



EXPLORING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES AND GENDER NARRATIVES IN THE WORKS OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN

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Abstract

This thesis has examined socio-cultural factors that are also significant problems for Indians. She is an Indian playwright, novelist, short-story author, illustrator, journalist, and cartoonist. She also composes plays for theatre presentations. I have studied to assess her two plays and two novels for my thesis. The two plays are Harvest and Lights Out, while the two novels are Escape and the Island of Lost Girls. Poverty, unemployment, gender issues, violence, trans sexuality, disability, technocracy, patriarchy, and marginalization have been examined. Current and urban conditions are exemplified by people who are perceptive and flexible. Padmanabhan has brought up one of the most important issues facing Indians, namely unemployment and poverty, which has given rise to the human organ trade. In her play Harvest, Manjula Padmanabhan explores the interaction between agrarian and industrial civilization via telecommunications' Om Prakash is from a rural background.

Keywords: *Socio-cultural Dynamics, Feminist Perspectives and Gender Narratives.*

INTRODUCTION

He is the key character of her play, and he has been laid off from his clerking job. He is his family's breadwinner. He shares a home with his wife Jaya, mother, and younger brother Jeetu. They all live in Bombay, which is a very crowded city. "The sound of dirty, despairing poison-fumed inner-city traffic..." begins the play. In a tenement building, a single room. A board-bed across the tops of tree trunks may be seen in the foreground, stage left. MA is sitting on the bed, close to the entrance door. Stage right, JAYA stands by the window. The

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kitchen is located at the back of the house.

The present research studies the politics of gendered spaces and identifies socio-spatial marginalisation in the plays of Manjula Padmanabhan. Their plays are based in the urban setup and focused on the educated, Indian middle-class society of the post-1980s. The research aims to study the diverse patterns of spaces (social) which play a dynamic role in the positioning of genders in the urban Indian context. Space defines human practices and human practices define spaces. The present study intends to make an inquiry into the construction of gendered spaces. Gendered space is defined as socio-cultural construction which privileges one gender over the other and it reinforces gender hierarchy by exercising control through spatial demarcation and alignments. It creates a geography of control and fear and plays a dynamic role in gender reinforcement and in the construction of gender subjectivities.

The present chapter theorises the concept of space, its development and the meaning it actively creates in the performance space of theatre. Space is categorised on three levels in the chapter: embodying body in theatre space, space in performance and gendered space. The gendered social realities have been seen with the spatial lens in the chapter along with the amplification of theoretical base of *Space* as a concept. The chapter is a study of the role of performativity and its functioning to explain and negotiate with space, body, gender and meaning. In the chapter, space is the measuring device to understand certain concepts: body, gender, theatrical space, space/place and time, masculinity, femininity and the idea of the third body/space/theatre.

“Gender is a copy with no original” – Judith Butler

The term gender, in a general way, is defined as a social and cultural interpretation of biological differences (with the assumption that biological is natural). Feminist theories and their basic argument begin with the analogy of sex and gender. Gender is socially conceptualised and practised that produces two opposites: ‘feminine’ female and ‘masculine’ male which further produces binaries, hierarchies and hegemonic relations between the two genders while constructing the relationship of dominant-subordinate or hegemonic/non-hegemonic at every level in the society. “Society is structured in such a way that people sees humans in their gendered roles” (Mazumdar 99). The belief is established in the patriarchal structure that gender is non-negotiable hence, dominant relationships are natural in its order, the idea which is being demystified and analyzed by the feminist thinkers and gender theorists.

Simone De Beauvoir’s statement that a woman is not born a woman but becomes one clearly

indicates towards the constructive nature of gender. Moreover, gender is considered as the real troublemaker since all the socially constructed attributes attached to a female or a male body and their sexuality is due to gender determinism. Gender shapes a male as the masculine man and a female as the feminine. Judith Butler asserts that gender is performative and it is rather a compulsory practice (not optional) of gender performance. Butler's significant theory of gender as performative, gender as 'drag' and gender as being repeated stylization of the body has challenged the notion of originality and naturalness of gender identity. Butler said that "gender is a copy with no original" (qtd. in Halberstam 17). She believes that gender is a particular kind of imitation, not of a real sex but of a projected ideal that does not exist anywhere else. Teresa de Lauretis proposed that gender is not a property of bodies rather it is a "product and process of a number of social technologies"

Gender is a learned behaviour and attitude, unlike sex which is taken as biological and given by birth hence, considered natural. The binary of sex/gender has created a misconception that gender is a fluid one and sex, a fixed one but later, feminist biologists, historians and scholars have established the fact that sex is also determined. Butler has questioned the counter-relation of sex/gender and the belief that sex is a natural concept. She said, "Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature" instead, she asserted that gender comes before sex since gender as a discursive element gives rise to a belief in pre-discursive or inner sex that, "gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of inner sex or essence or psychic gender core" hence, gender precedes sex.

Feminism is a socio-political movement for the equal rights of women and one of its agendas is to question and reinterpret the stereotypical identities of women, attached and enforced on the female body within the patriarchal structure. In this regard, Diane Elam asked whether 'women' is primarily a natural (sexed) or a cultural (gendered) category and she finds that there is the desire for having an identity above all, whether it is natural or cultural and that too is being realized by knowing rather differences than similarities. Lacan gives linguistic grounds to explain sex/gender differentiation which is helpful to understand gender roles as Diane Elam refers to him, "Gender is not established on the basis of any intrinsic sexual properties of the subject, but rather in opposition to the sign of the other gender" and there is no natural correspondence existing between biological sex and gender roles.

Basically, gender theories are a discourse about the sexual margins. Gender determinism has given birth to social stigmas, prejudices, discrimination, spatial control and violence. Gender norms promote several stereotypical beliefs such as male and female are the only two

normative sexes; women are physically/mentally weaker than men; transgender and homosexuals are the deviants etc. The dichotomous view of gender that believes in the dominance and dualism instead of differences and multiplicity and one is presented in opposition to the other, one is portrayed what the other is not which compel the gender theorists to come up with multiple questions and issues and work on them.

Hypotheses of the Study

The plays of Manjula Padmanabhan provide a wide range of situations and the portrayal of the gendered practices of characters to examine and problematize the gender-based spatial control and exclusion prevalent in the contemporary urban Indian society of the post-1980s.

Methodology

In the present research, the theories of space and gender are employed to get the comprehensive understanding of the selected socio-cultural and political context. The method of textual analysis with descriptive and analytical approaches has been used in the study. The method of performance analysis and review analysis are also used along with the close reading of the plays to get a comprehensive understanding of the selected plays taking them as performative texts. Gender ethics and sensibility runs throughout the study. The study relies on extensive literature survey which forms the very essence of qualitative research. Library, journals and web sources have been accessed to get an intact exposure on the subject.

Delimitation

The present research is based on urban spatial, socio-political and gender contexts of the post-1980s in India. The selected plays of the playwrights Manjula Padmanabhan are focused on the urban educated middle-class society hence, concerned with the spatial existence and challenges of the urban Indian setting. The research concentrates on Indian English drama and urban proscenium theatre. Also, the study is concerned with the plays of Manjula Padmanabhan and not with the fiction and prose writings of the selected authors. There is a wide scope of study in different spatial contexts through gender lens but it is not feasible to incorporate several spatial contexts in one study. Though the study is focused on the spatial othering of the gendered bodies it is female gender that are focused in the plays hence, in the research study also. Further, the present study is an attempt to deconstruct the binary category of man/woman and open up a third space of possibilities, equality and recognition of differences, however, the third space is discussed in brief as it was not possible to incorporate the study of alternative spaces in details in the present study.

RESULTS

The present research work is an interdisciplinary study that interconnects the areas of space, gender, theatre and performance studies. In the present research, the quest begins with the concept of 'gender' before it could find other ideological constructions (e.g. *space*, *body*) connected and concerned with it. A feminist approach is a method in the study to achieve a balanced outcome in the research.

From Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), it is a journey from the general concerns of women towards woman's subjectivity, the individual feminism. In the views of Judith Butler, "Gender is performance". She has criticised the distinction often made between sex and gender. Sex is no less fluid, no less acquired, than gender. Sex mimics gender and bodies become gendered by merely performing their roles. Anne Fausto-Sterling too breaks the old notion regarding the idea of sex which is always defined as biological, hence fixed.

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The seeds of space theory are found since the beginning of public/private debate which could be well understood in Carole Pateman's study. Peter Brook's book *The Empty Space* (1968) gives the space study a theatrical dimension and Henry Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974) and Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Theory* (1989) have made *space* a "produced" entity instead of taking it as divine or natural creation. According to the Marxist geographers Henry Lefebvre and Edward Soja, space is socially produced, but that space is also a condition of social production.

Virginia Woolf has begun the talk for a female space in literature with her book *A Room of*

One's Own (1929). With Shirley Ardener's work *Women and Space* (edited, 1981), Gillian Rose's *Feminist Geographies: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (1993), Doreen Massey's *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), the space theory has been given a feminist turn. Gillian Rose asserts that any conceptual model of space will be inherently gendered and never transparent. Some recent books titled *Gendered Geographies: Space, Place in South Asia* (2011) by Saraswati Raju, *Gender, Space and Resistance: Women and Theatre in India* (2013) edited by Anita Singh and Tarun Tapas Mukherjee and *Acting Up: Gender and Theatre in India, 1979 Onwards* (2015) by A. Mangai have significantly contributed to understand the standpoint of gender-space in the context of theatre in India. Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay's *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance* (1998) and Gay McAuley's book *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (2000) help to understand the recent development of 'Performance Studies' as a new discipline.

Study of Indian theatre could not begin without Bharata's *Natyashastra* which is notably translated into English (1951) by Manmohan Ghosh. Since the present research focuses on gender and performance in the tradition of theatre of India, M.L.Varadpande's *Tradition of Indian Theatre* (1979) is worth mentioning here as the book helps to understand the genesis of Theatre in India. Further, Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, Nandi Bhatia, Vasudha Dalmia, Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsri have provided critical studies in the field of Indian performance space and the role of women in it. Anthologies titled *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre* (edited by Lakshmi Subramanyam), *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* (edited by Tutun Mukherjee), *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival* (Seagull Books), *Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play* (by Poile Sengupta) are some of the significant records to establish the substantial presence of women playwrights and their contribution to the Indian drama.

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