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### Finding Her Space in Malayalam Theatre

#### Abstract

Specializing in the distance of woman within the theatre and tracing the history of Malayalam women theatre. Women have been traditionally considered healthy to occupy the domestic space best than the public space. Of all the humanities, theatre has historically been the one least accessible to women artists in patriarchic society. Participation of women in Malayalam theatre had been silenced for decades until recently. This paper examines the evolution of women theatre in Malayalam and emerging gender sensitive attitude towards the theatre.

#### Introduction

Here then, one can fruitfully trace some of the attempts by women to enter the public stage and secure for them a sense of identity, an identity that went beyond theatre. Moreover, the theatre reflects within the decisions of its themes and characters, in what it chooses to mention and what it chooses to ignore, the tensions at add the gender equation. Here the main targets are going to be on feminine agency: on women actors, playwrights and characters. The try is to determine traces of women's growing presence within theatre and society in the face of their position and repression.

To venture into the history of Malayalam theatre which includes the contributions of women theatre artists and other participants was not accidental. The women-sided approach that developed in later 1980. Malayalam theatre has a history of only 128 years. The amount of participation of women in this time in this particular history is high so it is important to analyze them deeply. Such an analysis is inspired by the silence that resounds in other written histories of Malayalam theatre. The information on participation of women in the earlier plays including their names is missing. After 1980, after the conscious interventions by women in Malayalam theatre, the written history has a section of 'women theatre'. This part does not cover women's contributions of that period of time entirely, but that is the only part where women theatre participation finds a mention. If one attempts to enquire about the women participation in earlier years, the first name found in the history books is of a play 'Subhadraadhananjayam' written by Thottakkaattu Maadhaviyamma. When we progress in this line, we understand that our famous historians just too carelessly mentioned about the play named 'Subhadrarjunam' written by a famous woman writer, Thattakkaattu Ikkaavamma. In many other history books, we can see that this error is repeated. 'Why mention women in theatre history?' is the instinctive question that is being asked and this kind of carelessness can also be seen while mentioning women of modern times. Ikkaavamma was the first woman who performs in the Malayalam theatre. She took a great effort for this even though socio-political situation was against her. She gave new face to the Malayalam musical theatre where she had provided entirely different performing language for women. But why the women part of this history was made invisible is the question we should ask.

Among the famous plays, talented writers and the trends that changed with time one could not have found much about the women plays. Due to the lack of confidence that comes from not knowing much about theatre as a medium, there might be many unpublished or

unperformed plays written by women. But many famous plays like ‘Akjaathavaasam’ by Kuttikkunju Thangachi, ‘Saavithri Athavaa Vidhavaavivaaham’ by Lalithaambika Antharjanam, ‘Devadoothi’ by B Saraswthyamma or ‘Madhavivarma’ by Madhavikkutti also did not feature into Malayalam theatre history. We understand that this silent absence has been brought to light only by a women-sided analysis.

Then it is must talk about the ‘women -essence’ that was propagated by men playing women parts in Malayalam plays. Each woman is wrapped by layers and layers of quality, which make up her fundamental nature and her essence then how it is possible to present a woman in stage by a man where the real essence of woman is lost. But the significant problem emerges: how does a man depict a woman? How does the male actor signal to the target audience that he is playing a female character? Except carrying the female costume (with short tunic) and the female mask (with long hair), he might have indicated gender through gesture, movement and intonation. In thinking about portrayal, it is important to remember that the belief of the female derived from the perspective of men, which remained alien to female experience and reflected the view of the gendered opposite. This vocabulary of gestures initiated the image of ‘Woman’ as she is visible on the stage - institutionalized through patriarchal culture and represented by male-originated signs of her appropriate gender conduct. Moreover, the exercise of male actors playing women advocated the advent of female roles which lent themselves to generalization and stereotype.

Since women have been denied to act in the Malayalam theatre, female parts were played by a man called Velukutti Asan however he didn’t get proper place in the history of Malayalam theatre as he did solely women’s role in his life. He had to face many sexual harassment throughout his career .we can’t take into account this issue as a mere attack against not only him but to the women at large so from this we tend to know that socio-

political situation had been denied to access to women into theatre as well as those who are interested were not willing to come forward due to this kind of poor conditions.

Women have been important participants of folk, classical and ritual art forms in diverse forms in Kerala. The women theatre artists hailed from these artists who participated in ritual art forms as a part of their tradition. This is a very important piece of information for the construction of theatre history of women participation. Women were excluded from these art-forms later and the, participation of women is still being avoided in many art forms. Kakkarissi natakam is an art form destined to perform by men however which has been replaced by a girl called Rosi .For the first time female part was played by a female instead of man. Later she went for acting in theatre and cinema called *Vigathakumaran* which forced her to create exile from her place. She had to pay her life and forced herself to forget the actress inside her. This was an important milestone in the history of Malayalam theatre. From this, we tend understand the social situation of women throughout the beginning period of Malayalam theatre was terrific. Women tried hard to intervene in theatre in that specific social situation.

The renaissance plays are considered as the ones which discuss ‘women agenda’ which is very limited in concern. Brahmin society tried to reform the conservative practice of the community. V.T.Bhattathiripad was one of the pioneers of the theatre movements in Kerala. He wrote a play *Adukkalayilninnu Arangatheku*. It was the first play to have a concrete social objective and its movement led by Namboothiri sabha.

At the end of the nineteenth century, women began to gain education that enlightens them and attitude towards everything got modified that can be seen through their dressing style and body language. These changes have disturbed the society. Premji joined Yokashema sabha and wrote *Rithumathi* in which he says about these contradictions that found in the society. once a girl start menstruating in Namboothiri family, she ought to break the bond

with the outer world and should have confined within the four walls of kitchen that had been replaced by the modern women that can be seen in this play furthermore it provides new hope for the relation between men and women aside from marriage. Devaki is the central character in this play. She attributes modern, educated woman devoid of any traditional beliefs and affirms her rights on choosing her life partner but her space is also limited in another sense as well.

Namboothiri women didn't get space in any theatre except *Thozhilkendrathileku* in which a group of women wrote plays and enacted in their own plays. The play was against the patriarchal system in which they show the distressing mind of men over the modern women. The play is critique of society and it also depicts their mental conflicts as well as their women agenda.

Political plays are a genre which have invited many discussions later. By that period of time, women were active participants in theatre. What did these plays, which are said to have influenced Kerala's life-style in a major way, contribute to its 'idea of women'. Central concern for the political plays in Malayalam was women's freedom. Social reformers like V.T .Bhattatharipadu believed that when women get liberated from their constraints then only we can attain religious freedom as well. K.Damodaran was a Marxist and writer whose *Pattabaki* was the first political drama to be staged in Kerala paved the way for the advancement of women within the theatre. Kunjimalu is a central character in the play where she has a direct or indirect relation with central plot and sometime it seems like no longer progress will occur in the plot without her. Amina is a strong character in this play. She had the courage to lead even political party rally but she was restricted by her father through the playwright. How this, inequality between men and women exposed throughout this play. *Kootukrishi*, *Nammalonnu*, and *Ningalenne communistakki* are the other political plays followed where playwrights failed to give prominent place for women in the plays. She was

restricted by the male writer and nothing was done from his part to overcome her inactiveness in the play. She is mute, illiterate who doesn't know to write and read as her male counterpart. She always talks in a local language where as men talk like highly educated one. When women attribute the value, religion and culture, men has been surpassed by all these things. Devil, ugly, local, were some apparent features of women in these plays like early Sanskrit plays.

Indian people theatre association was formed in 1948 May 25. Its aim was to bring cultural awakening among people of India. It's the cultural wing of communist party which fosters the making of *Ningal enne communistakki* by Thoppil Bhasi. There are four female characters in the play but who had no specific role in the central plot. They are just dancing around the male characters. Playwrights have given carefully some space for women to express their love towards hero which shows that women become subject of love only. If a girl wants to be strong, she mustn't have romance. As many as women become part of the communist party and came into mainstream once this paly has written but it has never bestowed this ever changing women.

Men has been continued to depict women in their work from a masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents and represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the male viewer. Women are acted upon according to usage and conventions. It's still repeating again and again in the political play as well. The description of feminine beauty through the symbols such as long hair, body shape, large breast, everything is same as earlier plays except some changes in their attire. How this, there evolved a new feminine image with the same symbols as before.

With the stage always associated with social reform and collective commitment, drama played an active role in the early-20th-century Kerala reform movement. These plays of the 1920s and the 1930s stressed the requirement for reforming the situation of women.

Produced as a part of social renovation, they had a strong ideology that stood in favor of gender equity and initiated a cross-fertilization of theatre literature and social restructuring. Kalari movement and folk theatre groups had taken up the initiatives to change the style and performance of medium of theatre. The Kalari movement in 1960 was a chance for women to get closer to theatre as a medium. The theatre initiatives that followed were extremely influenced by these two movements. The changes in the medium of theatre initiated the spreading of women's liberation ideas in 1980s. The women theatre groups that started functioning in various levels, their plan of action, performances and their styles.

To create theatre consciousness and nurture the theatre lovers under the banner Nadakakalari had launched which aided women to intervene and perform in theatre. How this, Malayalam theater was alive with women during 1990s and slowly they had learned the grammar of the medium. There are few women who have taken gender-sensitive ideas to the theatre and we could see the changes that have happened to theatre in Kerala after such intervention. These changes have influenced the space in the theatre other than its visual language and production. The 1980s played an important role in the changes of women's life in Kerala. It was the time of emergence of feminism. One of the major discoveries of feminism that raised women's consciousness of their experiences was that the oppression of women was a sexual, erotic oppression. Women learned to view their own bodies in the same way, and so were prevented from identifying with their own appearance. Social and political movements of Kerala have strong bond with the theatre so that could helped the feminist movement in communicating with the society through this medium. Street plays of Manushi, a pioneering feminist group founded by a group of college teachers and students under the leadership of Sarah Joseph on women issues were a thought provoking step. It was an eye opener to the society. Manushi presented a play called *sthree* in streets on the theme of women's issues which foster the coming of another movement called Samatha. It is a women

street theatre group led by professor and activist Ushakumari in 1987, which gave confidence and space to the women in theatre. Theater becomes medium to communicate women's issues. Kalajatha is another travelling troupe of street-play performers. The subject they chose were issues faced by women in social, political, and economic spheres. Women agenda was the central concern for these movements. The topics of the street plays were new and they were about life but the same old mundane image of women like weeping and crying, husband beating up wife, house wives doing the never ending house chores, illiterate and non-sense wives. Some cases, women were depicted as goddesses having the power to inflict curse on society. The attitude of street plays changed only after the intervention of women theatre activist. It has changed the perception of women lives.

The women's theatre workshop conducted by Stree Padana Kendram was innovative, where for the first time started discussion on the problems of representation of women's body in theatre. It was the time when women come to conscious about the invisibility of women in the Malayalam theatre history. They were not just discussing about the constrained and prescribed movements of women or gestures which only used for vulgarity but the social-economic status of female actors. Their agendas were producing written theatre experiences, find neglected women playwrights, grasp the language and grammar of theatre and find space within the male dominated theatre. That was the first time theatre become subject of study from the women perspectives. Studying the images of women on stage, finding women playwrights, producers, writers, become the object of study. Sajitha madathil's Malayala Nataka Sthree Charithram has covered the entire history of participation of women in Malayalam Theatre. This book received the state award for Best Theatre Book in 2010, which mainly focused on the invisible women's theatre history.

Sajiths Madathil along with Sreelatha and Sudhi has formed a women's theatre group called Abhinethri. They produced a play called *Chirakodiyochakal* in which they did

experiment with their ideas. The two friends named Sudhi and Raji went on to redefine the concept of theatre by exploring unknown possibilities through a theatre group they founded and sustained. They set up Nireeksha Women's Theatre in 1999 fighting against all the odds. Society tried to discourage them back when they initiated the steps to establish Nireeksha and even they were not sure that they could keep it going for so long because of the unfavorable conditions but it has been going strong for the last twenty years. Their play emerges out of their need to search for a new aesthetics for women, it is their policy to produce plays that has feminist concept, are scripted and directed by women and have women characters telling their stories. Nireeksha regularly conducts theatre workshop exclusively for women under the series name *Bheri*. Their women centered plays were *The Troll*, *Anungal illatha Pennungal*, *Pravaachaka*, *Punar- Jani* and *Kudiyozhical*.

Very few have taken up their career in theatre because of the limited space has been given by the family, workplace, Academic institutions. Contemporary theatre artistes are becoming more sensitive towards gender politics. As many women come forward into theatre as writer, director and actresses nowadays. The school of drama is one of the foremost theatre training institutions which started at the end of the 1970s have played major role in the entrance of women into the theatre. Women started to study theatre as an academic subject both within the country and abroad that gives them confidence to actively participate in theatre. Shylaja Jalal and Mini I.G, former students of National School of Drama have been working for the theatre for years. Sreeja Arangottikara is a director, actor, and writer who have been active in theatre for 25 years. There are many progress have taken place now with the coming of women into the theatre.

## Conclusion

Various changes that have happened to theatre in Kerala after the intervention of women. The main focus of the conventional theatre has been portraying women priorities such as birthing, mothering, menstruation and rape whereas contemporary theatre advocated the go back of women body or to female way of life. Contemporary theatre attempt to present, amid the numerous women experiences which isn't always without struggles towards domination, Indian girls aspirations, their fulfillment or frustrations, issue to situation they stay in. Modern Malayalam theatre trying not only about achieving freedom through theatre but additionally about the responsibility of voicing the socio-cultural and political situation of women in India.

Stereotyping and beautification as a form of oppression and exploitation of women had been experiencing and in most of cases, female body is objectified, 'othered', broken part and reconstructed graphically and physically. It had no identity of its own. This is the formula penned by male playwright which has been replaced by the female playwright. Any performer who is physically and vocally blocked will be a poor communicator and creator of theatre. Women especially need to free up their bodies and voices from the social and cultural conditioning that has driven them far away from themselves, has silenced their voices and has constrained their bodies. This trend has been demolished by new women. The space has already been created by the strong ladies of the old generation has been continuing by the contemporary activist in theatre.

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