Chapter - VI

Translating Gender and Transgender: Working with the Naqqals.

Making Gender Unheimlich\textsuperscript{314}: Acceleration and Mutation does not Create Monsters as Much as New Perceptions

As the last chapter demonstrated, we are left with a few discursive objects to play with as women, primarily those that suggest our identities revolve around the biological contingencies of our sex. So we do not revolt, claiming our identities are beyond our sex, though this is sometimes a highly productive strategy. What we do is show that those identities are not these safe havens of conformity and comfort - theatrical codes, languages, colours, bodies, and genres will be mutated, and this is the way women have tried to shed the discursive baggage and transform it into something more in synch with their modernist impulses.

Freud\textsuperscript{315}, when talking about fear, had a wonderful notion called the “Unheimlich”. Translated it means “uncanny”, but in German it suggests “un-homely”. This is a wonderful way to think about the impulses that drive women directors under Indian modernism, who are littered with the perceptual debris of centuries as home

\begin{footnote}{314 The Uncanny (Ger. Das Unheimliche -- literally, "un-home-ly") is a Freudian concept of an instance where something can be familiar, yet foreign at the same time, resulting in a feeling of it being uncomfortably strange: "In general we are reminded that the word unheimlich is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight." Freud, The Uncanny.}
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\begin{footnote}{315 Sigmund Freud (6 May 1856 – 23 September 1939), was an Austrian neurologist who founded the psychoanalytic school of psychology. Freud is best known for his theories of the unconscious mind and the defense mechanism of repression and for creating the clinical practice of psychoanalysis for curing psychopathology through dialogue between a patient and a psychoanalyst. Freud is also renowned for his redefinition of sexual desire as the primary motivational energy of human life, as well as his therapeutic.}
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makers and home creators. The uncanny for Freud, is the sensation of literally being without home, without grounding, without rooting – it is, put simply, the act of transforming what is familiar into something unfamiliar. He compared it to the loss of our eyes, not in the sense of blindness or disbelief, but in the sense that we could not trust our perceptions any more. As mentioned previously, the mutation that is the ideological impulse of our Modernism should, in its most successful cases, create a feeling that everything that was old is now new – but this is not something that makes us think of creation, as much as it makes us question the very belief that we can tell the difference between the old and the new. This notion captures the creative elements of our profession (transformation of perception, creation of sensation), the political desires of our sex (our power is in how we create a perception in you that makes you unsure of politically dominant perceptions), and the impulses of modernism. This notion captures the creative elements of our profession (transformation of perception, creation of sensation), the political desires of our sex (our power is in how we create a perception in you that makes you unsure of politically dominant perceptions), and the impulses of modernism (the mutation as creation philosophy) where all creation is a challenge to dominant codes, where we do not only evolve but we create "mutations" in dominant codes. Here we must not look at "mutation" through any negative lens - the metaphor is positive, as in biology mutation is responsible for creating variation in the gene pool as well as evolving the organism. Mutation is a metaphor for movement and experimentation in this chapter.

Therefore, keeping that in mind, let us look at the figure of the Naqqal. Already a disorienting figure – man pretending to be woman, but not a homosexual, a jester who speaks truth, a rural relic of medieval and (Pre) Modern times – who had to actively be transformed into a bearer of the uncanny. I do not say that this is what I started of with, but eventually that is what they became. Urban performers, global travellers, highly “post” modern creatures, bearers of complex modern narratives, integral to transforming the training of urban actors. They also transformed the notion of the ‘marginalized’ in my work – the marginalized character on stage is not the chorus, or the gender bender – the marginal, the shadow, the figure in between genders and cultures – is the driver. This is, as mentioned, the shadow. No longer the marginal, but the medium of transformation -
Between the potency /And the existence /Between the essence /And the descent /Falls the Shadow.

While it is all clear in retrospect, it is worth seeing, through an ethnographic journey littered with debris and anecdotes, how the relationships between us grew and how we founded our own uniquely Modernist interaction, in between cultures, but always returning home to our villages or our towns after creating together, what we hoped was uncanny.

INTRODUCTION

While critical and theoretical interventions on the construction of gender have made this point clear over the years, my experience of working with the Naqqals – female impersonators – suggests that such constructions and reconstructions are a part of their highly sophisticated native performance mythologies. In order to examine such mythologies, in my field work I have spent over 20 years trying to create encounters between these performers and urban actors. The Naqqals are musicians and travelling bards, who sing songs, dance, improvise while telling a story, and lampoon a situation, trying to subvert existing attitudes. Along with their repertoire of story-telling techniques, raucous humour, wild singing, the mainstay of their tradition was dancing that was performed by female impersonators.

The way I related to the Naqqals in terms of creating a training program for actors, was by learning and reframing my own conceptions and engagements with their representation of gender on stage. I was not so much interested in the maleness or femaleness of the characters anymore. That is to say, not trying to reach a space where the distinction between men and women disappeared, but reaching a space where this distinction did not matter. Our inherited set of values went through a shredding machine and I saw that how working with female impersonators made the actors not only realign their concepts towards femininity on stage, but also the way masculinity was experienced on stage.
The men who transformed themselves as women were trained to be erosive, wanton, and lascivious – the audiences that supported and patronized them were boisterous and male. This relationship between audience and performer was beyond the imagined limits of decency. What interested me about these performers was how swiftly they transformed themselves from beefy, jowly men into provocative and seductive female impersonators, without ritual or fanfare. Unlike the classical traditions, where this transformation of gender has almost a mystical hue, their process was quick and devoid of fuss. The shaving of the arms and the chest, the stuffing of the bra with whatever material was available (from rolled up hankies to cotton wool) the smearing of face powder, the painting of their moustache-lined lips into bleeding red smudges, to their antimony-lined eyes – all this made the female impersonators into the stars of the show.

This chapter will use my experience of working with the Naqqals as an opportunity to discuss the relationship that sexuality and imitation of sexuality have with performance. It will challenge the myth that it is necessary to be homosexual in orientation in order for a man to dress up as a woman or to perform his sexuality. It will also argue for a theatrical training program that stretches the imagination and embodiment of gender.

Background: History of the Naqqal tradition.

Naqqal (from the Persian word, ‘to imitate’): enacted by Naqqals, also known as Bhands (‘clowns’), are rural itinerant actors in Punjab, performing in Punjabi. They originally came from the bazigar (acrobats) caste, patronized by the local landlords, to whom they ritually apologised before starting their performance. The Naqqal performance follows a structure that begins with two actors, who through a series of jokes, improvisation, make satirical comments on politics and society. This aspect of the performance is constantly interrupted by four to five female impersonators, who enter dancing with their back towards the audience, and after straining the viewers’ curiosity and suspense to the limit, show them their face.

This then follows a humorous and dramatic encounter between the two male actors and the female impersonators, with most of the dialogues hinging on double
meanings that are mostly bordering on being seriously risqué. This constant repartee is usually followed by a great amount of ribaldry followed by raucous humour that at times can descend into obscenity. This is then followed by an erotic dance with many a thrust and a wriggle, to the accompaniment of musical instruments that include, besides the dhol (drum) and harmonium, resembling an accordion) the chimta (a metal staff with running metal disc), the toombi (a stringed instrument), the gubgub (a small drum, open from one side, with a string that is strummed) the matka (a metal pot), followed by an erotic song sung usually in malkauns or rang darbari. The style of dance resembles the pirouette movements from Kathak. This is then followed by the enactment of the story that is usually taken from popular Punjabi folk tales: Hir Ranjha, Sohini Mahiwal Puran Bhagat. The Ustad (the teacher or Guru) is actor/director/musician all rolled into one. The text that evolves has a freewheeling mix of tragedy and comedy that swings from the esoteric to the banal. This form of presentation is completely non-realistic, as for example, when the protagonist in the play Keema Malki pats his horse while singing a dirge to his beloved, the charger starts singing along with the lover. This contrast helps in breaking the maudlin mood and shifting it to another emotional plane, by breaking the continuity of a single emotion.

The dancing and the narrative is interspersed with comic interludes handled by a comic actor who represents the common man. In this way the performers function as both social critics and popular psychiatrists through their verbal gymnastics on varying subjects such as dowry, corruption and the people’s aspiration that are made visible through the performances. What concerned me initially was whether an ostensibly ‘old’ form would constrain and perhaps choke the representations required of a contemporary practice. What these forms did do, however, was free my work from the constraints of ‘realism’, which was the dominant mode of theatrical representation available at the time. The Naqqals would spin any narrative on its head by breaking all the rules of realism. In the middle of a tragedy a horse can appear on the stage and break into a song. In an episode in the famous love legend Sohini Mahiwal, the matka or the earthen pot upon which Sohini is crossing the river Chenab, suddenly animates itself and starts to narrate
the story to the audience. This is a theatrical device that does not fit with any known grammar of performance, but is completely acceptable to the audience.

The energy of the *Naqqal* form comes from the fact that, although it upholds traditional values, it has the capacity to question these values and spin them on their heads. The various conventions of chorus, music, unrelated comic interludes as well as the mixing of the human and mythological characters allow for alternative viewpoints to be presented simultaneously.

The First Beginnings:

In 1985, while driving from Chandigarh to Amritsar, we stopped at Jandiala Guru, from where I could hear sounds of singing and shrieks of laughter. There seemed to be a show in the village square. Through a narrow mud tract in the dusty golden light I could see a scattering of thatch huts with tin doors. Intrigued by the sound we walked towards a large gathering of men and children pressed against each other, squatting around a dimly lit stage. A *Naqqal* performance was in progress. An actor entered the improvised stage and blew on an antelope horn arbitrarily. Another sound that seemed suspiciously like a car hooter was going on simultaneously to the beat of an insistent drum. Immediately after that a decrepit old man appeared, blowing fire from his mouth, while a procession of actors followed him, moving with a shambolic monotony. After an exchange of risqué repartee, a group of garishly dressed female impersonators entered making the villagers sit up in anticipation. There was laughter all around me and the actors on the stage were encouraging the audience to dance with them. The stories that they enacted were pan-Indian myths conjoining local myths, transformed and renewed for local meaning. The gods they evoked rode bicycles, aspired to a Maruti 800 and also sweated profusely. The musical rhythms were inspired by the common stock of Hindi film songs, and folk tunes.

The stage on which they performed was made of temporary planks of wood, laid on a trestle creating a platform stage, lit by oil lamps, creating giant shadows on a patchy and soiled white sheet strung up haphazardly as a backdrop. The story had a
simple narrative, which most of the audience knew by heart. The Naqqals often poke fun at the high-minded ideals of the rich and powerful, through their earthy humour and capacity to ad-lib. Through humour they demystify those symbols that have become sanctified by tradition and hence reduce the tensions and anxieties of that segment of society that supports their art. The Naqqals’ ironic commentary on contemporary issues has a similar therapeutic impact. The Naqqal tradition not only represents a people’s rebellion against the establishment but also shows the way to adjust to and humanize it.

While watching them perform I understood the true meaning of the words ‘spontaneity’ and ‘openness’. To see a large number of people sitting out on a starlit night, responding to the mood of the performance was an enriching experience. To observe how the audience pumped energy and excitement into the performers was in some way to recognize that something real and precious was being exchanged. I then understood that tradition does not mean something back there, lost, but something constantly ‘alive’, ‘living’ and ‘expanding’.

Later, in 1987, I saw a Naqqal performance at Barootee Village near Pinjore on the outskirts of Chandigarh, a regular venue for their performance. They were performing during the Ram Lila festival. While walking to the performance ground, which was packed to capacity, with the smell of liquor and sweaty bodies, I sat down eager to witness the performance. With the entry of the Female Impersonators Pooran Chand, Sohan Chand and Bhadur Chand the crowd went wild. Encased in bright yellow, blood red and cobalt blue lenghas the gold dust on their face and hair was dazzling. That night they were gyrating wildly to the song “Jhumka Gira Re, Ravan Ke Durbar mai”, displaying a mock show of coyness. They laced their provocative gestures with a roll of their eyes, while consciously thrusting their fulsome falsies at an all male

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316 Ramila: Hindi folk form. The Ramayana, the shorter of the two great Sanskrit epics, consists of seven books and 24,000 couplets. It is traditionally ascribed to the poet Valmiki, scholars also suggest that its greater part was composed between the first century BC and the second century. The annual enactment of Rama’s story, during the Dussehra festival in September – October celebrating the defeat of Ravana (the demon king) is performed in most North Indian cities and villages, amongst various cast, classes and even religions. The are usually spread over a period lasting, on an average, from ten to twelve days, concluding four or five days before Dussehra. All the players are male Brahmans, except for the small boys in the monkey and demons armies, who may belong to any caste (Anuradha Kapur: Ramlila page 382)
audience. The audience participated with a roar of appreciation and threw coins and crumpled five rupee notes towards the performers. Meher Chand, the main musician with a checked blanket draped over his shoulders was singing songs about Ram suffering over Sita's abduction. His grainy hoarse voice layered with a patina of nicotine, suggested a cracked surface of notes that roamed freely assuming new rhythms and individual cadence. Mundri, with his heavily kohlled eyes strummed his *toombi* with wild abandon becoming a *mast kalandar* in the process. The female impersonators puckered their red lips that were painted on to the chalky white canvas of their face. “Look at me, I am so beautiful and saucy,” they stated with an insolent insouciance. The unassailable arrogance of the performer mocked the audience without modesty. The dance did not in any way convey the mood of the song, but contradicted its pathos by their unfettered sexiness.

The singing and dancing kept pounding in my mind and heart and I felt completely overwhelmed by a powerful emotion, indescribable but palpable, that bound me with the thousands of anonymous spectators that had gathered for the performance. Suddenly my initial sense of alienation completely dissolved and in the sound that they emitted I felt myself pulled towards a hidden memory, a lost note, a possible history. After the initial euphoria and romanticism two things happened, on one level one was seeking connections; the other aspect was seeking and probing disconnections, to explore both the links and the disjunctions. Questions about the way cultures collide, communicate ideological contradictions, how experiences feed on popular culture displace and also replace national myths. While watching them performing that evening, I wondered, why does a *Naqqal* actor speak to me so directly? How do I connect with him? Why am I so intrigued by the female impersonator? As I was completely bored with realism, working with this form would be a sort of a journey. A journey that did not have a pre-determined destination but would give me the space to be in a constant state of ‘movement’

While watching the performance I recognized that the spectator is as essential an ingredient as the actor for the development of the narrative. They are part of a people’s local culture and history, integrated into ongoing social structures outside the
performance. These actors have a rudimentary understanding of the skill required for dancing, singing, improvisations and the playing of instruments. They lack the virtuosity of a classical performer, but that is more than made-up by their irrepressible verve, gift for ad-libbing and unbridled gusto. This performance would not be classified under the pantheon of ‘high’ art or classical, as it is local, vernacular and entertainment oriented. The make-up of the female impersonators does not have the transformative skills of a Kabuki317 Onnagatha318, but they appear more as an ‘idea’ of a male beneath a woman’s costume. At times, even obvious male characteristic such a hairy arms and stubble, would not take away from the exaggerated suggestiveness of the ‘feminine’ in a way that is seductive but not unsettling of gender norms.

To quote Artaud319 who simply said “The Theatre is Oriental”. I think Artaud was right, myth, reality and ritual is replete in Asian Theatre, while the West has given birth to realism. In India there is such a rich source of forms and material to use as references for the contemporary theatre that it would be a sort of blindness if not myopia to not fashion a performance tool from a legacy that is available at your doorstep. I saw in the visage of the female impersonator, a possibility and a potential that could enrich my work. Theatre for me is not about two people sitting in a restaurant and exchanging a

317 Kabuki. From the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth the Kabuki has been the most popular forms of theatrical entertainment in Japan and remains the most typical of the theatrical arts in that country. It is an eclectic form, as its name, commonly taken to mean skills in song and dance, implies, inheriting features from most of the earlier forms developed in the country. The word appears originally to have signified ‘eccentric.’ But the heresy of yesterday soon became ‘orthodoxy.’ Usually performed on a large stage, its passion for the spectacular, and its violent inclination to popular melodrama makes it a popular form of entertainment.

318 Onnagata. In Kabuki drama, a female impersonator. The onnagata has occupied a conspicuous place on the Japanese stage from the earliest recorded time. In 1629, the government shogunate issued a decree forbidding women on the stage because of the undesirable effect the women kabuki(onna kabuki) had on social morals. As a result of this ban, male actors began to play female roles by using artificial, stylized female gestures... the most famous onnagata was yoshizawa who mixed her professional and personal life for the onnagata, whereby the onnagata dresses and plays the part of a female, not only on the stage but also in private life. For many years this practice was followed, but today the onnagata leads a normal personal life, acting and dressing as a woman only when he appears on the stage. (Encyclopedia of world drama,page-620)

319 Artaud, Antonin (1895-1948) French director and playwright. Artaud’s cherished dream was to find a new kind of theatre in France that would not be a artistic spectacle, but a communication between spectator and actors. As in primitive societies, it would be a theatre of magic, mass participation in which the entire culture would find it vitality and its true expression. His two major books The Theatre and Its Double, and Theatre of Cruelty have been seminal books for a theatre practitioners.(Winter:1963)
conversation. That would be realism not poetry— and in theatre we need to unmask that which is hidden in the text, in the layers beneath the character, to penetrate and exchange.

My Interaction with them

The Naqqal performance is designed for pleasure as well as profit. Allusion, parody, irreverence, subversiveness and comic interludes were the main ingredients of the performance. It is a form without any firm or continuous tradition and the Naqqals had become master adapters, changing the script, movement, songs and innuendoes as they go along. They included in their repertoire urban issues, along with stories of Gods and Goddess, legendary heroes, tales of bhakti and miracles that were enacted with an idiomatic speech, in a patois that had its provenance in colloquial aspiration. Their performance was rendered with a rhetorical flourish that was interspersed with a comic vulgarity that always stopped short of the crass.

They were also hired occasionally by the ‘Song and Drama’ division to sell products, pass on social messages and damage the reputation of a rival political opponent when necessary. It is sometimes weird to see issues of dowry, birth control and female infanticide being rendered with a declamatory flamboyance that made these issues get a dash of the mythological.

The Naqqals have been nomads and like all nomads, a trifle aloof and suspicious. Their background is mysterious, as all claim separate genealogies even though they belong to the same family. Prem Chand, the self-styled ustad, said his family came from Rajasthan to Patiala on the invitation of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh. Tall and fair, with orange henna dyed hair with gold loops in his ears, he looked more like a buccaneer than a musician. Mundri claimed no such grand history for himself. Wrapped in a huge overcoat, even in mid-summer, with thick military shoes bought from the flea market; his favourite activity is sleeping and a stubborn resistance to bathing.

Most of them had no permanent address or home and moved from village to village with their cattle and sheep in search of pasture and work. They would sing at a village mela and weddings. The female impersonators, who gave themselves pseudonyms
like Miss Rosy and Miss Hurricane, would have no problem posing as hermaphrodites, dancing and singing with gusto at the birth of the village headman’s son or at traffic crossings. It was all a question of survival and no role was big or small, good or bad in their dictionary.

Their main source of income was when they assumed the role of an apothecary dispensing cures for buffalos and cows during the monsoon season when animals were more prone to disease. During this period they would sit in a cowshed chanting incantations to dispel evil spirits. Before the start of this ritual the ustad would assume the role of shaman and purify all the musical instruments by lighting incense and sprinkling rice over them.

Working with the Naqqals showed me a way of negotiating with cultural histories, stories and myths – not as something fixed and rigid, but letting them flow into personal histories and testimonies- it is almost like wearing your belief, emotions, rage, pain, on your bodies. To bring to each performance something from your own life.

“...one’s profession is to communicate stories, human history, one must make one of two choices: either we are false witness, or we are witness. The fact of making theatre, of simply being an artist, increases the responsibility tenfold, one hundredfold, one thousand………one does not have the right to lie. Since one cannot completely avoid lying, one must try not to lie”.

320 Mnouchkine- Collaborative Theatre page 125. Over the past thirty years the theatre du Soleil has become one of the most celebrated theatre companies in Europe, and Ariana Mnouchkine one of Europe’s best known directors. In tandem with her work she has also been a active campaigner for human rights- for workers, immigrants, prisoners of conscience, HIV/AIDS communities and most recently the people of Bosnia/Herzegovina. The Theatre du Soleil is one of the rare troupe where change and transformation are part of the very essence of the undertaking. To create theatre is also to work relentlessly in changing oneself. This doesn’t happen without pain, nor without difficulties so terrible that they tear apart the fabric of the troupe.( Collaborative Theatre: page 11) See Also The Theatre du Soleil Sourcebook
It took a long time for me to understand their world and for them to figure out why I wanted to enter their world. Initially I felt like an intruder. It is always very complex to traverse social distances that are the result of economics, education and society. I thought let me forget all that and just see all of us as a group of people working together. Not concerned with cultural exactitude, I was interested on how it could add to my own aesthetic projects. But as the Naqqal tradition is also a commercial form of entertainment, they understand money well. If you pay them promptly they do not bother with other abstract issues. It was based initially on the barter system. We show you our skills and you dole out the cash.

The Company; Working with female Impersonators

My group 'The Company,' which has been working for the last twenty years, is a mix of rural actors and urban performers. This combination has become for me my theatrical metaphor. It is a collective enterprise without any hierarchy. It enables me to explore a multiplicity of styles with each actor having the space to explore his own personal voice. The other actors have grown up in the city and have obtained a modern education from drama schools and universities. By putting such a company together, I have tried to produce a somewhat precarious, somewhat unstable meeting of folk, tradition, and the modern, as between setting up an equation between the female impersonators and actress. This destabilises both gender and tradition and shifts attention to the ‘figuration’ of women on stage.

_Yerma_, a play written by Fedrico Garcia Lorca, which I directed in the year 1992, had the urban actors along with the female impersonators acting in the same production. The presence of the female impersonators, who play the role of Yerma’s sisters-in-law, disorients the naturalness of gender definition and raises question about how gender is socially constructed. Being a woman is not the same as ‘playing’ a woman.

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321 Garcia, Lorca, Federico (1898-1936) Spanish poet and playwright. One of the best known Spanish poets of the twentieth century and the most widely translated Spanish dramatist of the age; these facts owe something to Lorca’s tragic death at the hands of the Falangists; they also derive from the oddly symbolic way in which Lorca’s intense personal work reflects the death of liberty and the creative imagination in Spain, coinciding with the death of the Spanish revolution after three years of civil war (1936-1939)
Anuradha Kapur after watching the play wrote “By questioning the way women are portrayed on stage, Neelam’s work differs significantly from activist theatre that dealt with women issues in the 1970’s.”

“Female impersonations realign femininity, as we know, and permits a certain degree of exaggeration of characters; in representing female impersonator as almost a motif in her work, Neelam man Singh Chowdhry has attempted to make evident that the performance of gender is in itself a social act engineered by codes grounded in social structures. We may call this process of showing, after Judith Butler, how bodies are ‘materialised as sexed.”

When I work with the female impersonators it makes up a palimpsest on which to work out contemporary rethinking on the female impersonator. While working on the dramatization of plays like ‘Yerma’ (Lorca) ‘Naga Mandala’ (Girish Karnad) ‘Mad Woman of Chaillot’ (Jean Giraudoux) and ‘Kitchen Katha’ (an improvised play dramatised by Surjit Patar) what stuck me about the female impersonators were the similarities between the hero and the female impersonators. The framework of their bodies was alike. If the female impersonator did not attempt to be diminutive, then the hero doesn’t appear hyper masculine either. My production of Yerma had the female impersonators play the role of the two sisters-in-law. The presence of female impersonators in a play about ‘barrenness’ accentuated the sense of sterility in which Yerma is placed. To emphasise Lorca’s interest in stylised theatre I reached towards the female impersonators to present a set of grimly humourless sisters-in-law and vulgar androgynous laundresses (also played by the female impersonators).

322 Anuradha Kapur: Lift brochure 1993 page 9
323 body. city: Anuradha Kapur-page143
324 Jean Giraudoux (1882-1944) French novelist, essayist, diplomat, and playwright.
325 Surjit Patar(1944-) Punjabi Poet and playwright. Has a PhD on Elements of folklore in the poetry of Guru Nanak Dev. Retired as a professor of Punjabi from Punjab agricultural University.

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In *Naga Mandala*, a play written by Girish Karnad in his text has used as a conceptual device of a chorus that is representing flames ("what happens when we blow out the light from our lanterns at night?, what happens to the light?, where does it disappear? is a metaphysical question posed by Karnad in his play). He answered it theatrically by creating a chorus of flames, who have escaped from the homes that they light up. They represent the abstract and intangible energies that surround us, not visible, but definitely asserting their influence and power in our lives. In my production, this chorus of flames was played by the female impersonators, dressed in tinselly black costumes with sequins festooning both their faces and costumes, they seemed to belong to neither gender, it was as if an invented no-man’s space was created for the performance to be perceived from. With their surreal make up and razzmatazz costume, the female impersonators, devoid of an explicit sexual orientation simply present themselves in opposition to both male and female ideals. This decontextualised image that the female impersonators present, despite presenting a conflated view of the feminine, has the potential to disrupt and destabilise ‘ways of seeing.’ This ambiguity became the metaphor through which I interpreted the scene. The men playing women did it according to the way men-like-to-see-women, but what they represent on stage is linked to, and expressed by, their not being men, to their not-man-less.

To not only play with the characters but with also gender definition, certainly allows for a performance where nothing is stated, everything flows because anything is possible.

In *Kitchen Katha* which was directed in 2001, I made all the male actors dress like women and the women actors to dress like men. It is difficult to state the reason for this, but working with female impersonators had freed my work and my actors from gender configurations. All I can say is that suddenly something comes, and I don’t know how it has come on the surface. Actors write with their bodies, they become somebody else. This is the sign of transformation. As they are living another life, instead of putting

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326 Girish Karnad-(1938-) Kannada actor-playwright, film director. Awarded with the Rhodes Scholarship (1960—1963), he found his interest shifting from science to literature. A much lauded figure, he also was the director of The Film and Television Institute of India (1974-1975).
on their own clothes, they put on the body and the story of someone else. My actors go a step further; they also choose the gender in which they wish to play their character. It is very interesting to observe that in the present productions of The National School of Drama casting of the characters is not done on the basis of gender. “I believe that our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender towards a world in which individual modes of personal behaviour can be freely chosen.”

“Rather than reinforcing a binary view of gender relations in which human beings are divided into two clear cut groups, women and men, feminists rejected the idea that biology is destiny, but then developed an account of patriarchal culture, which assumed that masculine and feminine genders would inevitably be built by culture, upon ‘male’ and ‘female’ bodies, making the same identity just as inescapable. This argument allows for no room for choice, differences or resistance.”

For me to explore gender on the stage was based on the premise that gender, rather then being a fixed attribute of nature, should be fluid and have the capacity to shift from context at different times and in different situations. There is no identity behind the expression of gender “…Identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results. In other words gender is a performance; it is what you do at a particular time, rather then a universal who you are. We all put on gender performances, whether traditional or not, anyway and so it is not a question of whether to do a gender performance, but what form that performance will take. By choosing to be different about it we might work to change gender norms and the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity.”

While working with them I have observed that by using men on the stage to impersonate women on a temporary basis, opens new avenues into how categories, sex,

327 What does age mean on the stage? what does gender mean on the stage.( BV Karanth In conversation in Chandigarh in 2000)
328 Virginia Woolf; Towards a Recognition of Androgyny. page x.
329 Judith Butler: ( Born 1956-) is an American Post-structuralist philosopher who has contributed to the field of feminism, queer theory, political philosophy and ethics. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990) page 25.
330 Judith Butler. Gender trouble; Feminism and The Subversion of Identity :page 87..
gender, sexuality are overlapped, combined and managed. To understand what part of masculinity these men reject, and how they manage this ‘crossing over’ within their day to day male roles, was of interest for me in this chapter. In my work with female impersonators I noticed that often their portrayal of the feminine side became hyper feminine, taking gender cues from clothing, hairstyle, make-up and body language through an exaggerated view of representing a woman- hence by adding to its theatricality. — what constitutes the feminine for them? Lipstick? Breasts? Swagger? How are these exaggerated? Larger breasts? Brighter lipstick? Exaggerated swagger? These assumptions about the feminine remain in many respects, masculine.

**Lineage of Traditional artist**

The *Guru-Shishya Parampara* is the very soul of the oral tradition of most transference of knowledge between a teacher and his student. It embodies the living and learning relationship between the master and pupil. The cultural transmission of knowledge, information and stories have behind them a history of a well developed system of unconscious memorization in the oral culture. The narrative performative systems of telling stories through recitation included interpolation, expansions of the story and the inclusion of issues that were part of immediate/present concerns. Myths, legends, epics, and local stories were disseminated through this process. The narrative may have remained the same, but the interpretation changed in accordance with the narrators viewpoint, who always seemed to have a sense of the ‘now’.

Most of the traditional arts belonged to a family tradition. The traditional skills and aesthetic knowledge are handed down in an informal fashion in the process of day-to-day living. They are arts that emanate from the community and the community’s experience. Traditional arts are practices passed on within communities (defined by ethnicity, tribe, family, occupation or common history.) The practice of traditional arts reflects a community's shared cultural heritage. Traditional Arts are usually learnt in an informal way, through performance or example rather than formal academic training. Traditional Arts are arts that are influenced by a traditional view of the world; an aesthetic that is accepted in the community as the way things ought to be done.
As most of the traditional actors belong to one extended family. The group that I work with are all related - brothers, uncles, cousins, brother-in-laws and so on and so forth. In the beginning most of them also married within the clan, but slowly that is changing due to the fact that many of them chose to opt out of this profession, due to the uncertainty of the profession or the social stigma of being a performer, especially a female impersonator, in the present day context. The *naqqals* have lost the impulses that created this art form and the values that supported it due to changing taste patterns and the choices posed by a new globalized economy. The younger generation did not view their traditional legacy as offering them a viable profession and sought alternatives, from selling helmets and fruit or anything that brought a semblance of a livelihood, rather then sing, dance or play the drums. But most of them dreamed about getting an office job, a peon or a clerk if you were lucky or educated.

Traditionally when a young male member of the family is initiated into the profession, his training in music and singing is also combined with training in dance. It is very interesting to note that most of the training of a traditional performer starts from being a female impersonator. The implicit assumption behind this practice is that besides learning musical skills, the actor also needs to learn the skill of transformation. The skill required to change your gender is fairly complex and the inner code required is almost given like a secret *mantra* from the guru to the *chela*, through which the performer maps his process of performance. His training is gauged through his ability to transform himself convincingly. The talent of an actor for transformation and being able to re-constitute his gender is what determines his success as a student. The performer then makes a choice later in life, whether he wishes to be a female impersonator or a singer, or a musician. A very significant case in this could be that of the famous director BV Karanth who as a child worked with the *Gubbi Veeranna* Company, as a female impersonator. When he

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33 Karanth, Babukodi Venkataramana (1929-2002) One of the most eminent theatre personalities in contemporary India, B.V. Karanth directed plays, composed music, conducted workshops, as well as being a director of important films.

32 Gubbi Veeranna- a commercial movement in theatre in Karnataka that won huge popularity in the first half of the twentieth century, and the genre that was created was also refined during that period. Generically it is an interesting hybrid of several local traditions. The performances catered to a wide section of people, mostly a touring company with all-night performances in tents.
attained puberty he could no longer perform female roles. He not only lost his feminine voice and delicate jaw but also his livelihood.

Let me discuss the issue through the story of one dancer: an eleven year old boy named Gautam, a gotipura dancer from Orissa. This discussion wrenches the dance from its context, as one is not trying to analyze the intricacies of the gotipura dance form but is attempting to isolate the terms of address between the spectator and the performer. Gautam dressed in a flame red sari with red painted lips and sharply delineated eyes manifested in his visage the conventional tropes of seduction. As a child Gautam could look nonmale and this was the most convincing aspect of his role as a female impersonator.

“On a more complicated level, however, the excess and “surplus” encoded within Gautam’s surface femininity reminds a spectator of the absence of the female (the lack) rather than the presence. The choreography of the gotipura is punctuated by a series of tableaux in which the dancer rests squarely in front of the spectator and smiles seductively. He gazes boldly at the spectator and holds his smile. The directness of his seductive appeal is disarming, and it is this directness which paradoxically illuminates the way in which the dancer addresses the male spectator. No one forgets that the dancer is male; the invocation to the nonmale is controlled by the security of the performer’s male body. As in the substitution for the female in the sphere of visual desire. Gautam’s dance questions the function of erotic substitution—what Freud calls fetishes—in the incitement of desire which all performances exploit. The fetishized “female” images so perfectly encoded in Gautam’s costume, makeup and movement works not to bring the female into the spectacle of exchange between spectator and performer but to leave her emphatically outside. In place of the female, a fetishized image is displayed which substitutes for her and makes her actual presence unnecessary. (...) The fantasy generated by Gautam’s performance is the fantasy of exchange between men about women.”

Gotipura is a dance form that predates Odissi dance and is performed by 6 to 14 year old boys dressed as girls and rigorously trained for five years.

Source: A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance- edited by Carol Martin; page 160 Peggy Phelan

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333 Gotipura is a dance form that predates Odissi dance and is performed by 6 to 14 year old boys dressed as girls and rigorously trained for five years.

334 A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance- edited by Carol Martin; page 160 Peggy Phelan

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Satnam, son of a female impersonator Bhadur (with whom I have worked for the last twenty years) is now being trained as a female impersonator by his father. One day, while accompanying his father for a dance program in a village fair near Malout, Satnam stepped on the improvised stage, wearing a shinning red Salwar kameez, with his head covered by a green chunni, lurid make-up, flowers pinned on a wig—all the tools of seduction in place as I observed. Dancing along with his father, his youth more than made up for his lack of expertise, because his young age gave him the ability to look non-male. A male child can convincingly play an adult woman, but may not be able to play a male. Yet despite his lack of virtuosity, (in comparison with the older female impersonators) he knew exactly how to strategise the performance and had worked out the terms of address between the spectator and the performer.

Satnam’s surface femininity made me recognize, as a spectator, the absence of the female rather than its presence. The choreography of the dance was punctuated by a series of slanting looks, teasing gestures and at some point the dancer looks straight at the spectator and smiles, locking his gaze with the spectator in an unflinching manner. The directness had a hypnotic appeal almost as if a bird had pulverised its victim through the ‘gaze’. It seemed to illustrate the way in which the dancer addressed the male spectator. An atmosphere of intense intimacy is created through the locked gaze, almost as if he were ‘making love in public’.

In my working experience I have noticed that the male playing female roles is able to take transgressive, almost violent urges that are repressed in normal life. It also invites the participants to share in these excesses and an elaborate charade of illusion is woven in a way that makes the spectator an accomplice in the building of the illusion. The female impersonator fabricates to appear ‘real’ and minces and primp and also demonstrates incredible skills in singing (without changing his voice) and dancing, flaunting, taunting, provoking a loud and an exuberant participation from the male members of the audience.
Underlining all this is the fact that it is a performance for the male, by the male and about the male. It is multilayered and ambivalently marked. A man playing the role of a woman helps an audience subvert assumptions of cultural propriety. The male audience can take those liberties with the female impersonator that would not be possible if she was a ‘real’ woman and the female impersonator can have ‘hot’ talks with the audience, which would not have been possible if she was a real woman. This is to say that the female impersonators are free to act as women, because they are, in reality, not women. Traditional conventions are still strong enough to make it improper for a woman, either in real life or on the stage, to act as openly and freely with men, as a female impersonator can, initiating contact with them, inviting verbal and gestural exchange with the audience, provoking them to get actively involved. During a performance I have experienced a visceral sensation of their awareness of my presence. The female impersonators literally begin to perform for and with me. They look at me both for applause and for money, because they see me as a director and a director in their minds has no gender. The other thing I noticed was that the female impersonator reinforces the primacy of desire between men for men or boys. The young boy flatters the male spectators’ visual and physical prowess, by appealing to his maleness. In short the ‘fetishized’ female image reinforces rather than subverts the structure of the dominant codes that are ascribed to women within patriarchy, and the behaviours, attitudes and tasks they have to follow.

Also as it is a well-known fact that most patriarchal and feudal societies did not allow the entry of women in the performing arts. This situation of course slowly changed, by including prostitutes and dancing girls in the performing arts. Although female impersonation was an established convention in most pre-modern traditions of theatre and dance in South Asia, it entered a new phase in the urban entertainment economy that emerged in mid-19th century Bombay, particularly in the Parsi theatre, also in the

Parsi theatre: Highly influential movement between the 1850-1930. an aggregate of European techniques, pageantry, and local forms, enormously successful in the sub-continent and beyond, it may be seen as India first commercial theatre. As the name indicates, it was subsidized to a great extend by the Parsis, the Zoroastrian community of Persian origin that had migrated to Western India over the centuries. Engaged in shipbuilding and trading, the Parsis had become an important business force on the west course by the nineteenth century, and began to cultivate the arts and philanthropy. The first Parsi production is dated on October 1853, by the ‘Parsee Stage Players’ at the Grant Road Theatre.
closely related Gujarati and Marathi theatres as well as in the early films—where boys and men played the female roles. Their talent in acting, singing and dancing determined the success or failure of the companies to which they were attached. But the flip side was that women were kept out of the acting profession with arguments being that performing women were not available. But women had a tough time trying to gain an entry into Parsi theatre companies as their access was barred, not only by the company managers, but also by the female impersonators who considered them as a potential threat. Real women would definitely be more in demand than the female impersonators. Considering the way gender was represented on the urban stage, the fear was that real women may displace that equilibrium. The desirable traits of femininity were enacted by male bodies, enacting the idea of a woman that was packaged to suit the male fantasy, either in its idealized form or as a voluptuous votary of desire. The Parsi theatre was fiercely opposed to women acting on stage, even Kaikhushro Navrojji Kabraji, a spokesman for women rights, was against the inclusion of women on the Parsi stage. Dadi Patel it has been documented was the first person who brought a Muslim woman from Hyderabad to act in Parsi theatre. Latifa Begum was a consummate dancer and her role in the play Indra Sabha played to packed houses due to the novelty of seeing a woman on the stage. It is said, that one day a male member of the audience, enamoured by her infinite charm, whisked her off the stage and fled with her on his waiting carriage.

They may have had many Parsi financiers, managers, performers and patrons, but their personnel was by no means exclusively Parsis. Considerable cross-regional and cross-linguistic movement of artist and writers led to a heterogeneous mix at a broadly national level, with the result that the Parsi companies not only worked in Gujarati, Urdu, Hindi and English, but inspired theatres in virtually every corner of India. The form was highly eclectic and of unlike parts, taking stories from Persian legendary Shahnama, the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata, the fabulous Arabian Nights, Shakespeare tragedies and comedies, and Victorian melodramas. The social drama were equally popular— but the issues were elaborated within the family—problems about equality, sexuality education, and inheritance enacted within domestic terms. (Anuradha Kapur, Parsi Theatre-page341).

Kabraji, Kaikhushro Navrojji (1842-1904) A major contributor to dramatic literature and the development of the stage. Kaikhushro Kabraji was an extraordinary individual. He was not only the proprietor and editor of the leading Parsi newspaper, Rast Goftar, but also a playwright of high caliber. Kabraji alone should be credited with establishing the Victoria theatrical company. Sangeet Natak VolumeXXXVI

Dadi Patel (1848-1902) an impresario of the Parsi theatre and worked in the Grant Road Theatre. Parsi theatre Origin and development (SangeetNatak VolumeXXXVI)
The other actresses who were part of the Parsi stage were Amir Jan and Moti Jan - two sisters from Punjab. Amir Jan used to sing Sufi Ghazals and so mesmerised a Muslim business man that he married her. Her sister Moti Jan left the company and disappeared from the world of theatre. Miss Guahar and Miss Mary Fenton were the most famous actresses from the Parsi stage. Miss Guahar debuted as a child artist while Mary Fenton was the daughter of an English officer of the British Indian army. When women finally came on the stage, they came from foreign groups such as Christians and Indians Jews; this was true both of the Parsi theatre and the silent cinema. This racial "Othering" of the heroine wove in very neatly with the colonial preoccupations with "whiteness," this in a certain way also helped in distancing the stigmatized performer from the legitimate viewer, both the female as well as male. The modes of spectatorship that informed theatrical practices of gender and race impersonation locates several different, possibly overlapping, kinds of pleasure that were derived from these masquerades of femininity. It created an image of the Indian woman that got visually standardized as a cross-dressed man or a fair-skinned woman, both alien and hence paradoxically, acceptable.

The Female Impersonator. Dialogue

Puran Chand, - stage name is Chasme-Badur, sometimes Pammi and sometimes Miss Rosy - is a star performer at most village fairs. His name sells and despite muscles, hair and avoirdupois- his extravagant display of his star spangled costume a luxuriant wig, oversized breasts and a cleavage which defies nature, encoded within his persona an ethos and aesthetic that is hyper feminine. I have noticed, sometimes with panic, that while he is rehearsing for one of the plays that I am directing, he stares at me with a fixed smile and acts as if an invisible mirror is following him. He looks at me coyly, with a smile trembling on his red 'bow' lips. Almost as if I am the male client that he needs to seduce. This leaves me completely confused- is the male in him trying to seduce the

338 Came from Lahore and took the Parsi theatre by storm, due to their beauty and singing and dancing talent.
339 A child artist, became famous for her role as Sita.
340 Miss Fenton and English actress rechristened Meera Bhai for the Parsi stage. One of the most famous and accomplished actresses of the Parsi theatre.
woman in me, or is it the 'female' in Puran that imagines' me to be a male. As being a
director is a fairly androgynous role to play. It is this ambiguity that creates its magical
hold over me as a director and as a spectator. Perhaps the intricate codes that are
operating within the psyche of the performer do not completely cohere with my
understanding of the entire process, as I respond to their transformation as something that
happens on the surface, but for them it is as if they have “put make-up on their soul”

I have seen at a village performance in Solan, Bhadur Chand, a female
impersonator from the Naqqal tradition, sit on the lap of the patron and twirl his
moustache in an attempt to extract money from him. Shows that are performed in the
night by a group of female impersonators, musicians and singers have a carnivalesque
quality as it affirms and mocks, celebrates and critiques prevailing definitions of what
titillates and stimulates a predominantly male audience. The actors flaunt their bodies in
exaggerated costumes drawn from and elaborated upon through cultural stereotypes- The
seductress, the Goddess, the idealized wife and daughter – often their names suggest an
exaggerated sexuality: Miss Sweety, Miss Rosy, Miss Hurricane, Miss Bulbulah-Hind,
and Miss Chasme-Badur. I have also seen during the course of their performance a
crowd becoming violent, abusive, and aggressive. In their desire to be titillated the
atmosphere becomes extremely sexual and restless, as the crowd is waiting impatiently to
be collectively seduced. The spectators always present a version of masculinity that has
the sanction of the dominant culture and as such raucous and coarse behaviour is the
norm at such performances. In the middle of a show the female impersonator can lash
out ‘as a male’ to discipline an unruly spectator and without much effort again slip into
the female role.

During my field work, I travelled with them to Balachaur a small town near
Ropar in Punjab, in 2007, and met some of the female impersonators from the Naqqal
tradition getting ready for a show. There is lots of talking and going out for tea. The show
begins with five or six musicians lining up at the rear of an improvised stage. The sound
of a conch shell announced the start of a play and the actors flutter into view to the sound

34 Stanislavski from actor Prepares page-234

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of huge applause, stamping of feet and wild whistling from the crowd. After a vigorous
dance the musicians start their singing, and the actors begin the narrative. All the lines
are sung with frequent interludes of dancing and this performance goes on for almost half
the night. The costumes are glitzy with lots of spangles, with a lot of rolling of eyes and a
constant smile. Whenever a photographer came to the edge of the stage to take a
photograph, the female impersonator become very still, composing his expression, to face
the camera. After the photograph is clicked he resumes his dancing. The female
impersonators have high stuffed falsies, golden earrings studded with huge stones, white
pasty make-up and silken wigs. Under a lurid tent lit up by kerosene lamps, I asked them
certain questions to gain an insight into their craft. With a mirror propped precariously
against a chair, on a cold wintry night I chat with Puran Chand, Bhadur Chand, and
Sohan Lal as they remove their make-up.

“Does the female impersonator only play the role of the seductress”, I asked
Bhadur Chand. “We also play the role of Durga and Kali (goddess). When we do the
role of Durga, Kali, or Surupanakha, (the sister of the demon king Ravana) we sing their
Shabads (religious hymns) and our expression comes from the feelings behind the
words” he said. “What kind of woman do you try to imitate, do you use your mothers’,
sisters, or wives as reference”? Sohan Lal, a female impersonator with a high pitch
singing voice answered “I use the gestures and body language of Hema Malani, Sri Devi,
Kareena Kapur or Preity Zinta. I want to look as beautiful as them”.

Puran Chand, an attractive female impersonator, and a huge star in the villages
in which he performs, mentioned that he would like to become a woman, “I like the ada
(mannerism) of women. When I perform the role of a woman on stage, I should be
familiar with her ada. I enjoy becoming a woman and performing the complete ada of a
girl, (the coyness, the wiles, the slow gait, the grace, the sacrifice) and during the
performance I must forget that I am a man. My ustadji (teacher) used to always tell me –
you must become a woman ‘completely’ while performing”. (It is fairly evident, that the
idea of a woman is based on the so called idealised ‘calendar art ’ sort of representation).

342 Hema Malani, Sri Devi, Kareena Kapur, Preity Zinta- all famous Bollywood actress
In a tent, with a mirror propped against their knees, they were applying make-up before the show. It was 11 PM at night. I saw them patting a thick coat of powder on their face, and after the powder had settled into the pores of the skin, I saw the female impersonators outlining their eyebrows, tracing their lips, exaggerating their eyes with a thick kohl pencil, almost as if they were writing on their faces the character they were going to portray. Very hesitantly I asked them, “Why are you applying so much white make-up on your face? Will this help you to become a woman?”

Puran Chand, had a quick answer “When we apply make-up, we remember Mohini; (the celestial beauty, who specialised in seducing learned sages in Hindu mythology) and try to become like her, the ultimate seductress. Make-up enhances the quality of attractiveness required to seduce sages, and saints. When we play the role of women for the stage, we remember the celestial beauty and try to emulate her through make-up and dress”.

“When you become Mohini, What happens? Who is Mohini? What is Mohini for you? What are her special qualities - is she strong, is she beautiful, what aspects and attributes of her do you try and present?” Bhadur quickly replied, “Shringar is what Mohini represents, and it is this particular quality that we try to remember”. “What are her other qualities?” I asked, “Is she fragile, gentle, does she have Karuna rasa Bhakti-rasa?” Puran was quick to reply, “She has everything, delicacy, style, coyness, grace-she has everything”.

The question that has always intrigued me is what do their wives make of their profession, how do their daughters react when they see their father transforming into a woman, does it confuse them, lead to a sense of blurred identity? An embarrassment in their community? Very tentatively I broached this question, “Does your wife think, I am a woman, my husband is also a woman”? This question had all of them laughing at its absurdity. “They know this is our tradition, the wives domain is clothes and food, what we do is a man’s work and only men do it. Our women don’t do this work. They know this is our profession and we have to do it” (despite being female impersonators, their male chauvinism is very much intact).
The Illusion

The make-up of the female impersonator is done in front of a large mirror. As the make-up is being applied the process of internalising the illusion of being feminine is also set into motion. The female impersonator’s face is covered with a chalky white powder, this is not done to make the complexion unnatural, as say in the clown tradition of the west, but to erase the features and paint on it a face afresh. Treating the face like a blank canvas on which the character will be written, etched and decorated. Elongated eyebrows and vermillion painted mouth, eyes like deep inkwells create a hyper-femininity. The female impersonator is not supposed to be a verisimilitude of women but is supposed to signify a woman. The actor neither plays a woman nor copies her but only signifies her as an idea, with all the exaggerations that are imagined about an idealized woman. The women that the female impersonators depict on the stage do not allow for identification as they are more in the nature of idealized women than a ‘real’ woman performing.

The female impersonator dressed in feminine and flattering dress is both fascinating and illusionary. The male members of the audience knowing that it is not a ‘real woman’ exercise those liberties that would be unthinkable if it was a real woman on the stage. This interaction satiates certain voyeuristic needs in a feudal and male dominated society.

The men who transformed themselves as women were trained to be erotic, wanton, and lascivious – the audiences that supported and patronized them were boisterous and male. This relationship between audience and performer was beyond the imagined limits of decency. It was sexist, nocturnal and misogynist. It happened deep in the night, far away from their homes and wives – removed from the precincts of their everyday life. The intentions were single-mindedly erotic.

This brings us to the question, how does one shift through the boundaries of sexuality, especially in the concept of the female impersonator? Is the man who dresses periodically as a woman, sees himself as a woman, who is not entirely a woman, a man
minus a man or a man plus a woman. What happens on the stage? The man, in the man and the woman in the man become hybridised.

On Changing Taste.-

Already many traditional arts have been commercialised, uprooted, simplified, to suit a changing market for cultural events, rather than follow the demands of their history and cultural practices. This was done in the case of the more classical and ‘saleable’ art forms - the Peking opera. But this did not really happen in India as the awareness to treat classical forms, and to some extent folk forms, as a national treasure has not entered into the mind-set of the cultural mandarins here. Yet folk forms as well as classical forms cannot be locked out of the ongoing process of life. Many art forms will cease to exist. Nothing can stop artistic extinction and nothing can be preserved indefinitely. To sometimes force it to live, when circumstance and needs have changed, is to make it like a museum piece cut from its life force. Sometimes the constant urge to preserve is like thrusting a mask that hides the fear towards change.

‘... but a gap has opened between modern Indian theatre and traditional forms. The issue is complex because the traditional forms are exciting theatrically but ideologically and socially they are often reactionary, as in Jatra. Commercial melodrama Modern theatre’s problem is how to use the staging and direct relation to the audience of the folk forms without at the same time falling into the reactionary mythopoesis. The answer is not an imitation or adaptation. Rather a suggestion that writers, designers, and actors fully experience the folk forms, and get training in the folk forms – and then ‘forget’ what they have learned; fully digesting the techniques so that they became part of the muscle of their own work. It is at the level of body consciousness, integration of music and rhythmic movement, environment staging and direct contact with the audience that modern groups can use traditional theatre’.

343Richard Schechner (1938-) one of contemporary theatre’s most celebrated directors, he is also a world renowned artist and scholar. page: 86 performance Theory
A few months later, to continue my dialogue, I went to their village, Majri, in December 2007. Sitting on a rope bed we talked over hot cups of tea with the cows mooing at the back, while the women of the household busied themselves in making cow-dung cakes to be used as fuel. While talking to Prem Chand the *ustad* of the *Naqqals* and a famous impersonator during his times, about changing taste of the audience and the changing times, Prem Chand, a compulsive talker, with a propensity towards exaggeration, claims that he is hundred years old and still virile. His passport puts his age as 72. “When I used to dance and sing in village fairs, people liked to watch a *Naqqal* performance. They also enjoyed listening to ghazals, Qawwali, and religious songs. In those days there were no loudspeakers, nor electricity. People had simple taste and used to concentrate on words, their meaning and the art itself. No speakers, no roads, no buses. We used to walk with our baggage on our heads, even if it was a distance of fifty miles. There was one bus which was bound to break down on the way and we would be left behind. So, we used to walk. We have learnt this art the hard way”.

What is the difference between performing in the city and the villages was a question that I posed before them. Puran Chand the female impersonator chirps up, “In the villages, we don’t perform like the way we perform in the plays of ‘The Company’. In the village we perform according to the taste and sensibility of the audience. In the villages our performance are more ‘badmash’ (salacious), as the prime motive, besides entertaining, is also to extract the maximum money out of the audience and the only way that can be achieved is through titillation, seduction and by being risqué. If they don’t give us money, we tell them to go away and say we won’t perform. In this way we embarrass them publicly for their pusillanimity”. We do *nizakat* (wiles) and *nakhara* (coyness) until we get the money. Sexist behaviour is used, dialogues expressing love and passion are expressed- I have become yours and you have become mine, which is greeted by hoots of laughter and the victim immediately opens his purse to save himself from further embarrassment. This can only be done if I imagine myself as a woman. Otherwise I cannot perform”.

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I guess this is one of the main reasons for the female impersonation to have survived as a village tradition in Punjab, as it is based on the whole process of seduction, of extracting money.

Here I would like to present another dimension of the female impersonator from the Marathi stage. The Marathi stage has had a very distinct tradition of the female impersonator. Balgandharva, (1886-1967) one of the most celebrated female impersonators from the Marathi Sangitnatak tradition had a sweet cherubic face and a mellifluous voice. He was given the name of Balgandharva (the young celestial singer) by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the nationalist leader. The range of characters that he portrayed was from the mythological to the historical and social. The elegance of his female impersonation made women not only follow his style and dress but also his elaborate coiffures and the way he draped his sari became the fashion statements of his time. He influenced and even set standards for the fashion in the silent movies, but after a brief stint in films he rejected the medium as he ‘felt uncomfortable’ Balgandharva was accepted as the most successful female impersonator of his times. This appreciation was based on many aspects of his art. All other female impersonators were appreciated for one or two of their qualities or for some specific roles.

However the understanding and appreciation of Balgandharva as the most complete and overall successful female impersonator took into account the visual, auditory and histrionic aspects, and I suggest that this understanding was heavily underlined with the idea of a respectable woman. In other words, Balgandharva’s, darshan, his singing and the roles he played together created an ideal (essential) woman in theatre, seductive and desirable and yet dignified and respectable; not only the most suitable for the consumption of the women of respectable households (as well as the dignified men) but also an ideal of imitation in their real lives; as the trend setter for women’s attire as well as for the abstract qualities of good womanhood in domestic and public life: so much so that his fans did not accept a real woman in his place while he was

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344 Sangitnatak (literally means ‘music-drama’): glorious tradition in Marathi theatre during the early decades of the twentieth century, representing an amalgam of two parallel structures—singing and theatrical acting.
active in theatre. Further, this appreciation of Balgandharva continued, in recent times in the nostalgic writings on Marathi theatre and music as well as in the practice of the Sangeet Natak, even after the end of the practice of female impersonation.

Through the example of a famous play *Begum Barve* written by Satish Alekar I will try to give a glimpse of the life of a female impersonator beyond the stage. Though this is a fictionalised account, yet to some extent it captures the life and tragedy of being a female impersonator. *Begum Barve*, considered a classic play of contemporary Marathi theatre, deals with the eponymous female impersonator’s memories and fantasies. A minor singer and dancer actor, cast out on the streets after his musical company closes down, sells incense sticks and is brutally exploited by his ex employer. Barve, is from the tradition of sangitnatak era who had fallen into penury due to the changing taste patterns in the entertainment industry in the first half of the 19th century. As a minor female impersonator in a Marathi theatre company and now unemployed due to the closure of the theatre company due to the advent of cinema, Barve has completely identified with his feminine self. He surrenders himself to a hallucinatory world where fact and fiction merge, blanking out reality. Being addressed as Begum by his various clients/customers reinforces the myth of his femaleness.

On a magical day, his fantasies get enmeshed with those of a pair of clerks who are his regular customers and get almost fulfilled. The entire conflict is built up on a particular hot Thursday evening, when the clerks desire a pot of water to assuage their burning bodies. The pot of water gets erotic connotations. Water equated with life, sex, and erotica. *Begum Barve* arrives in the room of the clerks with the pot of water on his head and for the clerks in a split magical moment Barve, is not the tired and faded female impersonator but the woman for whom they are lusting. From this moment onwards a magical change takes place and the lives of these two sets of people get meshed together in an illusionary bond. The pot of water on Barve’s head gets a mythic hue with the Radha Krishna iconography being replayed.

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347 Satish Alekar, *Begum Barve*, Pune:Neelkanth Prakashan,1979 Satish Alekar a famous Marathi playwright(1949-) *Begum Barve* considered a classic play of contemporary Marathi
348 Satish Alekar (1949-)Marathi actor, director and playwright. Professionally a bio-chemist, he has been working with “The Theatre Academy” in Pune.
Barve arriving with the pot of water on his head represents an archetype of desire and love and transforms the clerk’s dull and dreary life with a meaningful glow. The clerk becomes Krishna- and the pot carrying Barve is Radha. Along with this is the evocative image of breaking the pot of water and seeing Barve drenched which releases a host of erotic images that parallel the playfulness of Krishna in the legend.

The last scene is deeply moving as it shows that Barve’s illusion is so complete as a woman that she simulates a pregnancy. Singing on a swing decorated with flowers, Barve feels complete. Her employer mocks at her: You? Pregnant? Oh Hell! Just look at it. Look at this dhoti-wearing woman. Look at this pregnant woman with no stomach. (the employer tears off Barve’s dhoti, revealing beneath knee length stripped men’s underpants) you are pregnant, you bastard? Take a look at Barve’s underpants.

The clerks, after their brief flirtation with fantasy, are happy to go back to mundane existence. The employer establishes his brute strength and regains his hold over the fragile Barve. But Barve without his imaginary world collapses.

The story above illustrates the complex slippages of identity encoded within Begum Barve in order to demonstrate the issues involved.

In this play Satish Alekar has brilliantly explored the life of a female impersonator. On the stage men could live the life of women, but when it spills into their daily life then the price they pay is heavy. “.... flung backwards on a chaise longue, Manohar Singh (1938-2002) playing a female impersonator in Amal Allana’s Begum Barve, is coloured in a rich violet light; his arms are tossed outward, his lipsticked mouth is open, eyes fixed above in a gaze of desire/betrayal/forsake-ness. The image elicits readings of tragedy and passion, of Camille; but of a Camille that in fact does not exist. It exist only in annotations of atmosphere, nostalgia and eroticism, that connects up to an undefinable, even untethered remembrance of stars like Bal Gandharva and Jaishanker Sundari and of the collective fantasy attached to them. The image calls attention to itself and to the selection and repression that nostalgia itself screens. The
gestic position is fractured anyway, as a masculine knee visible under the crumpled dhoti forces us to realign the feminine across several faultlines.  

Most traditional and popular performances, as I had earlier stated, not only in India but also in Asia, had men play the role of women. Begum Barve’s, identification with playing woman’s role on the stage, percolated into ‘her’ daily life. The sense of transformation was so complete that it spread over several faultlines. He wants to be a woman and he is also like a woman, yet he is not a woman. Like Bakhtin’s “rogues, clowns and fools”, the female impersonators create around themselves their own special world” which is connected with that highly specific, extremely important area of the square when the common people congregate” (Dialogic Imagination 159) The female impersonators are both real and unreal and the spectators participate in their temporary myth of being desired as women. In Bakhtin’s words, “one cannot take them literally, because they are not what they seem………..Their existence is a reflection of some other mode of being- and even then, not a direct reflection. They are life’s maskers; their being coincides with their role, and outside their role they do not exist”  

“A Significant yet somewhat overlooked part of Butler’s argument concerns the role of sex in the construction of “natural” or coherent gender and sexuality. Butler explicitly challenges the biological account of binary sex, reconceiving the sexed body as culturally constructed by regulative discourse. That supposed obviousness of sex as a natural biological fact attested to how deeply its production in discourse is concealed. The sexes body, once established as “natural” and unquestioned “fact” is the alibi for

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347 Anuradha K: Theatre India; Number 9, Actors Prepare –page 24.
348 Bakhtin- November 17, 1895 to march 7 1975. Russian scholar, Philosopher, and literary critic.
349 Bakhtin’s rogues, jesters, and fools are celebrated as ‘the organized voice of the oppressed.’
350 Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (, 1895 – 1975) was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, and scholar who worked on literary theory, ethics, and the philosophy of language. His writings, which cover a wide variety of subjects, inspired scholars working in a number of different traditions (Marxism, semiotics, structuralism, religious criticism) and in disciplines as diverse as literary criticism, history, philosophy, anthropology and psychology. . Dialogic Imagination 159). It is through the essays contained within The Dialogic Imagination that Bakhtin makes a significant contribution to the realm of literary scholarship. Bakhtin explains the generation of meaning through the “primacy of context over text” and the hybrid nature of language. To make an utterance means to “appropriate the words of others and populate them with one's own intention".
construction of gender and sexuality, unavoidable more cultural in their appearance, which can purport to be just-as-natural expression or consequence of a more fundamental sex. On Butler’s account, it is on the basis of the construction of natural binary sex that binary gender and heterosexuality are likewise constructed as natural. In this way, Butler claims that with a critique of sex as produced by discourse, the sex/gender distinction as a feminist strategy for contesting construction of binary asymmetric gender and compulsory heterosexuality will be ineffective.

If Begum Barve had been a hermaphrodite or a hijra, it would have been easy for the men in the audience to distance themselves, from the politics of his identity - That’s not me"- would have been a predictable defence. But by retaining the feminine and not blurring the male, the spectator both male and female have to figure out their own affinities with him.

This drift of a blurred identity within the contours of ‘woman’ has the protagonist simulate a pregnancy to complete this sense of womanhood. This level of impersonation presents the audience simultaneously with the image of the real and with the idea of the unreal. That it offers them, in Baudrillard’s words, “with a kind of thrill of the real’, or of an aesthetics of the hyperreal, a thrill of the vertiginous and phony exactitude, a thrill of alienation”.

An experienced female impersonator knows how to strategize the performance, how to capture an audience by knowing what to conceal and what to reveal. How to

351 Judith Butler: Judith Butler (1956-) A Sourcebook of feminist Theatre and performance, edited by Carol Martin, is an American post-structuralist philosopher, who has contributed to the fields of feminism, queer theory, political philosophy, and ethics. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity The crux of Butler’s argument is that the coherence of the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality—the natural-seeming coherence, for example, of masculine gender and heterosexual desire in male bodies—is culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts in time. These stylized bodily acts, in their repetition, establish the appearance of an essential, ontological "core" gender. This is the sense in which Butler famously theorizes gender, along with sex and sexuality, as performative. Routledge. pp. 129–33.

352 Jean Baudrillard (July 29, 1929- March 6-2007) a French cultural theorist, philosopher and political commentator- known for his analyses for the mode of mediation and of technological communication. His writings, although consistently interested in the way technological progress affects social change- covers wide subjects- from consumerism to gender relations. (Professional wrestling by Sharon Mazer; page 21.)
engage an audience in an active call and response, within the parameters of the traditional and the improvised? Through their persona they make visible cultural and counter cultural ideas of sexuality.

Conversely the Onnagata, or the female impersonator of the Kabuki stage (from the Japanese classical Theatre) does not attempt to resemble a real woman, yet exaggerates feminine manners in order to create the ‘ideal’ woman. These portrayals were ‘as men like to see them’ refined elegant, and generous. The men who brought the Onnagata to life on the stage presented a stylized woman who was more feminine then a ‘real’ woman. Onnagatas’ fantastical expressions artistically reflected a countries own expectation of the ideal woman. Every aspect of the Onnagata, the wig, the make-up the gestures, portrays the perfect female image. The men, who created the image, used strong lines that could only be created by a man. This in a certain intricate manner sublimated the male fantasy of an idealized woman. Despite the gender violations, the theatre did provide an outlet of gender expression in a strict society. A fantasy world is created where men are women and the audiences absorb the social roles created by these characters. They seem to encode ideals of the expected female roles in Japanese society. Every action, movement, gesture symbolized socially implied statements of proper behaviour, while constructing gendered lines. The need to play a woman while retaining the privilege of being male.

There are no stereotypes or standardization in the position of the female impersonator in the performing arts. There is a story about a woman who poses as a man to do the role of a female impersonator sometime in the early 18th century. The stage that she passes through is of the woman becoming the man to play the woman. The twist in the whole tale is that a male member of the audience falls in love with the illusionary woman while the real woman, playing the female impersonator, falls in love with the man. This example makes us realize that gender, as a concept on stage, cannot be dichotomized as male or female and provides a strong base for explaining how gender was socially constructed.
During the time of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) women were not employed on the Elizabethan stage, so Shakespeare wrote all his female roles to be played by boys. Shakespeare had considerable fun with the idea of a boy playing a girl playing a boy, as is the case with Rosalind in *As You Like It* or Viola in *Twelfth Night* and even more theatrically, with Flute playing Thisby in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Boys in professional companies often graduated to male parts as they matured and their voices dropped and their beards grew. When Hamlet first greets the players he recognizes one such fellow and says: *O, my old friend! Thy face is valanced since I saw thee last, comest thou to beard me in Denmark?*

Male impersonation made audiences aware that certain gender norms could be easily broken and taken on by the opposite sex. This opened the door for recognizing transgender identities and broke the barrier of manifesting gender as male/female, masculine/feminine and continued to create a space for a gender identity beyond these clichés.

“The cornerstone of Bertold Brecht’s theory is “verfremdungseffekt”\(^{354}\), the technique of defamiliarizing a word, an idea, a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh.” A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time it seems unfamiliar” (Brecht 1964:192); “The A-effect.

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\(^{353}\)The term “Elizabethan theatre”, however, covers only the plays written and performed publicly in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558–1603).

\(^{354}\) The distancing effect (German: *Verfremdungseffekt*) is a theatrical and cinematic device coined by playwright Bertolt Brecht “which prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer.” In German, *Verfremdungseffekt* signifies both alienation and distancing in a theatrical context; thus, “theatrical alienation” and “theatrical distancing”. Brecht wanted to "distance" or to "alienate" his audience from the characters and the action and, by dint of that, render them observers who would not become involved in or to sympathize emotionally or to empathize by identifying individually with the characters psychologically; rather, he wanted the audience to understand intellectually the characters' dilemmas and the wrongdoing producing these dilemmas exposed in his dramatic plots. By being thus "distanced" emotionally from the characters and the action on stage, the audience could be able to reach such an intellectual level of understanding (or intellectual empathy); in theory, while alienated emotionally from the action and the characters, they would be empowered on an intellectual level both to analyze and perhaps even to try to change the world, which was Brecht's social and political goal as a playwright and the driving force behind his dramaturgy. .
consists of turning an object from something ordinary and immediately accessible into something peculiar, striking, and unexpected” (1964:143). In performance, an actor alienates rather than impersonates the character or even demonstrates the character behaviour instead of identifying with it. Brecht theorizes that if the performer remains outside the character’s feelings, the audience may also, thereby remaining free to analyze and form opinions about the play’s fable. ‘Verfremdungseffekt also challenges the mimetic property of acting that semioticians call iconicity, the fact that a performer’s body conventionally resembles the object (character) to which it refers. This is why gender critique in theatre is so powerful.

Gender refers to the words, gestures, appearance, ideas and behaviour that dominant cultures understand as indices of feminine or masculine identity. When spectators ‘see’ gender they are seeing (and reproducing) the cultural signs of gender, and by implication, the gender ideology of a culture. Gender in fact provides a perfect illustration of ideology at work since ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ behaviour usually appears to be a “natural” thus fixed and unalterable extension of biological sex.  

I have noticed that the female impersonator that I worked with did not have the transformative skills of the kabuki Onnagatha or even of the transformatic skills of a Kutiyattam or Kathakali actor. The Naqqals, with their repertoire of story-telling techniques, raucous humour, wild singing, along with their strong tradition of dancing performed by female impersonators, sang songs that were heavily laced with risqué meanings along with a dose of pop Sufism, local history, and sexist attitudes. It was assumed that female impersonators were homosexual. This is again a stereotypical reading of the female impersonator. Not a man, not a woman, so it is either the third sex or he is gay. This sort of linear deduction is only a half-truth. Some of the female impersonators definitely are homosexual but then, so are some of the male actors.

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355 From the chapter Brechtian Theory/ Feminist Theory Page 123, edited by Carol Martin from the book A Sourcebook of Feminist theatre.

356 Kutiyattam-ancient form of Sanskrit theatre still extant in Kerala. Kuttu (play) is the generic name for these two varieties of Sanskrit theatre played in the Kuttampalams (playhouses attached to the temples).

357 Kathakali (from katha, story, and Kali, drama): celebrated theatre tradition from Kerala, believed to have originated in the small principality of Kottarakkara in erstwhile Travancore (south Kerala). From the Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre: page 203.
Choosing to be a female impersonator in no way seems to suggest a sexual proclivity, but depends more on family tradition, artistic training, physical endowment and artistic choice. As most of the female impersonators I have worked with have families, children and land, the wife feels no embarrassment or social stigma about their husbands’ world as a female impersonator. In fact the female impersonator is aided by his wife, before a show with the wife helping him in arranging his costume, his wig and also loans him her make-up.

I remember the female impersonator Bhadur Chand asking me to arrange for a brassier as he had forgotten to borrow it from his wife. It’s really part of the job/craft/art. What is interesting is the inter-relations that happen in a group that comprises of female impersonators, traditional musicians and urban actors. The personalities that they develop are an amalgam of their individual identities and their cultural stereotypes – the female impersonators, even in their daily clothing of pant and shirt, retain the feminine within them. On train journeys the female urban actors in the group are comfortable sharing berths with the female impersonators, as they are seen as being men as well as women. The male part of them makes a woman secure during long journeys while the female part of them creates an identification.

I have also noticed that once they get into their female garb, the attributes of being a woman transforms them not only physically but also internally. I see them falling into the conventions of representation. A narcissistic and voyeuristic duality of the ‘doer’, ‘doing’ come into play. If I accidentally enter the room in which they are changing, they immediately react to my ‘gaze’ and hurriedly cover their flat hairy chest with a towel or spread their hands on the chest. At this moment they have dropped their maleness and are slowly transforming themselves as women. The act of covering is not just an affectation, but a necessary code for arriving at that transformation. Also at that time they talk to me as a woman, discussing their health and family problems in a manner which is usually associated with a woman.

During a performance, the dancer hurriedly enters the stage and stands directly in front of the audience and smiles seductively, holding the gaze boldly. The
coquettishness of the stance that is assumed is highly provocative, but it is in the sheer power of its directness that the viewer is disarmed. Paradoxically it is this directness that we see the way in which the dance is being addressed to the male members of the audience. No one for a moment forgets that the dancer is a male; the suggestion of the feminine is cocooned in the safety of the male body. The purpose is to simulate the ‘feminine’, which is done through costume, hair, make-up, to feed the male gaze through stereotypical aspect of what makes a ‘sexy’ woman. The image of the woman is created by the male imagination only by displacing the conventional woman. It is in the absence of a ‘real’ woman that the illusionary woman comes alive.

The Naqqal tradition provided a fund of stage conventions, concepts and techniques that were not only sophisticated but highly creative. Their ability to detach themselves from the action of the play and comment on the action on the stage is a tool used by cutting-edge theatre practitioners. After playing a role the actor, still in costume (sexual costume), could either join a singer or sit in a corner smoking a cigarette. Their ability to become ‘invisible’ on stage was a quality seen either in mystics or in extraordinary performers, and it dismantled notions of illusions and reality in one swift stroke. The Naqqals have never heard of Bertold Brecht, but the male actor in female clothes, creates an alienating effect. “When gender is “alienated” or foregrounded, the spectator is enabled to see a sign system as sign system- the appearance, words, gestures, ideas, attitudes, etc, that comprise the gender lexicon become so many illusionistic trappings to be put or shed at will. Understanding gender as ideology- as a system of beliefs and behaviour mapped across the bodies of females and males, which reinforce the status quo- is to appreciate the timelessness of verfremdungseffekt, the purpose of which is to denaturalise and defamiliarize what ideology makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable.”

What becomes interesting is that the audience sees not an imitation of social behaviour and concerns, but a reading of it, an interpretation of the times. In the act of watching the performance the audience gets a sense of identification of watching and

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being watched, of their own lives being enacted and to engage with the self and see it being revealed on stage, makes for a feeling of being unmasked. The attempt of the audience would be to generate meanings, so that part of the self can be recovered, the part on display, the intrinsic essential self retrieved through the act of performance.

In Caryl Churchill play ‘cloud nine’ cross-dressing, in which the male body can be seen in feminine clothes, provides A-effects for a gender critique of the familial and sexual roles in Victorian, colonial society. In Holly Hughes ‘Lady Dick and Split Britches’ unworldly mobile home—and in the broadly satirical monologues of Italy’s Franca Rame, gender is exposed as a sexual costume, a sign of a role not evidence of

Cloud Nine is a two-act play written by British playwright Caryl Churchill after workshops with the Joint Stock Theatre Company in late 1978 and first performed at Dartington College of Arts, London, on February 14, 1979. The two acts of the play form a contrapuntal structure. Act 1 is set in British colonial Africa in Victorian times, and Act 2 is set in a London park in 1979. However, between the acts only twenty-five years pass for the characters. Each actor plays one role in Act 1 and a different role in Act 2—the characters who appear in both acts are played by different actors in the first and second. Act 1 parodies the conventional comedy genre and satirizes Victorian society and colonialism. Act 2 shows what could happen when the restrictions of both the genre of comedy and Victorian ideology are loosened in the more permissive 1970s.

The play uses controversial portrayals of sexuality and obscene language and establishes a parallel between colonial and sexual oppression. Its humour depends on incongruity and the carnivalesque, and helps to convey Churchill’s political message about accepting people who are different and not dominating them or forcing them into particular social roles.

Hughes, Holly (b. 1955) A lesbian feminist performance artist and playwright with a flair for telling the outrageous stories of everyday lesbian life, Holly Hughes has grown used to controversy. Although she has won awards for excellence in off-Broadway theater for her plays (Dress Suit to Hire [1988] and Clit Notes [1990]), her work has been called pornographic by both right-wing politicians and some members of the queer community. But Hughes’ work is meant to create controversy, to shake audiences out of their complacency, and to provoke movement and thought.

Franca Rame was born in Parabiago, Lombardy, into a family with a long theatre tradition. She made her theatrical debut in 1951. Shortly thereafter, she met Dario Fo, whom she married in 1954. In 1958, she co-founded the Dario Fo—Franca Rame Theatre Company in Milan, with Fo as the director and writer, and Rame the leading actress and administrator. Rame continued working with Fo through many plays and several theatre companies, popular success and government censorship. In the 1970s, Rame began writing plays (often stage monologues) of her own, such as Grasso è bello! and Tutta casa, letto e chiesa, which displayed a markedly feminist bent. In 1973, Rame was abducted, tortured and raped by a fascist group commissioned by high ranking officials in Milan's Carabinieri, the Italian military police. She returned to the stage after two months with new anti-fascist monologues.
identity. Recalling such performances should remind us of the rigorous self-consciousness that goes into the most playful gender bending. A –effects are not easy to produce, but the payoff can be stunning.

Working with female impersonators allowed me the space in which to address for myself the question of being a female director and working within a regional context. Working with the Naqqals is working with tradition, which I do not see as something that is fixed or pre determined, but something that can be transferred, translated and metamorphasised from its existing cannons to connect with everyday concerns but in an imaginary, heightened and unfamiliar way.

In my work since the last twenty years I have explored the presence of woman alongside female Impersonators and male performers both from the urban areas as well as from the folk tradition, creating and playing out different material positions in time and space. This helped in unearthing issues of social gender and its representation, in an attempt to create a theatrical space, where gender is meaningless, and how fresh meaning can emerge by changing frames of reference.

Working with the Naqqals in a certain way clusters around the problem of the authentic in Punjabi theatre. The Naqqals as performers have along lineage, but are paradoxically without a continuous or firm tradition. They enact ballads, sing dance and lampoon the powers that be with the conventional license of clowns. In recent times their considerable popularity has been challenged by cinema and television and they have had to survive by doing ‘disco’ dancing at weddings and other community festivities. But in my work they appear along with urban performers, not as decorative ‘acts’ or even as a sign of cultural aesthetics, but rather they serve to displace the category of the authentic at several levels.

As they form part of my theatre group “The Company”, which includes women performers, the presence of the Naqqal female impersonators, disorient the naturalness of gender definition and raises questions about how gender is socially constructed.
Directing Raja Bharathari\textsuperscript{362} with them and then the subsequent performance in Delhi at the Kamani\textsuperscript{363} theatre was an unmitigated disaster. From the open fields to a cramped stage confined them, which made for a self-conscious performance. Their spontaneous and free movements now looked awkward and clumsy. Nothing flowed as nothing was natural. In an instant I recognized that by using the trappings of a proscenium theatre and western models I had made them lose their essential impulse. The Myth, ritual, magic and song, decontextualised from the life patterns, values of their community, became like a tired showpiece.

Conclusion

But the real problem I have with the entire question of female impersonator is that when a man dresses up flamboyantly like a woman, then somewhere his masculinity is even more in evidence. This makes explicit and implicit visible cultural and counter cultural ideas of masculinity and sexuality. The error happens when we think that there exist two separate and "opposite" genders, masculinity and femininity. Both these genders exist in their own orbit and when they are presented on the stage they come with their own specific baggage. Just as one begins a creative work from a blank canvas, in the same way an actor has to free himself/herself from categorization of representing a gender and carrying notions of how gender should be represented. A female impersonator is also in the business of displaying a woman’s body but through his masculinity. This duality brings out the concept of an androgynous form of acting. For me the entire question of the idea of androgyny, by which masculinity and femininity are not seen as belonging to two separate ends, but can include one or the other or both simultaneously without in any way losing out on either. Thus, being a women or being a man can be combined in many varied ways, “a representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognise its subject, but at the same time make it seem unfamiliar”( Brecht1964:192); It is only when a performer strives for the androgynous that a glimmer of possibility presents itself in freeing the body from historical stereotyping. As BV Karanth who came

\textsuperscript{362} Raja Bharathari is a popular folk story that is part of the oral tradition. It deal with the story of a king who has been gifted the eternal flower of life. A story that is sung by balladeers and actors from the folk narrative tradition.

\textsuperscript{363} Kamani Theatre is situated in Delhi near Rabinder Bhavan on Copernicus Marg
from the tradition of a female impersonator would ironically mock. ‘what does gender mean on the stage’.

A counter argument could be that androgyny also has its limitations, as the impulses and frame of references will inevitably spring from the dichotomy of male/female. What perhaps is needed is to construct a gender where there is no split between the sexes. Both move together in some sort of mystical configuration. Yet the dilemma is how do we keep the feminine and the masculine as two parts separated from each other, yet both essential for the creation of either? Each containing the others half, each complete by itself but conscious of the vital separation that makes them aware of their wholeness. The other contradiction would be that if the parts are separated then how can we conceive of it as a whole? Parts make a whole and the part also contains the whole. And then how do we move towards making this fractured half whole? What we need is not to construct combinations of two false concepts, but to go back to - and forward to - a situation with no split in the first place, a place without a gender dichotomy. The point must be made that keeping the masculine and the feminine apart and separate is what is difficult and unnatural, while keeping them together is simple and natural.

Dialectics could be an approach that could be used to understand this concept structurally. A method to explore this tenuous relationship of multiple possibilities that this could unleash without losing the focus of its context of the system - always keeping in mind the entire frame of reference of the relationship between the parts to its whole and the whole with its parts. A necessity to cull some thread of cohesiveness from the tangled mass of gender concepts.

For me as a theatre director I am interested in a gender that blurs distinctions and categorizations, has the ambiguity to transform and recreate gender dualities. I recall that one critic asked me after seeing a performance of Yerma by Federico Garcia Lorca ‘that why is it that in your plays all the men act like women and the women act like men’. Her puzzlement was my triumph. This blurring of lines is what fascinates me, to
be able to deconstruct gender - but that is at best only half the truth, because more than that what I am truly aiming towards is reconstructing gender and placing it somewhere intangible, mysterious and without precedence. In Bakhtinian terms364 “in the struggle against conventions, and against the inadequacy of all available life-slots to fit an authentic human-being, these masks take on an extraordinary significance. They grant the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolise life; the right to parody others while talking, the right not to be taken literally, not ‘to be oneself’ the right to live life in the chronotope of the entr’acte, the chronotope of theatrical space, the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks, the right to rage at others with the primeval (almost cultic) rage-and finally, the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to the most private and prurient little secrets.(Dialogic imagination 163).

In 1987, I was invited to perform my play Keema Malki in Amritsar. I was looking forward to the experience of showing my work in my hometown; the show was sponsored by a wealthy family of Amritsar. It was presumed that as I had a convent background, with a western sensibility, I would be bringing a show that would either be a drawing room farce or a slapstick comedy in English. To suddenly see folk actors appear on stage, along with female impersonators - and no pretty girls or boys - bewildered the audience. I could hear people murmuring, ‘Hijre stage te dance kar rehey ney!’ (Hijras are dancing on the stage!). No one could figure out how to respond to the show. I could see old school friends avoiding my gaze and after the show people melting toward the exit in an effort to avoid meeting me. It was as if I had become a social pariah and to add insult to injury I had done a play in Punjabi, quintessentially infra dig.

One of the more popular self-projections of Female impersonators in the oral tradition of rural north India is the image of a lustful woman, which directly contradicts

364Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (November 17, 1895 – March 7, 1975) was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, and scholar who wrote influential works of literary and rhetorical theory and criticism. His works, dealing with a variety of subjects, have inspired groups of thinkers such as neo-Marxists, structuralists, and semioticians, who have all incorporated Bakhtinian ideas into theories of their own. Among the circle of Russian/Soviet writers who made important contributions to aesthetic analysis during the first third of the 20th Century. For some time out of favour, his work has recently become fashionable once more.
the dominant and ideal image of the chaste woman and offers an alternative moral perspective on kinship, gender, sexuality and norms of behaviour. The construction of the lustful woman is based exclusively upon women's songs produced collectively by women and sung by women for an audience consisting purely of women. It seeks to understand how and why this image, common to both men and women's songs, has different connotations and messages. The construction of meaning around this image is explored in the social context of power relations and status considerations existing within the family, caste and class. As such, the article seeks to understand how far the subversiveness of these songs finds its echo in the actual transgressive behaviour of women in caste/class and gender relationships, and with what effect. It highlights the construction of masculinity, pleasure and deprivation, which cuts across several societal hierarchies. The inevitable conflict within a worldview where different and contradictory beliefs and desires coexist brings to the fore the interface between ideology and practice.