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PERFORMING (TRANS) GENDER; THE ONTOLOGY AND PERFORMANCE OF TRANSGENDER BODY IN CONTEMPORARY PHYSICAL THEATRE

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A paradigm shift in the critical oeuvre of Gender Studies was marked by Judith Butler's Gender Trouble. Gender as social construct and the performativity of the same as postulated by Butler were swiftly taken up to address the concerns of LGBT groups. As Butler says:

...gender is in no way a stable identity ... (it is) an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts... (so that) the appearance of substance is precisely that a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief (Gender Trouble). (Gender is performative is also the argument that gender is) ...real only to the extent that it is performed (Butler 179).

Though Butler's observation regarding gender has been adapted as a springboard by much of the Queer activists in the initial phase, there was a palpable disagreement growing within. For example, the transgender groups found it humiliating to conceive gender as mere socialization, performance, and genitals. For them gender was all these and more complex. Julia Michelle Serano, American writer and trans-bi activist is quoted in the book Gender Outlaws thus: "It's easy to fictionalize an issue when you're not aware of the many ways in which you are privileged by it" (18).

In the last decades of 20th century, LGBT took a turn to protest and they found different ways to stage their activism. One such medium was theatre. It wasn't until much recently that transsexual dramas were made. Panmai, the first transgender theatre group in India was formed in 2014 in Tamil Nadu. The question of history of their neglected life is an excruciating one, when they started answering it they acquired voice and space.

Theatre becomes a persuasive space where the transgender gets a live audience who first witnessed the story of their tormented lives, followed by renditions of their 'mistaken' bodies. Transgender theatre is not a tool of reflection of their oppressed lives nor advocates a social reformation but acceptance of their 'being'. The play The Colour of Trans by Panmai Theatre Group (2014) performed by Living Smile Vidhya and Angel Gladly, stages the same 'problematic' being. Despite the usual narratives of oppression one stronghold of the performance was the inclusion of their post-operative body. This rendered an element of shock to the play. What they intended was neither to normalize the 'mistake' nor to evoke sympathy rather to portray the body that has taken the brunt of the surgical wounds.

The Colour of Trans adopted 'body' as both subject and object of transgender experience as well as an instrument to narrate its history. Here, body is both the text and performance. The changes the performers underwent after the medical assisted normalization of their body swayed the theatre. The performance displayed both resistance and refusal; resistance to medical assisted normalizations and a refusal to erase their pre operative histories. Vidhya removes bandages on her body one by one during the play to reveal the scars large and small. They used theatre as medium to dismiss doubts and presumptions of the people about their body and their life.

'I was born a girl but I am sure it's a mistake' is the subtitle of the Czech play S/He is Nancy Joe (2012). It is a multimedia docu-dance performance by Mirenka Cechova, Tantehorse from Czech Republic. It combines the narrative and visual strategies of comic/graphic books, hip-hop, street art and graffiti to address the issues of identity, body alienation and transgender body. Mirenka Cechova also experimented with Japanese Butoh, creating morbid visual images and physical theatre. In the performance one notes that it is not the facial expressions or 'bhava' that elicit the theme of the play. A combination of physical mime, contemporary dance, classical ballet and music demonstrate the story of transgender body that seeks for identity.

The play starts with a girl in polka dotted frock who likes a truck more than a Barbie/doll. We witness gender transformation from here; slowly the girl adopts male movements. Cechova makes us forget the polka dotted girl. Through quick movements and dance the performer conveys phases of life of a transgender: alienated childhood days, anguish and doubts pain of realizations and adapting. The multimedia screens and costume were white. At times she merges with the projections and timely interference of colour



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and dialogues blend together to form nonlinear narrative. She interacts with the projections and at times merges into it. Amidst the transformation, the realization of the unavoidable biological womanhood is dawned on her through the menstrual bleeding. Dark red bleeds all through the screen symbolizing menstruation. Sarah Kaufman bewildered by Cechova's performing body and its magnetic manoeuvre wrote in The Washington Post:

...But most impressive of all is simply Cechova's body, which she turns into a battleground of self-identity and societal censure. Amid all the imaginatively used technology of this show, that body is an element of surpassing wonder. Cechova's spidery limbs can turn her into a stick figure; a moonwalker; a rough, rubbery street dancer; or a fragile sylph. Masculine and feminine, two dimensions and three, play out on that magical canvas with schizophrenic velocity. There's a message in that, about the universal beauty of the human form — its nonconforming breadth included... (Kaufman).

The problem of 'being' and 'performing' is at the core of transgender theatre. Performing 'being' is a hard task for any theatre practitioner. The transgender performers act their existence on stage. Performing 'being' may face a saturation point at some level when it adopts narrative style of performance and spectators will not receive the repetition of this narrative. Feminist, dalit and other marginalized theatres are examples for theatres which face this impasse because they also try to stage the 'being'. As long as transgender theatre addresses the problem of 'being', an eclectic performative pattern combining different theatrical techniques and experimentation needs to be employed. S/He is Nancy Joe adopted physical theatre, contemporary dance and multimedia as its means of presentation and won acclaim worldwide.

The transgender performance subjectifies their body as a textual tool to subvert the notion of society which advocated the view of their existence as a mistake. To the conception of the world that promotes heteronormativity, transgender theatrical performances subtly refute the perceived 'rights' and 'wrongs' of gender. They said that a person's identity and gender does not correspond to their birth sex.

Life writings of varied forms were not directly political until the marginalized sections of the society unabashedly came up to narrate their traumatic lives. The Blacks, holocaust victims, Dalits and sexual minorities have been experimenting with this self-narration and have found it to be quite authentic in several forms of 'consciousness raising'.

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas by Gertrude Stein, published in 1933 was first of its kind in experimenting within the genre of autobiography. It is written in the guise of an autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, when it was in fact the autobiography of Gertrude Stein centering on the lesbian relationship with Alice B. Toklas. It celebrated homosexuality and remains to be a classical example of how a literary text turns political in subverting stereotypes. A performing turn that celebrates such minorities carves out a niche for them in the genre of biopic recently. Milk is a 2008 American biographical film based on the life of gay rights activist and politician Harvey Milk, who was the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in California, as a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. The film was released to much acclaim, winning two Oscars for Best Actor in a Leading Role for Penn and Best Original Screenplay for Black. These genres were all accounts of 'being' and representation of 'being', which were denigrated and tagged as deviant.

When it comes to activism and propagandist space theatre stands ahead of film and other representations due to its immediacy with the people it interacts. The case of Lal Batti Express, performed by daughters of sex workers which recently went to Edinburgh Fringe Festival exemplifies the strength of theatre. Fifteen girls belonging to Kamathipura one of Asia's largest red-light districts constitutes the performers of this production. Chosen members of audience are invited to take part in the role play along with the performers. The roles range from a little kid, a photographer, a Muslim woman and so on; then they asked them to role play a thirteen-year-old girl who is a sex worker. The theatre comes to a standstill and the epiphany of the trauma of sharing a 'being' is accentuated. The theatre productions that are focused in this paper take up the challenge of performing transgender body and its ontological concerns. What else could be more propagandistic in terms of body politics and political activism?

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