

FEMININITY/MASCULINITY IN CONTEMPORARY BENGALI JATRA TITLES

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Abstract

At first, I would like to deal with the title of my research article. Shefali Moitra in her essay “The Sex/gender System” points out that sex is something biological which is pre-given and natural whereas gender is socially constructed, culturally specific and historically produced. This means that sex is constant and unchangeable which already exists in nature as natural. The sexual differences are grouped as male and female. But gender is a cultural category where a specific culture fixes certain norms and roles which are thrust upon male and female and attributed as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. In most cultures ideally men are expected to be aggressive, assertive and brave and women are expected to be passive, receptive and caring. This gender division is prevalent in all cultures. Feminists have pointed out that the attributes associated with male-gender roles have always been valorized. But women-traits are seen as something derogatory.

The Jatra of West Bengal endows with an interesting example of traditional theatre which originated from religious entertainment. Jatra as a form became increasingly secular over the course of its history. Though jatra of contemporary Bengal tries to retain secularity, the titles record a kind of conscious construction of gender entity. It seems that there is a distinct categorization of gender roles as presented through the names of different jatras. My contention here is to show how women's gender entity as revealed in the titles has been subject to patriarchal suppression. I will also try to explore how women's gender entity has been valorised in many cases.

For my research article I will primarily concentrate on the names of jatras of Bengal from 2011 to 2013. Though jatras have been subject to criticism and analysis, my reading of the names of the jatras will be distinct from the common readings. I will try to enlighten my readers to a different understanding of the names; it will be more from the gender perspective that I will set my argument.

Keywords: Jatra, Gender, Sex, Patriarchy, Femininity, Masculinity

Jatra is said to have originated from ceremonial functions that are performed before commencing a journey. Some critics hold the perspective that jatra developed from processions brought out in respect of different religious occasions. These processions often comprised of songs and dances as its most important part. Jatra has been considered a famous form of traditional folk theatre derived from the Eastern region of India. It literally means a journey and hence, majestic delivery and embellished gestures and orations are some of the features of jatra. Jatra as a form of Indian folk drama combines performing, singing and dancing altogether by the troop that is travelling from one place to another. In the earlier years, the religious values were well communicated with the help of jatra to the masses. But jatra as a form became increasingly secular over the course of its history. Though jatra of contemporary Bengal tries to retain secularity, the titles record a kind of conscious construction of gender entity. Here I would like to mention that I won't be dealing with the history of jatra in West Bengal, rather I will focus on the titles of contemporary jatras specifically the titles of those jatras of West Bengal which have been produced during 2011, 2012 and 2013. Traditionally on the day of the Rath Yatra Festival, which falls in the month of either June or July the jatra producers in West Bengal announce their upcoming dramas, with the shows starting in the Durga Puja season in September and October. Huge display advertisements are splashed across all major vernacular dailies to promote the dramas.

Before dealing with the jatra titles I would also like to introduce how patriarchy instils certain notions of gender roles and also how the sex/gender equation is formulated in a patriarchal society. It is important to mention that any conceptualization of the term 'gender' remains incomplete without a basic concept of the term 'sex' as these two are closely related to each other. So I will deal here with two terms- 'gender' and 'sex'. Shefali Moitra in her essay "The Sex/gender System" points out that sex is something biological which is pre-given and natural whereas gender is socially constructed, culturally specific and historically produced. This means that sex is constant and unchangeable which already exists in nature as natural. The sexual differences are grouped as male and female. But gender is a cultural category where a specific culture fixes certain norms and roles which are thrust upon male and female and attributed as 'masculine' and 'feminine'. To validate this I am quoting Shefali Moitra: "Gender is a Cultural construct. Each culture imposes certain norms on the behavior of men and women. These are prescriptions for appropriate behavior. Like in most cultures ideally men are expected to be aggressive, assertive and brave among many other things and women are expected to be passive, receptive and caring." (Moitra, 2002, p.06) Shefali Moitra in her essay also demonstrates how Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) categorizes three levels of sex-linked differences:

- “(i) primary differences characterized by differences in sex organs;
- (ii) secondary differences characterized by differences associated with reproductive function, e.g., breast, body hair, etc;
- (iii) tertiary differences characterized by differences in behavior, e.g., aggression, care, assertion, submission. These traits qualify males and females differently; moreover, they are not directly linked to the reproduction.” (Moitra, 2002, p.07)

But the feminist critics argue that the tertiary sex-related traits are quite baffling and complicated as they overlap with the notion of gender. Moitra asserts that Freud categorized the tertiary sex-linked characteristics as psychological or grammatical differences demonstrated in active (for male) and passive (for female) traits. In most cultures ideally men are expected to be aggressive, assertive and brave and women are expected to be passive, receptive and caring. This gender division is prevalent in all cultures. Feminists have pointed out that the attributes

associated with male-gender roles have always been valorized. But women-traits are seen as something derogatory. What I want to point out is that the sex/gender classification connotes that gender follows sex; thus gender is wired into biology. This means that the sexual identity or the biological identity is the destiny which forms the prescriptions of the gendered roles. This identity can be regarded as the first or primary essence. But this theorization of sex identity as the essential identity discerns the theory of biological essentialism. Thus one can define this essentialism as a fixing of certain fundamental traits or a set of characteristics which one must possess, which is fixed and constant and limit the possibility of social reorganization. But this fixity of essentialism is openly questioned and challenged by the contemporary feminist critics. They argue that the whole notion of essentialism is created by patriarchy, a system where man's essence is taken as the standard denoted as 'P' and the female as not 'P' ('≠P') leading to a hierarchization in the social structure where woman is subordinate to man. Elizabeth Grosz in her essay "Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism" brings into focus that to accept fixity is to accept subordination by the patriarchal system. Grosz in her argument on this particular relation brings into focus essentialism and its cognates and shows how biologism, naturalism, and universalism are different types of essentialism which render certain fixed attributes and functions and characteristics. Biology being the unaltered bedrock of identity is a kind of essentialism; again naturalism denotes the fixed nature of woman. But universalism is not necessarily fixed or innate; it is something which is there in nature as an inherent property. It suggests a certain commonality, certain resemblance which becomes the essence and thus gains a fixed position. Therefore, woman becomes a universal category, existing in nature and needs to be discovered and named which is done by patriarchy, which, however, subordinates women according to its essence considering the male essence as the right essence. Thus the relation between sex/gender division and essentialism is extremely problematized. Contemporary feminists have tried or are rather trying to claim women's equality from an anti-essentialist perspective. They try to posit that to accept essentialism means to accept subordination. If at all there remains an essence, women's essence should be dealt separately. Some feminists question the sex identities by asserting that there is no such reason or necessity to divide human being into the male and the female categories as sex is a cultural and political interpretation of the body within the realm of the patriarchal society. They feel that sexed bodies cannot signify anything without their gender roles. Thus gender seems to be woven into sex and vice versa.

Now to talk about the titles of Bengali jatra of three years specifically the jatra titles of 2011 to 2013 manifest different types of gender roles performed by women among which political empowerment of women is of prior importance. Here it is noteworthy to mention that 2011 is a very significant year considering the political scenario of West Bengal. After the prolonged ruling of the left government, the opposition came into power under the leadership of a woman, namely Mamata Banerjee. The 2011 assembly election could just mark a breaking point, with Banerjee gaining strength in polls as she tried to bring the CPM's come to an end. The political parties were tightening their grip on *jatra*, a powerful tool for communicating with the rural mass. The jatras abandoned the usual social and mythological themes to deal with issues such as land acquisition, industrialization and exploitation of the underprivileged.

Maa, Mati, Manush Kandchhe: Agnikanya Aschhe (Mother, Land, People Weep: the Firebrand Lady Comes), Maa, Matir Lorai (Mother and Land Struggle) Didi, Tumi Egiye Cholo Amra Tomer Sathe Achhi (Didi, Please Proceed We Are with You) are some of the titles of the jatras which flag the victory of a woman in the political arena. *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. Some jatra makers have used the name 'Mamata' in the title even though their play has nothing to do with the firebrand leader. *Maa Ache Mamata Nei (Mother Is There, but No Affection)* is one of such jatra titles. Mamata Banerjee has not only become the face of Bengal politics, but the places associated with her political struggles are also being used by the producers to attract viewers.

There are certain jatras which metaphorically use religious figure to validate the position of women in society. Among this category falls *Dashomitay Debi Boron (Debi's Reception on Dashomi)*. Though 'Debi' refers to Goddess Durga, there is no trace of the idol of Durga in the poster of the jatra. It rather shows a modern woman in two different attires performing different roles in the society to shun away mal practices and corruption like Debi Durga did. Thus the word 'Debi' here is symbolic. There are other jatra titles as well, for example, *Vanga Gharer Vagya Laxmi (Lady Luck of Broken Home)*. 'Laxmi' according to Indian mythology refers to the Goddess of wealth. Here the lady as revealed in the title seems to have the capacity to bring luck back. Another jatra titled *Bodhonei Bishorjon (Sunset at Dawn)* seems very interesting. Both the terms 'Bodhon' and 'Bishorjon' refer to the arrival and departure of Debi Durga in the earthly world which is very short-lived (We welcome Durga to the earth as our daughter who comes at her parents' home for her annual visits. Durga stays for four days-Shashti, Saptami, Ashtami and Nabami along with her children, Ganesh, Laxmi, Kartik and Saraswati and sets for her husband's abode on Vijaya Dashami). But these two terms are metaphorically used in the title of the jatra to trace the journey of a woman from maidenhood to married life which is very ambiguous. It denotes the panic of getting drowned in the battle of married life after wedding.

There are certain jatras which are exclusively on Indian mythological figures for example, *Brojer Basori (The Flute of Lord Krishna), Roktakto Kurukhetre Kadche Sri Krishna (Lord Laments Holy War), Ranorongini Debi Durga (Devi Durga: the Warrior Goddess)*. In the titles of these jatras we can perceive the presence of both male and female mythological figures which is a manifestation of gender neutrality. These jatras depict that these deities, irrespective of their gender, are not above the virtues and vices of the human race. On the other hand, the extra-human powers vested with these deities are devoid of gender bias.

The next category includes jatra titles which are largely on socio-economic issues. Among these *Adalot Jabab Dao (Why the Court is Silent? / Silence of the Court), Nakol Bou Hoite Sabdhan (Beware of Fake Wife), Amar Swami Amar Noy (My Husband is Not Mine), Ami Baroloker Jhi (I'm the Maid of Wealthy Man), E Ek Ajob Chiriaakhana (It's a strange Zoo), Heroine No.1, Shukher Thikana Aajo Ajana (Dwelling of Happiness Is Still Unknown), Bon Polashir Bagdi Meye (Low Caste Female of Bon Palashi), Bou Chaalbaaz Bor Cheatingbaaj (Sly Wife Imposter Husband), Boudir Aanchole Mayer Chhaya (Sister in law, a Reflection of Mother), Srichoroneshu Bouma (Respected Daughter in law)*, are noteworthy to mention. The title *Adalot Jabab Dao (Why the Court is Silent? / Silence of the Court)* criticizes the judicial system of the society where both man and woman do not get justice. *Nakol Bou Hoite Sabdhan (Beware of Fake Wife)* sends a message of being aware of wife with two different connotations; either the wife herself is wicked or she is a gentle lady who is misunderstood or misjudged in the patriarchal society. *Amar Swami Amar Noy (My Husband is Not Mine)* flags the feeling of a wife being betrayed by her husband which is demeaning for her. *Ami Baroloker Jhi (I'm the Maid of Wealthy Man)* again asserts class discrimination which in turn gives birth to gender discrimination in the society since men and women are treated differently according to their class position. *E Ek Ajob Chiriaakhana (It's a strange Zoo), Shukher Thikana Aajo Ajana (Dwelling of*

Happiness Is Still Unknown) again narrate the familial constraints and social problems where women are the major victims. *Bon Polashir Bagdi Meye (Low Caste Female of Bon Palashi)* highlights the power of a low-caste woman to eradicate corruption in the society. *Bou Chaalbaaz Bor Cheatingbaaj (Sly Wife Imposter Husband)* seems to demean both the role of husband and wife. *Boudir Aanchole Mayer Chhaya (Sister in law, a Reflection of Mother)* tends to valorise the role of woman since the sister in law is as caring and as loving as a mother which is normally unexpected in a patriarchal society. *Srichoroneshu Bouma (Respected Daughter in law)* seems to pay extra honour to the daughter in law which is rather unusual in a patriarchal system since 'Srichoroneshu' in Bengali is used to address the elders. Here it seems reverse (the father in law is addressing his daughter in law in a bizarre manner). Whether the respect is truly given or not is still a question.

There are certain jatra titles which reveal the theme of love, care, passion and also the turmoil prevalent in any love relationship. Among these we can include *Vorer Shishire Valobasha (Love on Dewdrops)*, *Mon Mane Na (Uncontrollable Mind)*, *Valobasha Chhara ar Achhe Ki (Nothing except Love)*, *Valosbashar Agniporikha (Acid Test of Love)*. These titles flag the struggle of both men and women in the society to establish their relationships. Though *Mera Naam Joker (My Name Is Joker)*, *Tarzan, Ami Circus er Joker (I am the Joker of Circus)* seem completely male centric, the presence of women in the posters of these jstras is noteworthy where the 'body' of women is being commoditized. It also applies to *Heroine No.1. Jayanti (The Lady Triumphant)* *Aparajita (The Lady Winner)*, *Debi (The Goddess)* and *Andhokarer Agnikanya (The Fire Daughter of Darkness)* project a women's world for West Bengal's jatra since the titles of these jstras are dominated by the presence of female characters who give the message of women's emancipation and empowerment in the society.

Finally it can be concluded that the titles of jstras in West Bengal not only talk about the suppression endured by women in a society or the commoditisation 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 jstras of West Bengal indicating a positive change in the society which is beneficial for women.

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