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Transformed Feminist Spaces and Identity Construction: Women Pandwani Performers in Indian Folk Theater

By Shalini Attri

Abstract

Theater proposes an alternative reality and different possible identities offering a framework of how representation works in performances, and it further provides an understanding of the transformative potential of enactment. The attempt to retrieve and re-write women’s histories through performances develops a culture of reconstructive capacities that resists absorption into the dominant culture. In theater, women have asserted their own vision and exercised their own viewpoints, expanding feminist space and communicating with spectators by employing publicly encoded signs. The folk theater of India, in particular, provides a public space to the (silenced) subaltern to assert agency and question the modalities of power, exclusion, images, and strategies that marginalize women. The paper examines Indian women’s roles on stage and in the folk theater of Chhattisgarh from the 1980s onwards and shows how feminist performances redefine gender binaries and contest popular consciousness. By voicing women’s perspectives, the women performers and women narrators of the epic Mahabharata in folk performances restructure and alter the stage. This paper explores themes of gender, power, construction of theatrical space, and the shifts in feminist positioning created by Teejan Bai and other women Pandwani performers and Kathagayakas.

Keywords: Women performers, Theater, Folk performances, Representation, Feminism, Pandwani, Indian folk theater.

Introduction

Folklore is a representation and marker of culture and identity. Alan Dundes stated that by analyzing folklore, the researcher understands “general patterns of culture” and elevates the “levels of consciousness” (Dundes & Bronner, 2007, p. 3). Francis Abernethy (1997) considers folklore “as the traditional knowledge of a culture” (p. 4). Social and cultural memory can be understood through folk narratives, which involve cognitive and affective processes. The narrative circulated through folktales gives thoughtful insight into social structures and cultural norms and beliefs, making it a micro-historical document which is representational in nature. The notion of representation is closely connected with aesthetics and semiotics and can be seen as a construct, an artifice, or an invention. Since it is impossible to separate representation from the larger culture and society, all representations are the product of a socio-cultural matrix. Erich Auerbach, in his extremely influential work Mimesis, recognized representation to be the very essence of Western liberal humanism. Twentieth century literary figures posed a serious challenge to the ways in which reality could be accessed or represented, illustrating that representation is a form of cultural

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determinism; in other words, beliefs, values, and discourse shaped by culture creates one’s sense of reality which is often constructed. The term representation has a complex semantic history wherein representation acts in two ways: spatial and temporal. How things are constructed varies according to culture, society, and particular times in history. Art, literary texts, films, folklores, theater, commercials and so on interpose and shape the ideas of the audience or readers. Hence, any form of art can redefine or re-interpret the circulated reality in a new and different form and can subvert the existing power structures or can also align with them. Thus, representation can also be a political act, and it offers a tool and voice for the marginalized and under-represented.

Theater is derived from Greek *theatron*, part of a cluster of words associated both with looking and with theory; theater designates an activity, a building, and a cultural institution (Shepherd & Wallis, 2004, p. 2). Being a medium of representation, theater draws interconnection between the performer and audience through production of meaning on stage and uses spatial and temporal acting to create alternate stances that work to reorient theatrical space and ideas projected within it. Folk theater, a local form of representation, integrates the elements of music, dance, and performance rooted and embedded in local culture and identity. India has a rich history of folk theater which has, as Pillai opines, “sociological, ethnic, ecological, and cultural layers of tradition having their own idioms of expression based on performances” (Pillai, 1985, as cited in Deswal, 2018, p. 175). The experience of history and culture of a community is projected through performative self-representation. As Hansen (1991) argues, “culture must first be seen as a set of practices; alternatively, it is composed as a range of meanings within a single practice” (p. 3). The two theatrical traditions of India, *Lok Dharmi* (based on folk stories) and *Natya Dharmi* (based on classical stories) are deeply rooted in tradition and culture. The theoretical and polemical discourses have elaborated on the contemporary Indian theater’s encounter with tradition since the 1960s. The blend of tradition and modernity after Indian independence made folk theater a space of transition, allowing new thought about gender issues through the dramatic sphere. Binary categories of public and private are key terms to understand the demarcating categories of space and place assigned to men and women. This gendered spatial construct was prominent in the folk theater of India where women had been denied admittance to folk theater as performers, and theater remained the public domain of men. The exclusion of women from public life creates a social absence and consequently privatizes their lives. However, in the 1980s, there was a shift of women from private to public space in the Chhattisgarh folk theater, where women began to occupy the arena of men.

**Chhattisgarh and Pandwani**

Chhattisgarh was a part of the state of Madhya Pradesh until 2000 and was later declared to be a separate state with Raipur as the capital city. The state shares borders with Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. Chhattisgarh is endowed with rich cultural and geological heritage of India, such as ancient caves, waterfalls, temples, Buddhist sites, rock paintings, wildlife, and hill plateaus. In fact, cave paintings are found in Kanker, Raigarh, and Sarguja districts that depict the settlement in this region from primeval times. The region was referred to as Dakshin Koshala in ancient times. The history of Chhattisgarh or Dakshin Koshala can be traced back to the 4th century A.D. The name Chhattisgarh, including “Chattighar” and “Chedisghar,” came into being because of the influence of the caste system. Between the 6th and 12th centuries A.D., the Sarabhpurias, Panduvanshi, Somvanshi, Kalchuri, and Nagvanshi rulers dominated this region. During the Mughal reign, it was called the Ratanpur territory. In the medieval period, the region came to be known as Gondwana and the vanquished
group, the Kauravas, went south into India, conquering the lands of the Dravidian tribe called Gondwana.

W. H. Sleeman (2011), the magistrate of the Central Provinces, while visiting the Bedaghat in the 1830, noted that, according to local legends, the Pandavas of the *Mahabharata* rested here during their journey and thus: “Every fantastic appearance of the rocks, caused by those great convulsions of nature …is attributed to the godlike power of those great heroes of Indian romance, and is associated with the recollection of scenes in which they are supposed to have figured” (p. 6). The Gonds call themselves Koitur or Kur. The Bastar district of Chhattisgarh has the largest tribal population with Gonds as the dominant group, and it extends from Bastar plateau to Chhattisgarh Basin. The term Gondwana was popularized in 1873 by Henry F. Blanford. Medlicott (1872) used the term “Gondwana” which meant “Kingdom of Gonds” (Antarctic Journal of United States, 1994, p. 16). The Gonds tribes recognized as the Koytorias are widely dispersed throughout the state. They predominate in the dense forests enclosed in southern Bastar district that accounts for more than twenty percent of Chhattisgarh’s population.

Theater is called *Gammat* in Chhattisgarh. Pandwani (songs of Pandavas) is one of the lyrical forms of theater and *Nacha* are a form of folk ballad performed in Chhattisgarh. The Ministry of Culture within the Indian government offers a useful overview:

This form of folk theatre is popular in Chhattisgarh, tribal areas of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. Pandwani narrates the account of the Pandavas, the protagonist of the epic *Mahabharata*, with Bhima as the central figure. The performers of the Pandwani consists of the main artist and a few supporting singers and musicians. There are two styles of narration in Pandwani, i.e., Vedamati and Kapalik. In the Vedamati style the artist narrates in a simple manner by sitting on the floor throughout the performance. The Kapalik style is livelier, where the narrator actually enacts the scenes and characters. (Ministry of Culture, n. p.).

The Pardhan Gonds, who created Pandwani or Pundavani, served as the bards for the Gonds rulers, adopted agriculture as a main occupation, and are regarded as knowledge-keepers as well as narrators of the tribal Rama Katha and *Mahabharata*. The Pardhans and Bhimas are the musicians and dancers: “The Pardhans play on the *kingri* (fiddle) and the Bhimas on the *tuma*” (Chakrabarti, 2019, p. 148). The *kingri* is an elaborate multi-stringed chordophone on which diverse tunes can be played. The *tuma* consists of a hollow piece of bamboo fixed horizontally over a gourd. In Chhattisgarh, tribal communities such as Bhima, Pando, and Korwa trace their lineages and ancestry from Bhima, Pandava and Kaurava. Bhima, the main figure in tribal accounts, is called Bhima, Bhimma, Bhimsen, Bimai, and Bhimul. He emerges as an ordinary tribal forest-dweller, epitome of the Gond tribe. Bhima’s name is a part of placenames rooted in myths, vernaculars, theater traditions, and religious practices, and he is seen as a mythical creator, rescuer, and progenitor of many tribes of the region.

**Pandwani and Mahabharata**

Pandwani denotes Pandawa-Vani (Pandava’s Voice). It is a solo theatrical form based on the Indian epic *Mahabharata* and is called the song of Pandavas, the legendary brothers in *Mahabharata*. The history of Pandwani dates back to *Mahabharata* which was written in three stages—Jaya written in 8800 verses (shlokas), *Bharata Samhita* written in 24000 verses. and the third *Mahabharata* written in 100,000 verses. It is further divided into North Indian and South
Indian editions. *Pandwani*, the narratives of the Pandavas, is a tribal theatrical creation. Referring to Gustav Oppert, Hiltebeitel (1991) states that the Sudras or non-Brahmin castes adopted the *Mahabharata*. *Mahabharata* as an epic lends itself to drama, public presentations, and tragic modes (p. 396). All these sociological conditions contribute to *Mahabharata* being more in circulation among the tribals. *Pandwani* is a part of the folk movement that combines the sentimental and cathartic interests in local history and mythology. The Pardhan tribal community was considered as the first singers and carriers of the legacy of *Pandwani*. This folk performance is widespread in Chhattisgarh-Gondwana-Bastar, and it describes the tales of *Agyatvasa* (exile) of the Pandavas. Bhima, the second Pandava brother, emerges as the dominant figure in tribal folk performances in *Sabha Parv*, *Lakha Mahal*, and *Kichak Vadha*. The *Mahabharata*’s core story illustrates the dynastic struggle for the throne of the Hastinapur kingdom ruled by the Kuru clan. The two collateral branches of the family that participated in the struggle are the Kaurava and the Pandava, represented by Duryodhana and Yudhishtira respectively. The episodes of *Vana Parva* and *Virata Parva* are more popular in the tribal and folk consciousness of the Central region of India (Singh, 1993). The native folk and tribal literatures explain how Pandavas wandered in disguise and concealed their actual identities in these regions.

Grounded in local flavor and ecology, *Pandwani* has two forms: *Kapalik* and *Vedamati*. The *Kapalik* variety is an indigenous version whereas *Vedamati* is based on the classical Hindu source. To revise and Sanskritize the *Pandwani* theater, the legendary exponent Jhaduram Devangan in 1926 initiated the *Vedamati* version based on Sabbal Singh Chauhan’s *Mahabharata*. It was written in the Doha-Chaupal meter and narrated in Awadhi with eighteen parvas. The *Vedamati* form featured mostly a single performer who sang the couplets from the text in a seated position, and the songs were set to folk tunes. *Vedamati* style was not acceptable to the rural folk audiences.

Historically, the folk theater of *Pandwani* was predominantly in the hands of men and later evolved to allow and centralize women performers from the 1980s onwards. This shift gradually altered the code of visual feminine conduct, impacting the caste and gender histories of the region. The narration of *Mahabharata* by women *Kathagayakas* redefines the discourse of women’s point of view of the epic. Traditionally, *Pandwani* was dominated by men, but Teejan Bai changed the entire structure of the stage by taking the reins of the Chhattisgarhi folk theater.

**Teejan Bai: Pandwani Performer and Kathagayak**

Teejan Bai (born in 1956), one of the renowned singers of *Pandwani*, has won Padma Shree and Padama Bhushan awards for her folk art. The socio-cultural construct of the region was the reason for Teejan Bai’s expulsion from her community at the age of twelve for singing *Pandwani*. She specializes in the *Kapalik* style wherein the storyteller enacts the tale through action and expressions. How this style of singing emerged is yet unknown, but according to Teejan Bai, “it might be as old as the *Mahabharata* itself as very few people could read in those times and that is how perhaps they passed on their stories generation after generation” (Bai, as cited in Ministry of Culture, n.d.). The *Kapalik* form with its rustic vernacular narrative captivated the minds of local people and the form was mastered and popularized by Teejan Bai. It is replete with divergences and local reinterpretations chosen by *Kathagayakas* with a divergence in naming patterns. For example, Pandavas’s mother Kunti of the epic becomes Katama, Hastinapur is Hasna-Nagari, the Kauravas are Kanvaras, all of which are deviates from their classic counterparts. Kanvaras are just twenty-one brothers in *Pandwani* and are depicted as “Jait Nagari ma panch

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2 These are civilian awards given by the Republic of India.
putur pandva, Ar Hsna Nagari ma ikkis bhai kanvara, Hain re Bhaiyaa” (Jait town had five Pandava sons, and Hasana town had 21 Kanvara brothers) (Singh, 2021, p. 50).

Being an exponent of Pandwani, Teejan Bai sings tales from the Mahabharata with musical accompaniments. At the age of 13 in the year 1969, she sang in Kapalik Shaili style of Pandwani while giving her maiden public performance in a village called Chandrakhuri (Durg). The Pandwani performers usually enact the battle scene with zeal, but Jhaduram Devangan and Teejan are more proficient in presenting the Shanti parva and Swaragorohan parva. Pandwani’s iconography and the role of women Kathagayakas (story singers) allows me to analyze the position of spectator and women performers in folk theater. Teejan Bai performs all the eighteen parvas; however, the impact of her performance in Sabha Parv, Dusshahna Vadh, and Keechak Vadh is immeasurable. The Ragi or the main performer opens the Mahabharata of Sabal Singh Chauhan, and a framed picture of Lord Krishna is also kept near the book of the Mahabharata. The enactment starts with the prayer of Saraswati, the Goddess of learning, followed by the prayers of Ganesh and Goddesses Riddhi Siddhi (prayers for prosperity and fulfillment). After the prayers of Saraswati and Ganesh, the tambura is also worshiped.

The Pandwani kathagayaka enacts and sings with an ektara or a tambura (stringed musical instrument) decorated with small bells and peacock feathers and uses kartal (a pair of cymbals). The performance recounts or re-enacts ancient epics, anecdotes, and accounts to instruct and amuse the community. There is no use of any other stage settings, but the Pandwani performers enchant the audience with stimulating theatrical movements. During the 1980s, women entered the field of Pandwani performances. Teejan Bai represents the history of the struggle of women on stage. The other women promoters of this performing art are Prabha Yadav, Meena Sahu, Nishad sisters, Ritu Verma, Shantibai Chelak, and Usha Barle (Ahmad, 1989). The opening of imaginative space through theatrical performance provided visibility and gender mobility, hence transforming the traditional space of folk theater in Chhattisgarh.

**Women in Theater**

Throughout history there have been attempts to define drama, theater, and performance, and their models have been deployed at different junctures by various disciplines. Performance, emerging out of fine arts, is a term inclusive of the genres of music, dance, and theater, and at the macro level performance can shape and determine individual and social identities. It suggests how the performer is looked upon by the spectator. John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) theorizes that culture influences how we see. He further illustrates that the objectification of women in art might have been the reason for women’s absence from stage or theater. In ancient Greece women were banned from stage and their presence was considered dangerous (Cockin, 2023, p. 3). During the Elizabethan age in England, gender hierarchies constrained women from performing on stage (Shapiro, 2010, p. 229). Men had a dominant presence in theater until the 19th century, although women entered into playwriting much earlier (Gewertz, 2003, n.p.). Similarly, women found no place on the Indian stage for a long time. While discussing female space in theater, Jill Dolan (1996) focused on the histories of women’s performance and the critical and creative terrain of feminist theater which transformed into an experimental performance matrix. Psychoanalysis became a tool for interrogating representations of gender, sexuality, and race that brought forward the “questions of form, context, history, and representation” (Dolan, 1996, p. 2). Reinhardt argues that “theatre is essentially ...a public, social, and male dominated art” and that “the masculine gendering of the public sphere in theatre is most true of tragedy” (Reinhardt, 1981, as cited in Shepherd & Wallis, 2004, pp. 70-72). Nandi Bhatia in *Performing Women/Performing*
Womanhood: Theatre Politics and Dissent in North India notes that women performed at the periphery in theater and were seen as a threat to the public space (Bhatia, 2010). Theatre, therefore, became a cultural practice that supported the patriarchal state. Women were rendered culturally invisible, and their invisibility allowed a focus on the masculine subject. Hence, there was no space for women in theater because they lacked the authority or choice to participate.

In Feminism and Theatre, Sue Ellen Case, while arguing about the invisibility of the achievements of women in theater, remarks that “the absence of these women causes the suppression of the tradition of women playwrights. The invisibility of their biographies suppresses valuable knowledge about the experience and models of women--in theatre” (Case, 1988, p. 44). The competitive concept of the theater “festival” that formed the basis of the emergence of drama in Western theater was rooted in male supremacy. If women were present in the audience at all, they had marginal status. She illustrates the arguments of feminist historians that this foundational exclusion of women constitutes drama as “a political and aesthetic arena for ritualised and codified gender behaviour linking it to civic and privileges and restrictions” (Case, 1988, p. 11). Learning and art were presumed to be the province of men: “Women in art always stand for something from the point of view of the male, which is presumed to be normative” (Phelan, 1993, p. 5). In theater, an apparatus of conventional representation, the other on stage is incorporated by the spectator as same.

What Teejan performs in her complex solo pieces is a deliberate and conscious refusal to be invisible, a refusal to participate in the representational economy of presence and absence. She reduces the wide gap occurring between spectator and performer. The artist and the audience interact at the performance operating within the culture. The performance of Mahabharata recapitulates a heritage stretching back to the past which defines Teejan’s identity and makes her the carrier of coded versions of what apparently happened in earlier times. Identity, subjectivity, and reality are produced and sustained by cultural representations.

Folk performing art is seen by Robert M. Morgan as an “intertextual linking of past to present which links artistic form to human memory” (Morgan, 1977, as cited in Hutcheon, 1988, p. 140). Victor Turner suggests in his studies of ritual social drama:

Social action requires a performance which is repeated. This repetition is a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. When this conception of social performance is applied to gender, it is clear that although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this “action” is immediately public as well. The meaning comes into the public sphere where gendered understanding of meaning changes according to the performance. (Turner, 1974, as cited in Butler, 1988, p. 526)

Teejan Bai, along with other women performers, adds a new deviation to the narrative when the scene of Draupadi disrobing in the Mahabharata is acted out. These women Kathagayakas bring to the public eye the humiliation faced by Draupadi which is very different from a man’s understanding, performance, and point of view.

Judith Butler (1988) in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” remarks that “just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and the play requires both text and interpretation, similarly the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already
existing directives” (p. 526). The Pandwani is enacted by these women Kathagayakas in a space traditionally seen as the arena of men, so the act of a woman performing becomes a resistant symbol. The absence of women in theater discourse is rooted in a lack of systematic consideration of women as agents, performers (of action), and scholars throughout history. This article locates and positions Teejan Bai and other women performers as a powerful force for understanding feminist scholarship in the Indian context. By contesting the structures that shaped the world of the Chhattisgarhi women, the women Kathagayakas of Pandwani strategically reorganized dominant discourses and even introduced innovative connotations to communicate new cultural meanings.

**Redefining Feminist Space in Folk Theater**

Teejan Bai is a localized pragmatic example of the transitioning nation when she resists the power structures and captures theatrical space at a regional, national, and international level. Another attempt at constructing a gender-based dimension to analyze the genre is that of A. K. Ramanujan through “the classical Tamil division of akam/puram that suggest a continuum stretching from domestic ‘interior’ tales told primarily by women to public ‘exterior’ performances by males. He identifies women’s domain with less formulaic, less complex uses of language, and men with the elaborate techniques of the professional bard” (Ramanujan, 1986, as cited in Hansen, 1991, p. 51). Teejan Bai breaks into an impromptu dance after the completion of an episode and celebrates the victory which makes Pandwani an accomplished theater form. During the performance, as the story builds, the tambura becomes a prop personifying as Bhima’s gada, sometimes as the mace, bow, or chariot of Arjun, and other times it signifies Draupadi’s hair. Teejan performs the part of a multitude of characters in the epic. She is supported by a group of performers on harmonium, tabla, dholak, and majira, and by two or three singers. Teejan introduces humor into the serious episodes. The stylistic tools applied in her performance are dialogue, songs, enactment, tambura that enables her to express a range of emotions, and native words that she adds to connect the folktales with a critique of current events. As the narrative progresses, the performance due to dance movements and element of surprise becomes more intense and experiential. Teejan repeatedly interacts with the accompanist and other singers, questioning and giving commentary. A single episode of her Mahabharata performance ends after several hours, turning a simple narration into a ballad.

Folk theater is capable of representing and being influenced by any aspect of the world, and of engaging in alternative possible worlds. The connection performers make between the theatrical events and the world outside the theater has various meanings both actual and implied, direct and indirect. Any artistic performance occurs in relation to certain aspects of cultural heritage that determine identity, and the performance can sometimes be a tribute or sometimes a revolt. The voices of the culture echo in the performances of these women and the codes, styles, and conventions impart identity and meaning to the Gond Kathagayakas. The process of information dissemination through the performance draws upon modes of delivery and specific roles of the performer further retelling stories, proverbs, folktales, legends, myths, and historical events in a creative trajectory, moving from agents to performance to receiver.

The use of epic narratives by Teejan Bai in folk performances has a definite aesthetic advantage where the narrative becomes a mode to handle time and space involving a twofold movement: from the narrative to the performative form, and from antiquity to contemporality. Folk theater is rural, community based, flexible, and inclusive in contrast to classical theater which is said to be refined, fixed, and exclusive in the Indian context. The two performances, classical and
folk, are distinct from each other. Pandwani is categorized as Lok Natya Shaily (folk theater form) based on Mahabharata and is popular among the adivasi (tribals) and rural masses of this region (Mahawar, 2012, pp. 26-27). Jhaduram Devangan attempted to make Pandwani textual and give it a classical aura, whereas Teejan Bai, on the other hand, endeavored to give it a folk character (Singh, 2021, p. 52). Folk has the possibility of adapting to changing needs. Teejan’s performance has a folk character that offers endless possibilities of variations and adaptation representing various characters with modifications.

Creswell’s understanding of the “public/ private” dichotomy as an exercise in power and the challenging of this binary as a type of resistance or transgression (Cresswell, 1996, pp. 22–23) can be applied to these performers’ resistance to gendered discourses and divides prevalent in public space. Gendered structures of space and discourse draw a line between public and private which has been codified through female impersonation in the early Indian folk theater. In the introduction to the Seagull Theatre Quarterly, Samik Bandyopadhyay remarks that in contrast to men who came into theater, solely motivated by the passion for theater, women entered theater for livelihood. This created a gap between the genders where men were looked upon as idealistic in contrast to women performers. He further states, “For the actresses, several of them single mothers or with dependents, the options were more constricted, and acting remained the only means of living” (Bandyopadhyay, 2000, p. 6). Karan Singh, in his article “Images, Fantasy and Violence: Woman in North Indian performance Tradition Svang,” remarks that:

The performative space of svang is primarily located within a prison house of male values, perspectives, and judgments. In these performances, females are often revealed through male guts, literally and metaphorically, in their androgynous transformations wherein less of a woman and more of a man, they become a specimen of collective male consciousness on the stage. (Singh, 2020, p.123)

Folk theater then became an androcentric showground projecting men’s consciousness on stage through their performance of women’s roles.

Performances of folk dramatic forms are never fixed and rigid but are fluid and ever changing. Every aspect of the performance is governed by denotation and connotation determined by the performer’s movements, speech, music, songs and constantly shifting networks of primary and secondary meanings. The complete message formed by a multi-layered communicative system produces a single unified structure. Performance spatiality is not limited to or marked out by fixed, semi-fixed, and dynamic theatrical components. Any representation, if it is to successfully evoke a fictional dramatic scene, will also create what “Suzanne Langer defines as virtual space—an illusionistic ‘intangible image’ resulting from formal relationships established within a given defined area. Illusionistic ‘virtuality’ has been the main characteristic of a spectacle” (Langer, 1953, as cited in Elam, 1980, p. 60). The performance is dependent for its encoding and decoding on a flexible system and set of codes common to its sources, performers, and audience. Teejan’s portrayal of Draupadi disrobing works upon the codes operative and existing in society which become the potential factors in determining the position of women in theater. The social construct of gendered space impacts women folk artists, particularly Gond women who are given an inferior status. In Woman’s Theatrical Space, Hanna Scolnicov (1994) states that women were relegated to interior private spaces whereas men dominate the outer public arena. The question of theatrical space thus becomes a question about women (p. 7). The reasons for the lack of women performers were that performance is a public art form and the performer is always in the public gaze, and also
that men dominated economic and artistic decisions, as was the case with Pandwani folk art before the arrival of Teejan Bai. Another factor that became an obstacle to women’s performance was the language. Cora Kaplan states that the refusal to allow women access to public language is a major form of gender oppression (Kaplan, 2003, as cited in Bhagwat, 2016, p. 2). On the contrary, Teejan Bai’s usage of language is a refutation of the male-dominated space, and her refusal to adopt the language of men adds her own style to the performance. Her act aligns individuals with community through realism and imagination and does not restrict itself to the sphere of culture. It in fact is a part of the larger social structure and evokes appreciative responses through their amazing interpretation of the epic narratives. Bishnupriya Dutt (2020) observes that “Komal Kothari, a folklorist, suggested a sociological method for the study of cultures by positioning performance practices within local traditions and communities” (p. 89). The re-enactment by Teejan enables her and the spectators to reconnect with their gods, their epics, and their culture.

As John (2003) notes, “The tribal versions of the Mahabharata is not a continuous narrative but is presented in disjointed episodes as noted by the author Bhagwandas Patel in Bhilo ka Bharat, paying less attention to the exact storyline of war” (John, 2003, n. p.). The local/indigenous woman artists like Teejan modified the traditional text according to their sociological needs and emphasized the transcendence of the epic feminine figures to human forms, thus fitting them to the contemporary times. Gurang Jain, a sociologist, remarks that, “the instances where women are emancipated and respected are given special attention” (Jain, as cited in John, 2003) by focusing on the women-centric episodes of the Mahabharata. For example, Draupadi finds more space in the local tradition whereas the classical text fails to give her centrality. This new representative model of women placed in the regional context can cause a shift in the consciousness of the public sphere, subverting the traditionally constructed gender structure. With incorporation of the local folk tradition, the Kathagayakas intermeshed the epical theme with the contemporary beliefs. Bhima’s glorification as a folk-hero and the exaltation of Draupadi inspires local women folk artists. Schechner remarks that performance can be seen as a wider nexus of social and cultural practices, i.e., the “whole constellation of events that takes place among the performers and audience” (Schechner, as cited in Shepherd, 2016, p. 27).

In theater the interactions involving performer, audience, and fictional characters are governed by rhetorical and authentic conventions. To persuade the audience there is a need for authenticity. Marco de Marinis’s essay “Theatrical Comprehension: A Socio-Semiotic Approach” argues that the audience is an active maker of the performance’s meaning. A performance transforms the spectator into a participant (Marini, 1984, as cited in Shepherd, 2016, p. 9). The image of Teejan Bai on stage projects codes that create a new social order and capitalize upon the spatial relationship of women and culture. E. Ann Kaplan (2010) illustrates that woman is constructed by and for the male gaze so as to make them objects (p. 210), and in theater the gaze is owned by men. Traditionally the theme of the performance has been a male subject with whom everyone must identify. Teejan, while performing Keechak Vadh and Draupadi Disrobing, does not identify with the male subject or protagonists. Draupadi is not objectified by the male gaze but is glorified by Teejan, consequently elevating her position and creating her new identity.

David S. Shulman (1986) posits that epic heroines in folk versions are usually more powerful than the heroines of classical versions. The feminine agency is constructed as an empowered female capturing the courageous Draupadi, suggesting women’s transgression into the place reserved for men. The vernacular versions are grounded in marginal local cultures and communities that explore gender and power. These local accounts are transmitted textually, orally, ritually, and through performance by Teejan, who is the custodian and transmitter of knowledge
Draupadi’s centrality through representation strategies of ascendance is indicative of the prominence attached to her character within the native performances. Teejan’s identification with Draupadi disrobing reflects the adversities she has experienced in her life. Teejan notes: “My favourite story is Draupadi Cheer haran and through this story I want to tell people not to commit atrocities against women. Otherwise, they will face the fate that befell the Kauravas” (Teejan, as cited in Masih, 1997). Draupadi disrobing is narrated in this way: The Kauravas invite the Pandavas for a game of dice, and finally Draupadi is made to gamble by Yudhishtra which enrages Bhima. Draupadi is lost in the game of dice and is ordered by Duryodhana to be brought into the Sabha (Assembly Hall). The scene becomes more dramatic when Dushasana, despite Draupadi’s protest, drags her by her hair into the assembly hall. Teejan is shocked at Draupadi’s humiliation received at the hands of her oppressors—the Kauravas and her five husbands (the Pandavas). Teejan’s Draupadi responds in an aggressive manner, further voicing her opinion in outspoken attacks against her husbands. Her interrogation of a woman’s position as a wife reiterates the question of ownership in a larger context. Draupadi’s question: “Is it right or fair that a woman, let alone a queen, become a slave because her husband staked her in a gambling game?” (Das, 2012, p. 39) raises the discourse of righteousness in the Sabha, the courtroom, to dispense justice where a woman bears injustice. The right becomes the wrong because of the gambling act. The Kauravas and Karna question her chastity and honor. Teejan heightens the theatricality of this scene when Draupadi is brought into the middle of the court, all bruised and wounded and shaken by what is happening. Teejan, through Rukhmani’s intervention, mixes and contemporizes Draupadi’s plight with the state of Indian women in the 20th century. In a video of Bai’s performance, Lord Krishna comes to rescue Draupadi from her anguish, and the episode ends with Draupadi’s honor being restored by divine intervention. The scene closes on a tribute to Lord Krishna: “Tore murali me jadu bhare Kanhaiya, tore murali mei jadulage Kanhaiya” (Your flute is full of magic, Krishna; your flute seems magical) and a slogan to extol the greatness of Krishna: “Bolo Vrandban bihari laki jai” (Triumph of Lord Krishna of Vrindavan) (Hanuman Bhim Milap, 2023). Teejan Bai remarks, “When I enact the Cheer Haran (disrobing) of Draupadi, I become the strong Bhima and fierce Dushasana. Once in a while I break into dance while singing the epic. The narrator becomes the protagonist drawing the bridge between ancient folk music and modernity. She sings with the masculine vitality challenging the male bastion” (Bai, as cited in Arya, 2014, n. p.). The feminist retelling of Teejan Bai frames the narratives of Draupadi disrobing in Sabha Parv or violating her modesty in Kichak Vadh within a different matrix, allowing Draupadi to critically voice her resistance and opinion. The performance of Teejan, who acts as Draupadi, allures the audience in a special way and the powerful short dialogues which she shares with the accompanists have depth. The experience of Draupadi’s humiliation and pain illustrates Teejan Bai’s viewpoint when she remarks:

People in my village called me characterless because I sang and danced in public. My second husband used to beat me and stop me from performing. What could be more painful for an artist than not being able to perform? I can never forget that difficult path I have left behind. Indian women have this amazing ability to tolerate things, keep the pain to their hearts… (Bai, as cited in Singh, 2021, p. 67)

In Teejan’s performances, the portrayal of Draupadi appears to be vulnerable initially but she is also confrontational, finally turning into a fiery woman who refuses to be victimized or to
give in to adversity at the hands of her husbands or the Kauravas because of patriarchal norms. Teejan’s performance initiates complex debates. First is Draupadi’s dragging into the assembly hall as an act of violation of dharma, and the second is the validity of Yudhishtra’s stake. Teejan, acting as Draupadi, refuses to accept her dishonor. The masculine structure is defied and Teejan in her narration draws attention to Draupadi and her strength in an outrageous situation. A. Singh (2021), while elaborating on the characters of Mahabharata, remarks that:

Draupadi is a proponent of struggles, argumentativeness, and action whereas Rukhmani is an empathiser and arbitrator expressing female solidarity. Krishna is represented as an agency and redeemer. Bhima is the only husband of Draupadi agitated by her dishonoring and speaks against the injustice of Duryodhana’s violent act becoming the voice of Draupadi and dharma. (p. 67)

The narrative of Dushasana Vadh describes the combat between Bhima and Dushasana. Teejan wears a red sari with a vermilion tikka (dot) on her forehead when she enacts the scene of Dushasana Vadh (slaying of Dushasana) that takes place in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. The scene is set during the Kurukshetra war and there occurs a Mallayuddha (i.e., wrestling combat) staging Draupadi’s revenge. She identifies herself with Bhima, and the tambura flung over Teejan’s shoulder during the performance symbolizes Bhima’s glorious gesture. Lowering her shoulder in a posture recognizable as Bhima, Teejan moves her tambura over her right shoulder, takes a slight boasting step, and drops her voice a few scales further visualizing Bhima. In Dushasana Vadh, she rejoices in Bhima’s power and bravery. Teejan’s Draupadi becomes Shakti, and Bhima becomes a catalyst in constructing Draupadi’s courage. In these two episodes, she doubles up as a narrator and a character denouncing the conduct of men characters towards Draupadi. In contrast, Bhima is valorized as an ideal because of his compassion and understanding of Draupadi’s predicament. Her performances can be said to be one-woman Mahabharata, presented on the stage in the form of a dramatic interpretation combining the spectator, performer, and kinesthetic modalities. She establishes gender fluidity and the movement from masculinity to femininity. The imaginative expression used by Teejan adds novelty to this folk art.

Tutun Mukherjee’s Staging Resistance (2005) argues that society alienates women’s dramaturgy from mainstream theater. Teejan Bai’s Pandwani and her storytelling becomes a process for purposeful action that embodies her “subjective-in-between” (Arendt, 1958, p. 183) or intersubjective connectedness to others. She resists and questions the mechanisms of power, authority, ideology, violence, honor, and humiliation. This cultural experience and creative artistic expression are Teejan Bai’s attempt to reveal ways in which female experience was ignored, denied, and devalued in the production of knowledge (Singh, 2021, pp. 45-46). Storytelling in the form of Pandwani enables Teejan to alter private and public realms.

Hiltebeitel (2001) remarks that the local retellings of the Mahabharata created new narrative pathways. These retellings were not mere translation, but rather they enhanced and infused new connotations and narratives suited to the local needs (Singh, 2021, p. 49). For Das (2015) and Singh (1993), Pandwani, the Adivasi Mahabharata, needs to be recognized as a part of indigenous creativity and the oral history of India, as narrations of the community’s ethnicity, oral culture, and memories. The local communities are inventive in portraying women in their performances, and they exclude all those episodes in the Mahabharata that show women as weak and helpless (Singh, 2021, p. 50). These innovations have transformed Pandwani as a female folk form—Kumari Ritu Verma, Kumari Bai Nishad, Usha Barle, Shanti Bai Chelak, Parvati Verma,
Phul Bai, and Chekki Bai Sahu are all female names and Kathagayakas of Pandwani. The androcentric nature of folk art became gynocentric, with a new voice leading to a new feminist canon formation.

Judith Butler (1988), in her work “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” introduced the term performative to cultural philosophy. She argued that gender identity is not based on ontology or biology but is formed by the continuous constitution of bodily acts; it is an identity instituted through “a stylised repetition of acts” (p. 270). Butler’s idea is analogous to Austin’s explanation of performative utterances as rule-governed speech acts grounded in social circumstances and also self-referential “text act[s]”—a shift from speech acts to bodily acts (Austin, 1962, as cited in McDonald, 2003, p. 57). Folk performance is a panorama of existence (Gargi, 1966) with its ability to adapt and reconcile binary opposites. The cross-cultural spectrum of traditional text in the hands of Teejan and other women performers becomes a women-centered approach that speaks for and about women. It is an alternative way of exploring women’s power within their own sphere. Teejan redefines the meaning of performance and seizes the stage from men, causing a complete alteration in the field of folk performances. The intersection of art and social relevance allows theater to become an instrument of real change in women’s lives. It is a representation of women’s own unique idiom, form, language, and way of communicating. Teejan Bai created a feminist folk theater that became a tool for self-exploration and expression. Pandwani presents transformation and structural change, putting women characters in the dominant position.

Conclusion

Pandwani contests the suppositions of fixed social structure through the actualization of women figures on stage, while at the same time opening a creative space for gender mobility through their performances. The codifications of Pandwani by women invited condemnation for Teejan and relegated her to a peripheral existence initially. But Teejan subverted the male hegemonic structure by placing herself at the center and brought life to this art through innovations. She also gave an alternate view of how women narrate and perform the epic in folk style, revealing the power of transformation inherent in folk theater. The performances and dialogue of the women take on an important theatrical function within the orthodox cultural world in which they operate.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) argues, “if the dominant discourse is the discourse of cultural relativism, questions of power, agency, justice, and common criteria for critique and evaluation are silenced” (p. 520). Teejan Bai became the agent of resistance and transformed the direction of folk theater in Chhattisgarh. The reconstruction of female intellect through re-narration by the Kathagayakas of Chhattisgarh establishes a new normative and formative native/regional feminist model. These women performers in Chhattisgarh folk theater are redefining and reinventing new images and identities for women. This research foregrounded the identities and feminist expression of women of Chhattisgarh in folk theater Pandwani with a focus on Teejan Bai’s folk performance emphasizing the issue of positionality, inclusion, and social specificity. Pandwani is Mahabharata retold from the tribal and women performer’s point of view. It becomes a regional alternative feminist model transforming formerly masculine spaces and constructing women’s identities anew.

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References


