

Becoming Heroine in Jatra: Reading the Representation of Women in the Texts of Few Popular Jatra

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Abstract: The word "woman" does not signify an ethnologically, economically or socially homogenous group. The largest section of women belongs to the lower-middle and lower class and many of them remain outside the framework of the elementary education. Their ideological formation or cultural taste does not depend upon the reading of classical or mainstream literature. Their cultural diversions and recreations are different and should be included in the discourse of feminist criticism since popular culture molds the popular imagination. *Jatra* is one such important mass culture that has dominated the aesthetic taste of rural Bengal until the arrival of television. *Jatra* is a travelling theatre, very popular amongst the rural folk of Bengal. My paper studies the representation of the image woman and womanhood in few popular *palas* (plays) of *Jatra*. The plays of *Jatra* are basically written by male writers who control the depiction and dispersal of the idea of 'good woman' and 'badwoman'. Plays of *Jatra* unconsciously betray the schism present in the portrayal of female characters from different sections. An implied subversion can be noticed in the casting of self-employed woman from lower class or caste, who emerges out to be more valiant and free both in expressing herself as well as in her engagement with social protest in comparison to the upper class gentlewoman. This paper also deals with the importance of spectatorship in the construction of gender roles in the plays. By the analysis of few popular *palas*, the paper maps out how far such texts victimize or empower women and also whether they promulgate the generalizations or break free the stereotypes.

Keywords: *Jatra, Mass culture, Image of woman, Spectatorship, Stereotypes.*

Jatra-Dorshok or Audience of Jatra molding and being molded by Jatra

Rachel M. Brownstein's book *Becoming a Heroine* (1982) is an engaging work that studies how the literature we read influence our life style. She has explored the impact of the heroines in classic novels on passionate women readers. Following the trail, one can question where do the uneducated and half educated women who do not have access to classics, look for to become heroine in their life. It is the popular media that shapes their psyche and provides patterns to imitate. Their diversions or modes of entertainments are different. So are the images they grow up with. Jatra is one such popular media of entertainment of rural Bengal that controls the popular imagination. Jatra, the travelling theatre form, has a magnetic aura that captivates the minds of audience in an unparalleled magnitude. A significant number of audience comprise of women from lower background. I am enlisting two examples to show the impact of Jatra on its viewer's especially on the female ones. Mimasha Pandit in her article recounts an incident documented by the British ICS officials in 1908 that the women audience who came to view Mukunda Das's Swadeshi Jatra performance held in Jessore, broke their English made glass bangles during the performance which was immediately banned under section 144, Criminal Procedure Code. She writes-

"But what is most striking is the reaction of the people, in this case, the women, who witnessed the performance. They were excited enough to act in the most conspicuous manner like breaking their glass bangles in public place. But more striking than the breaking of the glasses was the source of production of the bangles; all these bangles were English made." (Pandit 128)

How the heroines of Jatra influenced the minds of its female audience can be understood from Gourab Ghosh's ruminations of the heydays in acting career of Jyotsna Dutta, a leading Jatra actress who popularized the character of Sonai from Brojen De' historical play *Sonai-Dighi*.

“The Sonai-Jyotsna later became the “Prima Dona” of Bengal Jatra. The character of Sonai, her style, her costume and her accessories were a craze at that time. For the first time Bengal witnessed the popularity of a female artist in the most popular performance form — one that was close to the heart of folk, close to the soil and culture of Bengal.” (Ghosh 72)

From the above examples it is easy to construe the impact of Jatra on its female audience. On the other hand the nature of audience has played an important role in shaping the aesthetic standards of Jatra and to be specific the representation of women. Analysis of Jatra texts enfolds the latent subversion of gender hierarchy. Jatra gives more space to the representation of women from marginalized sections that also forms the largest part of the female crowd. Women characters from the lower strata of society are shown to be bold and boisterous in terms of exercising freedom of speech while the women characters from the gentry are comparatively submissive in expressing themselves. For example in Voirab Ganguly’s play *Rokte Roa Dhan* (Paddy sowed in blood) the character named Jhumli Kahar, a peasant girl outshines the lead heroine, Gauri in her courage and action. Spectatorship of Jatra plays an important role in the formulation of gender image. Women have been the target audience in Jatra. It is few producers and *palakers* partial attentiveness towards male audience and forgetfulness of female audience which is responsible for the increased profanity on the stage.

Arrival of Real Heroines in Jatra

Before plunging into the textual analysis of image-making in Jatra, I would like to discuss about the inclusion of professional female actors in the world of Jatra because it played a pivotal role in the casting of women characters. It was not until 1960s that Jatra got its professional female actors. Before that the female roles were performed by male actors called *Purush Rani*, female impersonator. According to many eminent Jatra director and *palakar* (Script writer of Jatra), degradation of Jatra started with the inclusion of female actors in Jatra. Undoubtedly the characterizations of female roles have changed after that but it is also not true that Jatra was unknown to sex abuse before that or jatra’s status was very high. It is another common fallacy and double standard of the patriarchal society to put the onus on female sexuality. However

inclusion of female actors in Jatra changed the dynamics of representation which should be discerned from both the positive and negative point of view. Adverse impact can be seen in the increasing number of sensational scenes and flesh showing. Jatra posters and stage started getting flooded with skimpily dressed women. Commercial Jatra commoditized women like any other popular culture. But it is also a matter of women empowerment as they slowly carve their niche in the all-male world of Jatra. Today no one can imagine Jatra without female characters. Women Jatra artists like Jyotsna Dutta, Beena Dasgupta, Kakoli Chowdhury, Mita Chatterjee were no less popular than their male artists in ruling the hearts of thousands of audience with their skillful performance. They enriched the quality of performance in Jatra with their dexterous acting. It cannot be denied that affirmative transformation of modern forms of acting style in Jatra was possible due to the inclusion of female actors. (Das 179)

One can easily perceive the uneven ratio of male and female characters in Jatra performances. In most of the *palas* only 3 to 5 female characters act beside 11 to 12 male actors. Today it is unimaginable to think of the Jatra without female artists but there was also a time when Jatra *palas* totally excluded female characters. But recently I came across a *pala* written by a contemporary Jatra-*palakar*, Dr. Tapos Kuila who has shown the unprecedented bravery to write an all-female *pala* Vanumotir Khel (Vanumoti's Magic how). It has a cast of ten female characters in both good and bad roles. Exclusion of all male characters is not a common feat in the male dominated world of Jatra.

Gender Stereotyping and Subversion

Feminist literary criticism began with a suspicion of established ideas, and disproving those propagandist ideas and posing resistance to that belief system. Popular culture is a potent medium of encrypting and perpetuating such belief systems. The plays of Jatra are almost exclusively male authored. Thus we are left with no alternate possibility to unearth an "écriture feminine". The paper poses a phallogentric criticism and sought to analyze the portrayal of women characters in *Jatra* text written by male authors. In a conversation with a bookseller of *Jatra* texts, it was revealed that many Jatra scripts are bought by the Bengali daily soap makers. One can easily notice the similarity between the two. Jatra like the soap operas has a bulk of

palas featuring melodramatic, melancholic women whose existence revolves around their husbands. This type of Jatra is sarcastically named as "Shankha, Sindoor, aalta" Jatra (Ivory bangles, vermilion, liquid red color are marks of a married woman in Bengal). (De 43) This kind of Jatra is responsible for diminishing the image of a woman to the role of a crying wife. Jatra has shifted from a pitiable portrait of a domicile woman to stronger female characters, politically active, valiant. Jatra does not only deal with melancholic helpless vulnerable women. It has also pictured strong characters picked from history, mythology or fiction alike. When historical *palas* enacted the lives of Rani Laxmi Bai, Sultana Razia, and mythological *palas* too did not limit themselves in portraying the clichéd story of characters like Radha and Sita. Brajen De's *Upekshita* (The Unwanted Lady) should be mentioned in this context portraying an expressive woman character, Amba flaunting her demands and questioning the double standards of patriarchal society. She rebels against Bhisma being abducted by him and refuses to comply with the social dictum when rejected by her fiancé. With the rise of communism and popularity of social *pala* in 1960s we got female characters that stand side by side the male rebels and fighters. The characters like Manoshi, Nasiban in Utpal Dutta's *Rifle*, Jhumli in Voirob Ganguli's *Rokte Roa Dhan* are courageous and undaunted.

Often the country-city division is displayed in Jatra. A city woman is stereotyped as proud, amorous, lascivious woman. Her urbane self will be reflected in her gaudy western attire contradicting the village girl in sari. The city girl will be bullied by rural folk until she learns the lesson and reappears at the end of show wearing sari to display her mental transformation. This polarized view of country and city woman is reiterated in many *palas* to typify a biased notion regarding educated woman. It's a regressive picture of women education which has been wrongly highlighted by the *palas* but Jatra on the other hand also has an important contribution in the sphere of gender sensitization. Jatra has advocated the empowerment of women not only by creating strong female characters but also through the portrayal of sensible male characters. Here again I am enlisting two very popular Jatra *palas* where the *palakars* has shown that the change in the society can be brought by changed mentality of men as well. In Brajen De's *pala Akaler Desh*, Matongo accepts his lost wife without any question when she returns at the end of the *pala* and when questioned about his wife's purity he refuses to blame his wife. Similarly, in Voirob

Ganguli's *Rokte Roa Dhan*, the hero Ankush tries to convince his lover Gauri about her chastity in spite of being ravished when she herself internalized her fallen state according to the social stigma

Gauri: Ami kolonkin.

Ankush: Na, pujarini.

Gauri: Ami abhinetri.

Ankush: A juger sabitri.

Gauri: Ami dhorshita.

Ankush: Jibon songrame tumi aparajita." (Ganguly 146)

[Gauri: I am ill-reputed.

Ankush: No, you are a worshipper.

Gauri: I am an actor.

Ankush: You are the Savitri of this era.

Gauri: I am ravished.

Ankush: You are undefeated in the battle of life.] (Paraphrase mine)

Tarun Kumar Dey is critical of the contemporary Jatra writers who are in the vogue of creating stereotypical melodramatic jatras and draws their attention to the works of Sourindro Mohon Chatterjee. In many of his palas Chatterjee has spoken of women emancipation. He particularly talks about the pala *Shapmukti* (Remission of sin) which is radiant with the protest of Urvashi, a courtesan of heaven. Urvashi is severely punished when she refuses to sleep with Durbasha because of the sage's repulsive appearance. She gives voice to the unheard plea of sex-workers who are deprived of their right to their own bodies:

"Nohi pranheena mora,

Nohi mora sombhoger jontro matro shudhu,

Ruchi o aruchi,

Amader ache thik tomar moton" (Tarun De 45)

[We are not lifeless.

Neither are we machines to serve sex.

Liking and disliking.

We too have just like you] (Paraphrase mine)

Jatra is context sensitive and flexible regarding the choice of themes. It quickly adopts themes from current issues. Amrita Basu Roy Chowdhury's article is an interesting study of titles of Jatra produced in the duration of 2011-2013 demonstrating gender disparity in such plays. In 2011, West Bengal got its first female chief minister and we saw the reflection in Jatra whose lead figure is spreading the message of woman empowerment in the political field.

"*Banglar Kshamatay Mamata* (Mamata in Power in Bengal), *Banglar Masnade Mamata* (Mamata at the Helm of Bengal), *Mahasangram Joyee Mamata* (Mamata the Victorious), *Matir Ghore Mamata* (Mamata in a Mud House) all have the life and achievements of the leader as their central theme." (Basu Roy Chowdhury 265-266)

This could be seen as a positive signal towards the socio-political possibilities with a changed portrayal of gender roles.

"Finally it can be concluded that the titles of Jatra in West Bengal not only talk about the suppression endured by women in a society or the commoditization of their 'body'; rather they portray the struggle of women to combat patriarchal subjugation and their relentless effort to assert their own right, be it social or political. The simultaneous process of stereotyping and de stereotyping is very much evident in the titles of the Jatra of West Bengal indicating a positive change in the society which is beneficial for women." (Basu Roy Chowdhury 267)

Thus, Jatra has always contained the seeds of subversion in the characterization of both male and female characters. Though, Jatra cannot deny being responsible for the commodification of women by generalization, it should also be credited for the considerable representation of women from the marginalized section and making explicit the class and caste hierarchy that exists within

the broader concept of women. As a popular folk theatre it has always been capable of creating vast changes in our social structure because it has a greater outreach and connection with the masses. The changing role of women in the society gets reflected in the shifting patterns of the Jatra. It can and does sensitize mass consciousness towards gender disparity and violence towards women.

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