



Women's Theater and the Redefinitions of Public, Private, and Politics in North India¹

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Abstract This essay explores the intersections between performance, materiality, and marginalized women's struggles by delving into the meanings of public and private, and the nuanced and varied meanings of gendered resistance. Focusing on three very different kinds of theatrical performances by women in North India, I analyze how each performance appropriates, complicates, or reinforces the interwoven patriarchal concepts of public and private on the one hand, and femininity and masculinity on the other. In so doing, I also consider how both space and kinship are strategically deployed in these performances, and the different meanings of resistance and feminist politics embedded and implied in each performance. I argue that a focus on these processes allows us to grapple with the ways in which gendered materialities — shaped by class, caste, and geographical location — become central to the articulation of politics. This framework opens up new “spaces” to examine how multiple publics are constituted and reconfigured in terms of their socio-political identities and provisional alliances in and through publicization/privatization struggles, without essentializing or fixing the meanings of either public or private or of the spaces in which public/private acts are enacted.

When theater is used as a space to deal with violence, it must become the womb in which Abhimanyu lay learning the secrets of battle. From it must emerge words and forms, now tethered in an umbilical cord and now cutting free, smeared with flesh and blood. The performance area must become the reclaimed body-site seen from different perspectives, appearing dismembered and unified, destroyed and resurrected all at once. The stage must become a body transformed into a sign, signifying a thousand meanings, creating a thousand texts ... and the meanings must

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descend like a giant mirror before people, reflecting their lives, their culture (Lakshmi, 2000, p. xiii).

I use CS Lakshmi's words to introduce my work here on women's theater, not to alienate readers by the specificity of her metaphors, but to draw them inside the messy political spaces of public and private and the struggles over their redefinitions in the North Indian context. Abhimanyu is the son of Arjun in the Indian epic, Mahabharata, where a 14 day-long battle takes place between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The quotation refers to the time when Arjun, the most skilled Pandava warrior, shares strategies of warfare with his pregnant wife, Subhadra, while Abhimanyu listens in his mother's womb. But Lakshmi reverts the emphasis in the story from a traditional celebration of masculinity, power, duty, and dharma (right path) to a celebration of a "body-site" made out of womb, flesh, blood, and umbilical cord. In so doing, her words capture at once the cultural and political specificity of a gendered social context, while politicizing the violence in women's lives and highlighting the rage with which Indian women have claimed theater as a space to rearticulate their relationships with public and private.

The linkages among performance, space, and politics have recently attracted the attention of many critical geographers in "Northern" academic institutions. Interestingly, this heightened academic interest has coincided with a rise of people's theater, especially women's theater, in the so-called "South" where activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have deployed theater as a vehicle to promote an alternative vision of development, a vision in which struggles over economic and political rights of the marginalized are viewed as inseparable from the development "of awareness, of imagination, of a culture of the mind" (Bartholomew 1995, 1; Sharma and Krishnamurty 2000). Not surprisingly, then, women's theater figured prominently in my own political and intellectual journey in 1998-1999 when I went to Chitrakoot district (in the Bundelkhand region of north India) to study two organizations that have worked to empower marginalized women by enabling their access to water, technology, and literacy. By the time I arrived in Chitrakoot women's ongoing struggles over access to resources had paved way for a raging and all consuming street theater campaign against domestic violence, and all the organizational and community spaces echoed with its impact. This led to a shift in my own research inquiry, as I immersed myself in the campaign, accompanied the campaigners to villages where they enacted their plays, and participated in the long discussions before, after, and during the performances.

The research I undertook in Bundelkhand and thereafter, revealed to me that space, performance, and politics are as much on the agenda of grassroots theater activists as they are on the geographer's, and both groups grapple in similar ways with the interrelationships among the material and the metaphoric. At the same time, however, academic deployments of performativity and resistance have sometimes sparked severe criticism by scholars and activists for their depoliticized nature, for their lack of engagement with materiality, and for creating little analytical space for collective struggles of peripheralized subjects (Houston and Pulido 2001; authors' interviews with T. Sharma, August 22, 2000; L. Krishnamurty, August 27, 2001; R. Bartholomew, October 7, 2001). These perceived, and sometimes real, gaps and dichotomies between academic (read discursive/textual) versus activist (read grounded/material) conceptualizations of performativity and resistance must be apprehended, interrogated, and bridged, especially by those who continue to believe in the necessity of crossing cultural and institutional boundaries to support struggles for social equity and justice. This article seeks to

contribute to this goal by bringing varied understandings of materiality, space, and politics from different institutional and socio-political milieus in dialogue with each other. In so doing, I deliberately adopt a tone that switches from academic to non-academic, from formal to informal, and from story-telling to analysis in the hope that this will allow me to reach multiple audiences of academics, NGO workers, and independent activists in both “Northern” and “Southern” locations.

Simonsen (1996, 508) has argued that a concern with materiality in social theory does not mean a dismissal of culture and difference. Rather, such a concern facilitates engagement with culture and difference through social practices and forms of life, instead of through discourse and textuality. Simonsen urges us to understand contextuality as a social, spatial, and temporal situatedness of social activities, where context actively shapes social practices, while also being shaped by them. She argues that theories based on situatedness, social spatiality, and social temporality “do not lead to a static grounding of social activity and knowledge but to an insistence on embodiedness — which is as critical to totalizing versions of modernist universalism as to different forms of postmodern relativism” (Simonsen 1996, 509).

In a recent analysis of social justice struggles of low wage service workers at the University of California, Houston and Pulido (2001) challenge the increasingly abstract studies of performativity and the body that are detached from material struggles. Arguing for a need to reconnect performativity to both material analyses and collective struggles, the authors highlight the continued relevance of performance as an oppositional and collective form of socio-political action. While they do not deny the need to see the body as a performative site upon which multiple social identities are continually encoded and potentially resisted, they point out two serious limitations of approaches that posit subjectivity as either grammatical or performative:

First, [such approaches] radically [reduce] the scale of resistance to the individual body, thereby diminishing the power and viability of collective action. Second, ... postmodern configurations of performativity can run the risk of fetishizing resistance to the point of encompassing everything and nothing. Such theorizing tends to conflate the discursive and the social, while at the same time devaluing oppositions, and thus oppositional politics, as being oppressive and totalizing. (Houston and Pulido 2001, 4)

Instead of thinking about performativity as being either radically inclusive or as denoting a condition of inbetweenness, then, Houston and Pulido (2001, 3) conceptualize performativity as a dialectical operative in a materialist sense. For them performativity is a set of practices that exposes the dynamics of power and exploitation, while at the same time producing and rehearsing strategies for social and personal transformation. The authors reject analyses that privilege the politics of cultural difference at the expense of the politics of economic difference, for it is the latter that form the basis of oppressed people's struggles for “systemic social emancipation” (Houston and Pulido 2001, 5). They argue that this distinction between emphasizing the economic versus the cultural is crucial because the reality of late capitalist societies is structured by the binary of capital and labour. “Indeed,” they argue, “for much of the world, questions regarding the body and resistance are life and death struggles” and translate into a fight “to keep one's body alive” (Houston and Pulido 2001, 5).

I quote Houston and Pulido at length because they make a critical intervention within a theoretical framework that has, thus far, made little or no analytical space for the struggles of those who experience the worst forms of political, economic, and social marginalization and disenfranchisement. At the same time, I believe that their framework needs to be made messier. If we introduce gender, sexuality, and kinship to Houston and Pulido's predominantly class-based notions of exploitation, the distinction between the economic and the cultural necessarily begins to blur. And it is here that the performances of the most marginalized social actors — poorest women who are factory workers, sex workers, and peasants; who are wives, lovers, and daughters, as well as victims of the most horrible forms of violence; who are the most vocal and artistic performers and political activists — and the ways in which they deploy, negotiate, subvert, and redefine the notions of public and private, provide us a rich opportunity to grapple with the contextual, and yet highly material, meanings of feminist politics.

In this following analysis, I extend the above discussions by reframing existing accounts of three very different kinds of theatrical performances of North Indian women, each of which articulates a feminist politics by reconceptualizing and recasting the predominant definitions of public and private. My analysis of the first performance is based on Veena Talwar Oldenburg's study of the courtesans of Lucknow, where the courtesans treat Oldenburg to an unscripted "Matinee Show" that mocks the institution of marriage and bourgeois notions of respectability and morality (Oldenburg 1992). I then draw upon my own account of the street theater campaign of Vanangana, a women's organization in Bundelkhand (Nagar 2000a), where I lived and worked for two months between December 1998 and April 1999. In this case, the script is a product of collective labour, and activists stage their play against domestic violence outside the homes and in the streets of the same villages in which women are being murdered. Finally, I juxtapose the performances of courtesans and Bundeli activists with the script of the opening sequence of *Aurat (Woman)*, a well-known political play produced by a professional theater group, Jan Natya Manch, that explicitly addresses questions of class, gender, and capitalism, and has been staged multiple times throughout South Asia.

Through a comparative analysis of these three performances, I explore the intersections between materiality, metaphor, and politics, as well as the nuanced and varied meanings of gendered resistance. I analyze how each performance appropriates, complicates, or reinforces the interwoven patriarchal concepts of public and private on the one hand, and femininity and masculinity on the other. At the same time, I consider how space and kinship are strategically deployed in these performances, and the different meanings of resistance and feminist politics embedded and implied in each performance. I argue that a focus on these processes allows us to see the ways in which complex and contextual gendered materialities become central to the articulation of politics, without essentializing or fixing the meanings of the "political" (Robinson 1998).

Popular Theater and Women's Struggles in India: A backdrop

Anand. Joy.

A word I encountered in unexpected contexts. In a tiny, cramped room on the slushy banks of a narrow, dirty strip of water, beside a heap of

garbage. The Kalighat red light district, where a few women gathered to speak to us about a theatre workshop experience they had some six months [ago]. ... 'What did you get out of it? How did you like it?' Amra ananda pelam. Joy. 'It gave us joy.'

...

'I can't imagine living without it now. Natak [theater] is my life'

Jana Sanskriti theater worker.

Joy. Healing. Fun. For women who are denied one, a voice. A sense of power. Visibility. Recognition. A space she can claim; a space where she is listened to.

Empowerment ...

From Anjum Katyal's (1996, 2) Editorial in *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, following interviews with sex workers who participated in a theater workshop led by Sanlaap, a Calcutta-based women's rights center.

Claiming space, finding voice, gaining visibility, discovering power! The above responses of Kalighat's sex workers encapsulate the ways in which popular theater in India has become central to the articulation of grassroots feminist politics, that is, political action largely defined by the participation of poor and often stigmatized women who have little or no access to formal education or political venues.

The heritage of popular theater in India can be traced back to a long standing tradition of folk performances, but what distinguishes modern street theater from other dramatic forms are its primarily political, often militant, overtones (Garlough 1997, 7). Street theater, in its modern form, was popularized by the Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA), the country's first organized political theater movement that emerged in the 1940s under the aegis of Bengal's Communist Party (Bharucha 1983). According to Malini Bhattacharya, a politician and feminist activist, street theater aims not only to provide entertainment, but to serve as a cultural intervention that can work directly at the level of people's consciousness:

This is not to negate the importance of change at the political and economic levels, but to assert that politicization of cultural forms is a slow and gradual process and cannot be achieved merely through generalized political directives. (Bhattacharya, quoted in Garlough 1997, 8)

Experimentation lies at the core of this genre. Scripts evolve through group discussion and current events and real life cases are used to contextualize issues and to effectively engage and communicate with the audience. Authors employ popular tunes, characters and folk songs, not only to provide entertainment and familiar comparison points for the audience, but also to resist and critique mainstream practices and discourses. In this mobile medium of communication, props are kept to a minimum and there is no built structure called the stage. Instead, actors go out in search of their audience as well as a suitable site for enacting their play. Costumes are sometimes used to compensate for the

starkness of the play and emphasis is placed most heavily upon the performance of the actors (Garlough 1997, 9).

In the 1980s and 1990s, a variety of groups ranging from religious reformers and mainstream politicians to factory workers and students, adopted street plays to gain support for their agendas. However, the largest groups of its practitioners are middle class urban activists, including women's organizations, who believe that as privileged, educated people they bear a responsibility to educate the common people on critical social issues (Kumar 1993; Garlough 1997). Women's organizations throughout India have recognized and adopted street plays as a powerful medium to critique prevailing norms, to voice alternative visions, and to mobilize their audiences around issues such as dowry, domestic violence, women's education, and marriage (Sadasivam 2000; Garlough 1997).

But street theater is not the only medium available to Indian women to politicize their struggles. Informal performances, as the next section will reveal, also take place within the privacy of the *char-diwari* (literally, four-walls), even as they challenge the most public definitions of bourgeois masculinity and femininity. The next three sections of this paper illustrate some of the variations in performative strategies by juxtaposing three performances by women, each raising different kinds of political questions in quite different contexts. Yet, all the performances can be loosely labelled as "feminist" and each of them politicizes the notions of public and private in innovative ways. In the last two sections, I compare the different strategies and notions that the performances deploy and suggest ways in which an engagement with the problematic of public and private in gendered struggles can open up new spaces to think about the intersections among materiality, performance, and resistance.

Case I: The "Matinee Shows" of Lakhnavi Tawaifs (Courtesans)

In her 1992 article, "Lifestyle As Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow," Veena Talwar Oldenburg discusses how *tawaifs* (courtesans) in the city of Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh, India) celebrate womanhood in the privacy of their upper storied apartments called Kothas, and their liberation from the rules of the patriarchal world beyond the Kotha. These tawaifs enact vivid reversals of social perception and logic — of the conventional definitions of morality and respectability — in their everyday lives so that resistance for them "is not a part-time or sporadic activity," contends Oldenburg (1992, 23), "but a way of life." For example, even though injunctions about female modesty do not apply to the tawaifs, they insist upon using the burqa, a long overcloak, to move around in the public spaces outside the Kotha. The burqa, worn by Muslim women in purdah, covers the wearer from head to foot, is worn over regular clothes and enables the wearer to see through a small rectangular piece of netting over the eyes. The tawaifs argue that in contrast to 'normal' women whose burqa symbolizes the ownership of their bodies by their husbands and families, burqa for them is a means to block the gaze of men on their own terms. In the words of a tawaif, Saira:

Men long to see our faces. If they could brag among their friends that they had seen Gulbadan or Amiran in the bazaar without a covering, they would go up in the esteem of their friends. We are not in the business of giving them cheap thrills. While we walk freely and anonymously in public places, looking at the world through our nets, they are deprived because we have blinkered them. We do not bestow anything on men without extracting its price (Oldenburg 1992, 42).

One of the chief tools that the tawaifs use to cultivate, celebrate, and continue their life style of resistance is “a secret repertoire of satirical and bawdy songs, dances, informal miming, and dramatic representations, aimed at the institution of marriage and heterosexual relations” that are regularly and privately performed only among women (Oldenburg 1992, 39). These so-called “Matinee Shows” are crucial for not only the solidarity and well-being of the group, but also to help the newcomers discard old and internalize new notions of what it means to be an *aurat*, or woman. In these performances, the tawaifs “amuse, educate, and edify the denizens of the Kotha” by mocking repressive relationships and male sexuality in the conjugal home, and by caricaturing male relatives and kin in countless risqué episodes. Writes Oldenburg (1992, 41–42):

These routines, studded with subversive and irrelevant jokes and obscene gestures, are performed like secret anti-rites, which have been carefully distilled and historically transmitted from generation to generation, to form the core of their private consciousness and oral heritage.

Below, I consider one such “Matinee Show” on the “joys of marriage,” a “half hour-long satirical medley of song, dance, dialogue and mime” that Oldenburg is treated to when she asks a tawaif called Gulbadan as to why a handsome, well-educated, and wealthy woman like her did not settle down to a life of respectability by marrying a Nawab (descendant of noble family). In response to this question, Gulbadan proceeds to show Oldenburg what marriage was before she “wished” it on any “respectable” woman living in the Kotha (Oldenburg 1992, 39–40).

In the performance that follows, one woman, Rasulan, wraps her long scarf as a turban to play the husband; Hasina Jan takes her cue as the wife; other tawaifs become children and members of the extended family; while Gulbadan sits amid the bolsters with her water-pipe, presiding as an obnoxious mother-in-law. Hasina first surveys the multifarious demands on her energy and time: the children squall, ask for food and drink, and want to be picked up; the mother-in-law orders that her tired legs be pressed; the husband wants his food and undivided attention; the father-in-law wants his hookah to be refilled; and a sister-in-law announces that she cannot help with the chores because she is sick. Hasina mutters obscenities under her breath as she begins to do her jobs in frenzy. She lights the coal stove, dusts and tidies the room, cooks, presses the legs of the mother-in-law who emits pleasurable grunts, carries live coals to replenish the hookah, tries to soothe the wailing baby, and puts plates of food before her demanding husband while she is dragged down by another child. She finally collapses, croaking “hai tobah” (never more). A little later, she chokes with sobs, declaring that her *kismet* (fate) is terrible, that she would do anything not to have to be a daughter-in-law in this or any household. She is chained to this frightful life, just so that she can fill her stomach and have a shelter. The rest of the household snores noisily while her husband, who is belching and hiccoughing after his food and drink, makes a lunge at her for some quick sex. She succumbs and after thirty agitated seconds of his clumsy efforts she asks him for money for household expenses. He grudgingly parts with twenty rupees. She complains that the money is not enough even for the groceries (for which she gets a slap), weepingly renders an accounting of the money she spent last week, and cries some more until she finally falls asleep (Oldenburg 1992, 41).

Pointing out the morals embedded in this enactment, the tawaifs argue that an existence such as Hasina's is without dignity, and no different than that of a common

prostitute who gives her body for money. Distinguishing themselves in the same breath from housewives such as Hasina as well as from ‘ordinary’ prostitutes who serve working class men, the tawaifs argue that “It is we [courtesans] who are brought up to live in sharafat [genteel respectability] with control over our bodies and money and they [housewives] who suffer the degradation reserved for neech [lowly] women” (Oldenburg 1992, 41).

In reflecting on the politics implied, enabled or hindered by the tawaifs’ performance, it is helpful to think of Abu-Lughod’s (1990, 42) warning against the “romance of resistance,” which she defines as a greater preoccupation among scholars with finding resisters and explaining resistance than with examining various forms of power and how people are caught up in them. An examination of tawaifs’ resistance in the spaces of the Kotha and the streets illustrates how socially marked subjects defy dominant patriarchal codes. However, it would be dangerous to imply that such resistance easily translates into liberatory politics, especially when the acts of defiance are enabled by the internalization of the dominant heterosexual and class-based norms, and by maintenance rather than undermining of prevailing social hierarchies (Nagar 2000b). In order to avoid the romantic trap, then, it is necessary to uncover the contradictions in the tawaifs’ performance and the ways that their acts of resistance simultaneously critique and enable the continuation of existing power relations. This is a point to which I return later.

Case II: Women’s Theater Campaign against Domestic Violence in Bundelkhand

In sharp contrast to the theater of the Kotha is the organized street campaign of Vanangana, a women’s organization in Chitrakoot, where activists learned to raise their voices against domestic violence as a result of a long-term struggle over access to resources. For nine years two organizations in this region, Mahila Samakhya and Vanangana, worked tirelessly to help women from most backward Harijan caste and Kol tribe to gain access to hand pump technology, literacy and credit. Despite much celebrated successes in these realms, however, domestic violence continued to poison the lives of both organization workers and the women they sought to empower. This contradiction forced the activists to confront the gaps in their own vision of development, which had thus far failed to connect dis/empowerment of women with the everyday violence that suffocated, terrorized, and killed them in their own homes and neighbourhoods.

With this newly found political understanding, a core group of activists — who were themselves from rural areas of Bundelkhand — began to educate themselves about women’s legal rights, shared the stories of violence in their own lives, and started intervening in the murders of women in adjoining villages. These efforts sowed the seeds of a vibrant feminist street theater in Vanangana, where grassroots workers enacted the stories of their lives and tapped into the rural idiom and folklore to capture the hearts and minds of all villagers, regardless of gender, class, caste, or generation. Activism for these campaigners could no longer be contained within “women-only” groups. It had to flood the streets and compounds of the villages and the walled spaces of the state administration. By thus naming, sharing, retelling, and reinterpreting their own and others’ experiences of domestic abuse in a succession of “private” and “public” spaces, women imparted political meanings to their previously silenced stories and effectively reshaped the agenda of their organization.

The campaigners produced a picture story painted on cloth (called *Phad*) and a play *Mujhe Jawab Do!* (Answer me!), both of which critiqued the popular ideologies that a son-in-law must be worshipped by the daughter's family, and that "parents could befriend their daughter at her birth, but not in her fate" where fate is equated with her marriage. Both stories also uncovered the ways in which the village community, the police, the administration and the family colluded to shield and encourage the atrocities against women. In previous analyses of Vanangana's theater, I have examined for both academic and non-academic audiences, the process by which the play and the *Phad* were created (Nagar 2000a, Nagar and Vanangana 2002), while also reflecting on questions of positionality, method, and collaborative interventions (Nagar 2002). Rather than repeating these discussions here, I draw upon my ethnographic account of the play (Nagar 2000a) to highlight how notions of public and private became spatialized and politicized in Vanangana's campaign.

In the play, Mantoria, the protagonist, is ruthlessly beaten by her husband, who proudly proclaims that a woman is like a pair of shoes for a man, to be worn when he wants, and to be discarded when he is done. Despite her repeated pleas for help, Mantoria finds no shelter anywhere. She is repeatedly told that no one can alter her fate. When Mantoria eventually dies, there is much screaming and crying, and her father threatens to report the case to the police. Eventually, however, the police and the village headman persuade Mantoria's father to use his "common sense" and strike a deal with his son-in-law to protect the honour of his family and village. The father goes home richer, his conscience clear. The policeman is pleased that he has resolved another case of murder lucratively, while Mantoria's husband celebrates his freedom and manhood, and prepares to bring home a new bride with another dowry. The corpse of Mantoria, covered with a shroud that her eight year old daughter has placed upon her, lies in the middle of the stage the whole time her death is being bargained over. After the bargain is struck and another shroud of silence placed over her death, this corpse rises, rhetorically demanding an answer to why her father, brother, neighbours, and headman have all chosen to be complicit in her murder. Everyone, declares Mantoria — from the family and the kin to the village and the community — is a criminal. She demands of the audience:

You people of this society, answer me! Is woman a commodity — an item on auction — who is sold when she is alive and sold at double the price when she is dead? You community members and kin, who hide women's murders to retain the honour of your village, is this the place of honour you have accorded your women? You, who label the killer of a cow to be a sinner and a criminal ... answer me — is the murder of a woman not a sin or crime? (Vanangana 1998).

Saying this, Mantoria lights a torch to remember all the women who have been victimized by this conspiracy of murder and silence, and passes on the flame to all the women around her (Nagar 2000a).

In the months immediately after their creation, women performed the *Phad* and the play in more than 50 villages that had lost their daughters or daughters-in-law to domestic violence during the last six months. In each village, the performances were accompanied by songs, marches, poster exhibitions, and open public discussions where emotionally charged women and men passionately discussed the themes of the play before their children, their in-laws, their parents, their neighbours. They drew connections between women's lack of access to resources and their devaluation inside the household on the one hand, and women's

subordination as a source of masculine pride on the other. In village after village, people questioned the definition of domestic violence as a private affair and took collective oaths to stop violence against women.

Socio-spatial strategizing formed the core of Vanangana's successful campaign. The campaigners actively deployed and reconstructed social space by choosing the genre of street theater to engage with the communities, and by recognizing the highly spatialized ways in which kinship and marriage are practiced and experienced in much of rural North India. In a context where an unmarried woman is regarded as a daughter of her entire natal village or *Mayaka*, marriage implies an inevitable departure from the intimacy of the *Mayaka* to the distant and alien conjugal village or *Sasural*, where the woman becomes the daughter-in-law of the village. Thus, while the term, *Mayaka*, is interchangeably used for both the parental home and the natal village, *Sasural* refers to the parents-in-law's home as well as the marital or conjugal village. In the case of marital domestic violence, then, it is the *Sasural* where violent acts on a woman's body and being are perpetrated. And although this violence is often inflicted within the spaces of the household, the nature of a woman's relationship with her entire conjugal village is one that structurally denies her easy access to alternative spaces where she can claim or expect refuge (Nagar 2000a).

In this social scenario, the activists instinctively knew that the *Phad* and the street play would stimulate qualitatively different responses in the *Mayaka* of a recently murdered woman than in her *Sasural*, and the socio-spatial tactics employed by the *Vanangana* campaigners hinged upon this critical difference between the *Mayaka* and the *Sasural*. At the same time, however, the gendered meanings held by these two spaces were constantly complicated by the class and caste realities of each village. The enactment and reception of the campaign then, was shaped simultaneously by the symbolic and material meanings embedded in the spaces of *Sasural* and *Mayaka*, the local caste and class politics, as well as the particular circumstances in which women had been recently killed in each village (Nagar 2000a).

Case III: Jan Natya Manch's Production: *Aurat (Woman)*!

The third example that I consider here is drawn from one of the most successful street plays produced by Janam or Jan Natya Manch (People's Theatre) of India, *Aurat (Woman)*. *Aurat* was created in March 1979 during a break in the Conference of the Women Workers of North India. This play has had more than 2,500 performances, has been translated into almost all Indian languages, and has also been produced in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The opening sequence is adapted from a poem by an Iranian teacher and revolutionary, Marzieh Ahmadi Oskooii, who was shot dead in May 1973 by Iran's imperial forces (Jan Natya Manch 1997, 23). Safdar Hashmi, the man who adapted her poem, was also killed in January 1989 by Indian Congress Party thugs while performing his play *Hulla bol* (Attack) for workers in East Delhi (Afzal Khan 2000, 198).

Rather than paraphrasing or describing the play below, I reproduce the opening sequence of *Aurat*, where the words and movements of the actresses and actors powerfully challenge bourgeois notions of womanhood and articulate a politics that explicitly connects gender, class, and sexuality with home, factory, and fields, on the one hand, and with revolutionary change, on the other.

The opening sequence of *Aurat* (reproduced from Jan Natya Manch 1997, 23–24):

A circular acting area. Choreographed into a circle with hands on each other's shoulders, six actors enter from one side. In the middle is an actress. They all stop when they reach the center. They all turn together to face the audience and then sit down. The actress is seen standing in the middle.

*ACTRESS: I am a mother
I'm a sister
A daughter
A faithful spouse
A woman.*

*ACTOR 1: A woman, who, from the beginning,
With bare feet,
Has run over the scorching sands of the deserts*

ACTRESS: I'm from the distant villages of the north...

*ACTOR 2: A woman who from the beginning,
Has worked to the limits of her power
In the paddy fields and tea gardens.*

*ACTRESS: Who along with my skinny cow
In the threshing field, from dawn to dusk,
Has felt the weight of pain.*

*ACTOR 3: A woman who gives birth to her babe
In the mountains,
Loses her goat in the expanse of the plains
To sit, mourning.*

ACTRESS: I'm a woman

*ACTOR 4: A worker whose hands turn
The great machinery of the factory
Which each day tear to bits my strength
In the treads of the wheels
In front of my eyes
A woman from whose life's blood
The carcass of the blood-sucker bloats
And from the loss of whose blood
The profit of the capitalist increases.*

ACTRESS: A woman for whom, in your shameless vocabulary

*ACTOR 5: There is no word
Which can describe her significance.
Your vocabulary speaks only of the woman*

*Whose hands are unsoiled
Whose body is supple
Whose skin is soft
And hair perfumed.*

ACTRESS: I'm that woman

*ACTOR 6: Whose hands have been wounded
By the sharp blades of pain's knives
Whose body has been broken
By your endless, humiliating and back breaking labor.
A woman whose skin is like a desert
And whose hair smells of factory smoke*

ACTRESS: But I am an independent woman

*She steps outside the circle and goes forward with her fists up in the air.
The rest of the actors also move forward a step on their knees, fists held high.*

*ACTOR 1: Who with her male comrades
Walks shoulder to shoulder
To cross the fields.*

*ACTOR 2: A woman who has created
The powerful muscles of workers
And the strong hands of peasants.*

The rest of the actors sit as they are; the actress delivers the following dialogue zigzagging among them

*ACTRESS: I am myself a worker
I am myself a peasant, too.
My heart is a study in pain
The fire of hatred burns in my veins
And you shamelessly claim
That my hunger is an illusion
And my nakedness all make believe!
I am a woman for whom in your shameless vocabulary
There is no word
Which can describe her significance.*

The rest of the actors change direction to sit in a circle facing each other

*ACTOR 5: A woman in whose chest
Is hidden a heart
Full of festering wounds of wrath.*

*ACTOR 4: In whose eyes
Dance the red shadows
Of liberty*

*ACTRESS: A woman,
Whose hands have learnt,
Through years of toil,
How to raise the red flag.*

Picks up the red flag

Feminist Redefinitions of Public, Private and Politics: Comparing “Matinee Shows”, *Mujhe Jawab Do!* and *Aurat*

In questioning the conventional definitions of respectability, womanhood, and masculinity, all three plays described here attempt to “negotiate questions of women’s agency and identity by situating these on the terrain of bodily subject” (Niranjana 1999, 16). However, each play addresses these intersections in different ways, and these differences reflect the varying political agendas, objectives, and theoretical frameworks of each set of actors/activists. In discussing these differences, I first address the themes of the plays and then turn to the techniques and strategies deployed therein.

The tawaifs of Lucknow mock married life and middle class respectability and celebrate the womanhood of the Kothas as more respectable, profitable and desirable. The Bundeli women challenge the values of their society by questioning the very foundations of masculine pride and familial and communal honour, as well as what counts as crime and justice. While both *tawaifs* and Bundeli activists caricature “manliness,” the woman in the opening sequence of *Aurat* does not engage directly in a critique of “masculinity.” Instead, she celebrates her womanhood as a mother, a sister, a daughter, and a spouse; as a sexual being and a nurturer; as an animal raiser, a factory worker, a peasant, and a revolutionary. She considers her own womanhood as more precious than the womanhood of the upper-class women, for she has created the muscles of workers and the strong hands of peasants and she possesses the strength to lead her comrades on the path of liberty.

Despite the fact that all three plays challenge normative definitions of womanhood then, their social critiques of conventional masculinity and femininity are pitched at different levels. While the first two plays are primarily concerned with the politics of kinship, marriage, and women’s exploitation in their conjugal households, it is the politics of labour, defined explicitly in terms of production, reproduction, and revolution, that frames *Aurat*. It is not surprising, therefore, that women’s relationships to their families are only mentioned in passing in *Aurat*, while *Mujhe Jawab Do!* registers silence on issues of class and labour. The “Matinee Show” mocks the chores that middle-class housewives have to do in their so-called respectable homes and implicitly celebrates the work of the tawaifs or courtesans as a more dignified form of labour. At the same time, however, the tawaifs equate the “lack of respectability” of housewives such as Hasina with that of “common” prostitutes, who have less control than the courtesans over the terms of exchange for their sexual labour. The tawaifs’ social critique, then, fails to recognize how other beneficiaries or losers are inserted in the same complex web of patriarchal and class-based relations on which their own livelihood and alternative respectability depend.

O' Hanlon (1992, 63) criticizes the courtesans in Oldenburg's study for having found their means of resistance in reversing or inverting its patriarchal structures and for reproducing in their own practice something very similar to patriarchy's own hatred of women. But it is not so clear whether the inversion of patriarchal logic really undermines the courtesans' resistance. The courtesans negotiated an empowered discursive space within the material space of the Kotha. By renegotiating and reconstructing — in a literal sense — their place in the world, they derived money from men in return of their sexual and other services, and financed lives for themselves that were outside the sphere of marriage. They created a space in which girl children were educated and celebrated, and where women loved, respected and developed intimacies with each other. Thus, they participated in a kind of collective subversion by working within the dominant ideology and using the “master's tools” to create something out of it that was not intended (Brown-Owens 2000). As Campbell (1998, 112) notes:

The principle of rhetorical invention is subversion, using the master's tools to undermine, even sabotage, the master's house ... [What seem] to be the master's tools — language/symbols — are the only tools we have. Invention exploits the past ... it is parasitic; it adapts, reframes, juxtaposes, associates, satirizes, reverses, ridicules and appropriates dominant discourse, using and misusing every means by which meanings are corrupted and contested.

Even as we recognize the meanings embedded in their tactics, however, it is important to remember that the subversion of the tawaifs is restricted to the privacy of the Kothas and the men and women who are mocked in their performances do not constitute their audiences. As such, the parallel theater of the Kothas becomes the means by which *tawaifs* sustain and nourish their alternative ideologies of respectability and womanhood in order to maintain their own social and professional niche, which in turn hinges on the continuation of the existing patriarchal and class-based hierarchies.

The street theater of Vanangana and Janam in contrast is very much based on Brechtian poetics, in which “the spectator delegates power to the character to act in her place but the spectator reserves the right to think for [herself] often in opposition to the character. In contrast to Aristotelian poetics, wherein a passive spectator experiences a catharsis at the end of the dramatic action, the Brechtian spectator achieves a more activist, unsettling, “critical awareness” of societal issues” (Afzal Khan 2000, 178), the ultimate objective of this theater being the creation of a more just society. The Brechtian techniques used in both *Mujhe Jawab Do!* and *Aurat* force the audiences to recognize their collusion in perpetuating the injustices faced on a daily basis by women. Both plays, by the virtue of their very themes and casts of actresses, also make a powerful statement in socio-spatial settings “where female actors run the risk of being objectified as [public] spectacle” (Afzal Khan 2000, 174).

But there is a critical difference between the two plays. While Janam's *Aurat* is marked by a profound influence of prominent leftist intellectuals and artists who are committed to a universal agenda of revolution, the street theater of Bundeli women has not emerged from a deep immersion in Marx, Brecht, or Boal. Their stories and performances are very much rooted in the soil of their land and the blood and bodies of women who have been murdered around them. I would argue that it is this intense rootedness in their place-specific context, that enabled rural Bundeli activists to design their powerful socio-

spatial strategy of rotating the plays between the murdered women's Sasural and Mayaka, while also making room for the nuanced gender-, caste-, and class-based meanings embedded in those spaces. Each village was simultaneously a Sasural and a Mayaka, and each performing site was a "public" space for members of some castes and classes, and a "private" space for others. The activists' strategies, then, were informed by their own ways of knowing that allowed them to move privatized issues into the realm of public sphere, while also recognizing that the "public spaces" that they were appropriating were themselves politically produced, and were replete with contradictory meanings in communities divided by gender, caste, and religion.

In Conclusion

Feminist scholars — both geographers and non-geographers — have repeatedly cautioned us against fixing the meanings of "public" and "private" either by conflating the content of feminist actions with the spaces in which those actions take place (Staeheli 1996) or by ignoring patriarchal practices that exist without the existence of the "private" realm (John 1999). John (1999, 119–20) makes a critical point when she notes:

[T]he gender relations most relevant to us must involve the following complex relations of power between women and men: between women, who do not know the realm of the personal and private as "we" do. And men who are *excluded* from the dominant order of things, that is to say, from the dominant order of patriarchy and its norms of masculinity.

If we understand the maintenance 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, 22–23), then examining the ways in which resisting actors deploy specific spaces and discourses allows us to explore the nuances and complexities associated with varied articulations of feminist politics. In this sense, the meanings of spaces as well as of the discourses produced/challenged therein are embedded in gendered materialities, and are negotiated through the politics of publicization and privatization.

Thus, the tawaifs' "Matinee Show" in the "privacy" of their kothas empowers them to not only protect themselves against economic exploitation, but also to claim a respectability from the "bourgeois" women and men in the public realm. In a sense, the tawaifs create multiple publics for different kinds of "enactments." While their performance in the street is the presentation of a covered self and symbolizes a limiting of public access, their "private" performances are where they "reveal" and justify their womanhood and their wider social position, and where they collectively claim the dignity of their labour. In this way, the private performance becomes a way for the tawaifs to negotiate, claim, justify, and defend a group relation to the public.

The mobilization of Bundeli women, by contrast, is rooted in a deep disillusionment with "development" activism that narrowly focuses on women's access to technology, water, and literacy without promising them a violence-free and dignified existence in their own homes and communities. The "discursive geographies" (Pratt 1999) that emerge through their street theater, therefore, intimately connect the materiality of Bundeli women's bodies and sexualities with their material struggles for basic resources. Vanangana's campaign against domestic violence evolves as a spatialized political intervention that consciously creates different kinds of publics. The activists first shift the

discourse on domestic violence from the privacy of women's homes to the spaces of their organization, and later, from the organization to the male dominated public spaces of the community. They subsequently politicize the social spaces of the *Sasural* and the *Mayaka* to expose how violence is inflicted on women's bodies, and the ways that kinship, community, and bureaucracy are structured to legitimate that violence. With every spatial move, campaigners consciously create a new public domain to produce critical dialogue and reflection on women's experiences, and to recognize, challenge, and reshape the contradictions and oppressions embedded in popular discourses of honour and dishonour, masculinity and femininity, kin and community, crime and justice.

Finally, the more "straight forward" performance of *Aurat* in prominent urban public spaces throughout South Asia directly challenges the narrow and predominantly masculinist ways in which "the Indian left" often articulates its critiques of the state and capitalist society. In powerful and innovative ways, *Aurat* complicates, for an overwhelmingly male audience, the overlapping binaries of public/private, masculine/feminine, and production/reproduction, and depicts herself as the main leader of revolutionary struggles of the peasants and working classes.

In each of these performances, then, the process of coming together in different public sites to politicize particular interests, is itself a central part of the continual recreation and negotiation of identity and interests. A process in which gendered materialities as well as discourses — shaped by class, caste, and geographical and social location — become central to the articulation of politics. This framework opens up new spaces to examine how multiple publics are constituted and reconfigured in terms of their socio-political identities and their politics of provisional alliances/coalitions. Furthermore, it enables us to see how this re/constitution of multiple publics occurs in and through publicization/privatization struggles without essentializing or fixing the meanings of either public or private or of the spaces in which public/private acts are enacted.

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