templates which NSD Repertory Company has been using all these years. This raises one hypothetical question that how would Vivadi as her own production group would have staged it? Would it have been different? In fact would they have actually selected a play which concerns the story of middle class family? Anuradha Kapur says that she wanted to do this play for a long time, but the selection procedure vis a vis the group itself could give important insights. Is it in a way an acknowledgement by the director herself that there exists different kind of audience for repertory performance, which needs to be treated differently? Anuradha Kapur in her memorial lecture Natraja Ramkrishna Memorial Lecture, University of Hyderabad 2013 made references to Hindi Theatre as a separate entity which has always found problems with the work of women directors on the issue of overemphasis on style and form. One can infer from these articulation that there is a difference between Hindi theatre and Women Director's theatre) and consequently their audience. NSD repertory company (adhering to Hindi theatre) which is the professional theatre wing of NSD has been staging plays in Delhi and other Indian cities. They exclusively work in Hindi and have taken limited risks, have taken social and political issues from time to time and resisted projects of experimentation, therefore more closer to the common Hindi speaking, middle class family. In contrast, Anuradha Kapur's in-house productions (Vivadi), though in Hindi, are highly experimentative, interdisciplinary in nature and therefore demands the audience who already possess a degree of cultural capital themselves. The difference lies in the actors too. While NSD repertory actors, who are mostly Hindi speaking, Vivadi actors are well versed with Hindi and English and form the coterie of English speaking actors. This gap is important to notice as it also hints on a

certain 'difference' which is being maintained from other kinds of theatre which brings them individualistic symbolic capital to their name.

What is interesting about the work of Maya Rao and Anuradha Kapur is that through these plays they have turned back and picked up strategies of the past. Anuradha Kapur emphasizes the use of hyper reality in her play, by inserting the 'doing' of certain act rather than showing it (cooking real time, taking bath etc.) but one can also notice the effective use of psychological realism. An existential play, it depicts the life of middle class Deshpande family with a glorious past, trying to survive between rural and urban landscape and struggling with notions of tradition and modernity. Most importantly, while women folk in the play do not possess a subject position, the play is still able to draw the attention towards the domestic labor the women are subjected to. At the same time, it also shows the subtle bargaining power, they gain during the course of the play. For example by the end of the play Parag (the male protagonist) begins to listen to her wife, almost asking her advice in everything.

### **The State, The Market and The Civil Society:**

*I walk* (2012, 2013), a 10 minutes solo performance based on Gang rape in bus, December 2012, (Nirbhaya case) by Maya Rao, began as a performance which had to participate in Jawaharlal Nehru University, student protest against the same incident with the theme claiming the right to walk on road even in night freely. This performance has

been widely performed since then, in different forums and has undergone many changes. One of the earliest staging of this performance came up in Bharat Rang Mahotsava along with her other play *Non Stop Feel Good Show* (2013).

It would be interesting to see her journey from one performance to the other and how the performance continues to evolve. The Staging of *I Walk*, along with the *Non Stop Feel Good Show* makes it an integral part of the play. It is interesting to see that how the politics and aesthetics of the play evolve and what it tries to signify in particular version might not be the same in the other. *I Walk* along with the *Non Stop Feel Good Show* create a politics of its own. The Latter play uses the technique of parody effectively. Maya Rao's portrayal of West Bengal Chief Minister Ms Mamta Banerjee for instance is able to shift the focus from herself Maya Rao to the parodies character through which she criticizes political attitudes. In this scheme of things *I Walk* also connects to the larger themes of the play regarding the social and political attitude and connects it with Women's issue pertaining to Dec bus gang rape. It is interesting to see that how the politics and aesthetics of the play keeps changing and what it might signify in a particular performance, it might not be the same in the other. By bringing both the performance together and therefore not keeping the performance fixed, it seems as if it eludes its commoditization. Because it is not a fixed product, therefore it is difficult to commodify and be consumed in the market. *I Walk* is important as it uses a political alternative of renewing and using the applied theatre practice. Maya Rao also performed in many public spaces within Connaught Place, New Delhi along with a group of girls. Thus from individual it moves to the collective and resembles closely grass root activist theatre.

On the other hand, there is another version of the same play which is also doing very well and has got great publicity is by making it a 'performance' in itself. It has been staged in film festival, Literary festival, Shipra mall, Ghaziabad, some of the important universities in United states etc. It was also performed in Parliament Street on 6<sup>th</sup> February and Jantar Mantar on 14<sup>th</sup> February in forums created to discuss Nirbhaya case and the implementation of Justice Verma recommendations. While the play moves out of the capitalistically controlled Mandi house area and broadens the spatial influence through its performance, this also seems to be a calculated and controlled risk as the space in festivals still remains to be a homogeneous in terms of audience it collects.

I would like to refer to two of them particularly to further explore the politics of it. Connecting it to the contemporary debates on the same issue, the performance explores two to three important themes: One, the role of State in curbing crimes against women like rape, and the other a personal freedom to walk/choose/think. What is interesting here is that Maya in her latter two performances along with the one in Connaught Place becomes more forthright in her speech. The dialogues have been simplified and the stylistics has been reduced. It seems that she is in mode of explaining everything. She explains the meaning of 'consent' first before she discussed the issues of domestic abuse. One of her dialogues also asks all to join her to go to the police station, find out the names of 634 accused who have not been convicted yet and to paste their picture on every tree as a protest against the system. She uses more of Hindi than English. This change itself somewhere confirms that how style can become a hindrance in raising political issues.

The latest performance of *I Walk* had a different politics altogether. The Queer community in Delhi specifically has tried to see Maya Rao as an icon through which they can see a fluid identity which is not fixed. She performed in Jantar Mantar once again but this time it was for queer community protesting against the recriminalisation of homosexuality in a forum called Global Day for Rage. Here *I Walk* transformed into something different not only in terms of speech but also the structure of the performance. The play once again, was not as stylized as it was in the NSD along with the other play. Maya Rao chooses to wear a saree here. Apart from this she had worn saree in one of her performances in Jantar Mantar itself on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2013 performance. The wearing of saree introduces an ambivalent situation. While this could be one way of creating gestus by targeting Hijras in the audience, as they would relate to her more in the saree (note that there are certain gestures too which Maya does which are taken from bodily habits of Hijra (eunuch), like the ways they clap). I also feel this is also her assertion that she is a woman and female performer which in many ways brings a distance between her and audience. This could be said because of her own negation of seeing or acknowledging the queerness of her performance. She limits the scope of the powerful intervention by making it a part of the regular improvisations derived out of Kathakali. She adds that Kathakali is about energies, male and female and through the different uses of these energies one becomes male or female.<sup>127</sup> Perhaps this also could be the reason that she chooses to use Kathakali mudras more in this performance than any of her other *I Walks* she has done. The important point to be noted here is that the way the speech has changed from 'I walk' to 'this way, that way'. Some of the other sentences read like this:

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<sup>127</sup> From my personal interaction with her

I know I cannot take the step back anymore...  
Because I am not straight anymore...  
Give me 377 days of the year because I have no fear  
There are more than 377 way... to love, to have sex...

Also, the voice pitch used in this performance is so high that it breaks at certain places again which in many ways again signify the character of eunuch. The lines in their simplification attract a lot of cheers from the crowd but also at the same time simplify the politics of it. What would the cheer of the crowd signify? Will this cheering of the crowd has the potentiality of the political engagement. Some of my interaction with people present in this event in this context was insightful. They say that performance like this do create that 'affect' which is important to mobilize people but it soon dies down and again comes next year in a forum like this. In a way then it seems that state allows these spaces to demonstrate these protests to happen under surveillance and give a chance for celebration but not a political engagement. This is where I feel a powerful performance like *I Walk* becomes part of the commodification process.

While I think that *I walk* is a very powerful performance, I am taking few cues from her to discuss the concluding remarks and connect it to the work of all these women directors I have dealt with.

The role of State was an important debate which was widely discussed in various forum post Nirbhaya case and there were discussion about stricter legislation against various abuse. In *I walk* also when Maya says: "Give me 635 convictions", Give me one



politician and cop who would listen to me' is also another articulation of the enforcement of Law. Would a step like this not mean that it is the endorsement of State whom the power has been given to become the protector, the guarantor of women's safety. It means that the set notion of patriarchy does not get challenged or destabilized rather the power center moves from one hand to the other. One needs to note that the same power to protect also contains the power to annihilate (Homosexuality recriminalisation is just an example of the same). The anti rape bill passed in march 2013, which incorporates suggestions of the Justice JS Verma Committee, formed after the brutal Delhi gang-rape of Dec 16 last year, to make anti-rape laws stronger by introducing harsher punishments in one way also endorses the notions of middle class morality. This respectability and redemption narrative in many ways steps into the works of these directors.

The staging of the plays, in the Mandi house area which is part privately owned (Kamani, Sri Ram Center, FICCI auditorium, Sapru House etc) and partly state owned (NSD premises) is itself problematic and confirms a certain alliance here. One can notice that how grass root space has been totally eradicated from Delhi and NCR, in order to clean(se) the environment.

The second important point which one can derive out of the work of these directors is that how the 'individual' takes the precedence over the collective. The very appearance of women direct-ors in theatre landscape seems very celebratory. It seems as though it runs many a times parallel to the notion of celebrating 'girl power' (under police protection

like Slut walk<sup>128</sup>) which on the face of it resembles collectivism but is closer to the notions of individual freedom. While it evokes a lot of discussion of women's issues, it also in many ways fragments the political aspect of a debate. The focus on individual would automatically, in a globalised space, mean that it aligns with freedom which in its process disrupts the notion of equality and solidarity. This individuality is maintained through a unique difference which the directors create and therefore become 'star directors' which incorporates them in the domain of market and hence their alliance with the process of commodification

One is not trying to negate the works of these directors by referring it as commodity, but one also needs to be aware that in the mechanics of cultural field where direct economic and cultural capital is in play, determines or shapes the production. In a true Brechtian sense, the structure of the play itself should come in open for the audience to watch and think over. These works brilliantly expose the patriarchal notions of the modern order, breaks the distinct division of private and public, personal and political, anti colonial and post colonial but hide and thus helps in reification process of consumerist culture, market dynamics and the working of the capitalistic society, the power of the State.

One needs to acknowledge that it is generalized comment and is not applicable to all the work of these directors. Some of the performances create ruptures, slippages through which new and fresh debate emerge about gender, class, culture.

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<sup>128</sup> Indian version: Besharmi Morcha held in 2011 in few cities, protest against the rationalizing rape as the product of woman's appearance

I would end with the final comment, taking cue from Bourdieu who has shown us that how the world is a market and that rejection of the market also does not mean that one is out of it and today's world is a market driven economy, however he shows that within this market an individual with great symbolic capital has the capacity to turn the market in a different direction. Wouldn't then, these women directors who in my opinion have attained that symbolic capital, now should need to take greater risks, greater challenges and turn the market upside down?



## List of the select plays/performance referred: (Primary Sources)

Anuradha Kapur

(All plays by Vivadi group except wherever mentioned otherwise)

*Ghar aur Bahar* (1989) *Nayika Bhed* (1989): *Nayika Bhed* was produced after the Kasauli meet of many artists from different spheres, where discussion was held at length on how women's body on stage needs to be portrayed and other important feminist issues. *Ghar aur Bahar* was the adaptation of Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire*, the text was adapted by Geetanjali Shree; the plays were designed by the painters Vivan Sundaram and Nilima Sheikh respectively.

*Umrao* (1993): a version of Mohammed Hadi Ruswa's nineteenth century novel. The production received great critical acclaim. It was performed through 1994 in Delhi, Calcutta, and Bombay. Nilima Sheikh designed and painted the sets. Episodic in nature, it tried to open up unconventional spaces in courtesan narratives and focused on everyday life. Uttara Baokar played the title role. Text was adapted by Geetanjali Shree

*The Job* (1997): Directed Brecht's *The Job* in collaboration with the distinguished artist Nalini Malani who created the installation that was the environment for the performance; the play was supported by the Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay and the NCPA where it opened in January 1997. Ritu Talwar played the lead role.

*Sundari: an Actor Prepares* (1998): a performance based on the autobiography of an early twentieth century female impersonator Jaishankar Sundari, active in Bombay from 1901 to 1931. The performance dealt with the meanings of crossdressing and the dangers and the erotics of living between two genders. The play was designed by Bhupen Khakhar and Nilima Sheikh, the music design was by Vidya Rao and the dramatization was by Geetanjali Shree and Dinesh Khanna. Produced by Majlis, the performance opened in Delhi in May 1998; Harish Khanna, Jitu Shastri and Jagat Singh Rawat played the role of Sundari

*The Antigone Project* (2002, 2003): a multimedia performance made in collaboration with Ein Lall the project turned to Brecht's adaptation of *Antigone* to create a response to the Gujrat riots. It contained a video documentary on Godhara riots and had Seema Biswas and Harish Khanna in lead roles. The story is based on Brecht's version of Sophocles (and Holderlins) *Antigone*. The story of the unyielding *Antigone* focuses attention on the consequence of dogma and the genealogy of tyrants

*Centaurs* (2007): Based on Heiner Muller text along with Mahmood Mamdani's book *Good Muslim and Bad Muslim* explores the issue of surveillance, obsession with documentation, archiving etc. the main actor's transformation into object explore posthuman explorations. Harish Khanna and Rajesh Tailangare the only two actors in the play. Play uses extensive low end camera work and draws attention towards tools

*Sahab Biwi aur Ghulam*: (NSD student production): Based on Bimal Mitra's novel of the same name the play and is a look into the tragic fall of the haveli-dom and feudalism in Bengal during the British Raj. The play also uses the 1962 film version played in the background. This was staged in Bahumukh, NSD

*Gidh and Baby*: (NSD student production) Two play texts of the same name by Vijay Tendulkar were used together to explore the power of patriarchy in a family set up through *Gidh* and at the same time *Baby* explored the life of an innocent girl child and her story of survival. The stage design is made by Vivan Sundaram, containing a huge wrestling ring which is used by the actors to perform. This was staged in Bahumukh, NSD

*John Gabrielle Borkman* (2008): was shown in Delhi Ibsen festival and took Ibsen's play of same name. The play used industrial imagery by inserting a perpendicular iron structure, which also was used as two storeys of the house. The acting in the play was termed as 'out of control' which was also a means to add surplus in the play.

Harish Khanna, Rajesh Tailang, Anoushka Lal and others were

*Virasat* (2013): written by Mahesh Elkunchwar as Wada trilogies, was adapted to make three plays in one, chronicling the life of the Deshpandes, their rise and equally inevitable fall, a nostalgia for a golden past, the story of progress, the rural/urban, the domestic labor by women are few themes which the play explores. Deepan Sivraman has designed the scenography with set of rafters and pillars around a square cesspool in the middle where action takes place on all sides, spectators — seated as though in the wings witness action from different angles

Source (<http://portal.ieem.org.mo/professors/kapur.html>, The Pioneer and my viewing of some of the plays)

## Maya Rao

### (All plays by Vismayah)

*Khol Do* (1993, 2003): solo, based on a short-story by Sadaat Hasan Manto Delhi, 1997. The story only picks up the depiction of loss and pain of a father and how he in the process of mourning becomes the daughter himself. Non verbal.

*The Job* (1997): solo, based on a short-story by Bertolt Brecht, commissioned by Max Mueller Bhavan, Delhi, 1997. The story is based on a woman posing as a man and gets the job of night guard and how her true identity is evolved and what are the consequences of it.

*Deep(er) Fried Jam* (2002, 2003): socio political cabaret. The play follows the structure of stand up comedian. With live music Maya Rao jives and brings in her critic of classical codes of Dance, Lost charm of Delhi, has few camera work and ends with the allusion to Dandi March. Performance has been revised many times therefore name change to Deeper Fried Jam

*Heads are meant for Walking into* (2005): Cross media performance, it uses installations and different kinds of video work. It makes allusion to naked protest of Manipur and has a very thin and abstract story line

*Lady Macbeth Revisited* (2010): cross media performance, it brings in the character of Lady Macbeth who is planning to kill Duncan. This is just a starting point and from here goes the bizarre explorations of human psyche. Uses installations, video work extensively

*Quality Street* (2010): A scripted performance unlike others. Written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie the story tried to show the conflict between the residual belief in colonial past and new Americanized culture. While the former is connected to mother, the latter to her daughter who wants to have a traditional wedding at her native home. Through the humorous conflict between the two, the play proceeds

*Ravanama* (2011, 2012): commissioned by Ramayana festival, Adishakti, Pondicherry the play is again a cross media performance. It begins with the actors dilemma of playing the role of Ravana and how this needs to be done. This brings in various experimentation in order to explore the true characteristics of Ravana

*I Walk* (2012): the 10 minute piece was made in response to Delhi bus gang rape.

Source (<http://mayakrishnarao.blogspot.in/p/about-maya.html>, and my viewing of some of these plays)

## **Amal Allana**

**(All plays produced by Television and Theatre Associates, designed by N Allana)**

*Himmat Mai* (1993): Hindi version of Brecht's *Mother Courage* had Manohar Singh in the role of mother. He impersonated the character of mother, with Himachali attire and dialect and was probably one of the first treatment by Amal Allana of cross dressing performance.

*Begum Barve* (1996,2009) :From the pinnacle of fame and fortune to the depths of despair, misery and poverty, the story of Balgandharva is strangely re-invented and re-told by Satish Alekar in *Begum Barve*, the cripple and the man/woman with the golden voice, are here dichotomized into the two central characters of Barve and Shyamrao. The lead role is again played by Manohar Singh. The play draws from the background of the Marathi Natya Sangeet

*Nagmandala* (1996): Girish Karnard play, was staged in Bharat Rang Mahotsva, opening ceremony. Had Manohar Singh in the male lead role. The play has strong influence of Japanese performance tradition.

*Sonata* (2002): Written by Satish Alekar, the play is the story of three women located in a city space and their story. The play also uses painting of women artist as a response to bring the visibility to women and their work. It also did touch upon the themes of female bonding.

*Erendira and Her Heartless Grandmother* (2003): devised performance, based on Marquez's short story of same name. uses the techniques of split body and grotesque carnivalism. The music brings in the notion of npopular by adding Hindi film song number and Latin American music

*Nati Binodini* (2007): Based on Amar Kotha written by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century famous Bengali actress called Binodini. The play covers her sacrifice for theatre and how she gets betrayed by her mentor in the end. The story again uses the technique of split bodies.

*Metropolis* (2009) : Mumbai, which is being held hostage by terrorists who attacked the Taj Mahal Hotel on 26/11/08. The play begins with Nora Helmer of Norway, opening her door into the tumultuous, apocalyptic city of Mumbai. With this gesture of her leaving her home, she enters our play, our country, and proceeds to discover a new destiny for herself. Nora/Noora's move towards freedom is echoed in strident tones by Rukkaiya/ Rebecca West, who publicly confesses her 'crime' of sending Beate/ Butool to her suicide, in a bid to live in free love. Meanwhile Ilias Ali Beg, the Eilert Lovborg of Hedda Gabler, ignites a spirit of liberation through his newly published writings on sexual freedom in a future Islamic world. Towering above them all stands Ramzan Ali/ John Rosmer, once a cleric, who publicly announces his loss of faith in Islam. The political repercussions of his statement...ignites an already volatile situation, where right wing forces are at work in Mumbai. All these Ibsen characters have been transformed into Indian Muslims, making their actions and choices appear as bold political statements in the current scenario, where the tenants of Islam are open to question. The blaze of the Mumbai fire then is a metaphor. While destroying the past, it at the same time, ignites new ideas of a future freedom.

Source (<http://www.tta.co.in/> and my viewing of some of the performances)

## Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry

(All plays produced by The Company, Chandigarh except wherever mentioned otherwise)

*Yerma* (1993, 1999): Based on the play by same name written by Fredrico Garcia Lorca, the play is rooted in Punjab and bring in the pains and agony of the childless wife. The play uses Naqqal cast too in its staging and brings many explorations of ceremony, rituals in the play. Folk music remains to be the integral part of the play.

*Phaedra/Fida* (1996): By Jean Racine, the play has full female cast and explores the love of the queen for her step son. The play is also able to bring important theme of female bonding which cuts across the barrier of class as Fida strikes a bond with her servant

*Kitchen Katha* (1998,2001): The play brings in a live community kitchen on stage and share the food , recipes with the audience. The play with its cooking also delineates the story of Chand Kaur and her love story. Naqqals also participate in the cooking process.

*Sibo in Supermarket* (2003): The play brings in the parallel between rural and urban and juxtaposes both the scenes on the stage. Sibbo , the main character explores her past with the objects present in the market and thus open up to a scene of the past.

*Nagamandala* (2005): this play was earlier produced by the same group in 1991 and 1985 and it was again produced in 2005 and had Naqqal's presence.

*The Suit* (2007): Based on Can Thumba's play, the play brings in the conflict between a couple and the silent oppression the woman/wife goes every day , till the day when she become defiant in holding her sexual freedom . the suit is being referred to the suit which was left by the lover of the woman in the house which is used by the husband to humiliate her wife.

*The Wife's Letter* (2011): Base on R N Tagore's short story the play uses the split body technique and has both Ramanjeet and Vansh as playing the role of Mrinal, the protagonist. The play again brings in the theme of female bonding through the relationship shared between Bindu and Mrinal. It does not have any Naqqal presence.

*The Last tale* (2013): while the claims have been made the play is based on many Punjabi stories and Shakespeare's Othello, the text used is purely from Toni Morrison's Desdemona. Solo performance by Vansh Bhardwaj

(Source: <http://thecompanychandigarh.wordpress.com/neelam-mansingh-chowdhry/> and my viwing of the performances)



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## Youtube links

I walk by Maya Rao in Jantar Mantar on 21/02/2013:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6X6UugffFE>

I Walk by Maya K Rao in Jaipur Litrary Festival, 2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6X6UugffFE>

I Walk by Maya K Rao in Connaught place with group of girls

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cDi6ESfaX8>

I Walk performed in Jantar Mantar for LGBT protest Dec 2013, Global Day of Rage

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySjoUTUAwmU>

I Walk by Maya Rao, on parliament street, V day celebrations 14<sup>th</sup> Feb,2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-qop3XZI88>

I Walk by Maya Rao at Shipra Mall, Ghaziabad, 28/4/2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHo7glP5kYg>

Nataraja Ramakrishna Memorial Lecture 2013 by Anuradha Kapur

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZU9sBZkKSM4&feature=youtu.be>

Amal Allana's speech at Amity University.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agrAB\\_Bj5mU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agrAB_Bj5mU)

Ajit Verma's interview of Amal Allana

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKaIHvVGEhU>

Ru-Ba-Ru interview of Neelam Mansingh

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvALLmhnK4w>