

Power, Performance, and the Embodied Ideal: Exploring Gender Dynamics in the Theatre Industry

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Abstract

The intricate interplay between power dynamics, gendered ideals, and bodily practices is often witnessed within different industries including theatre. Through qualitative interviews and observations of plays and rehearsals, the research paper investigates the power structure that exists within the industry along with the embodiment of gendered expectations focusing on the construction and perception of the body as a “work in progress”. It underscores the complexity of power dynamics, hierarchy, and gender within the industry, highlighting persistent challenges such as gender disparities and male-dominated networks. It argues that power in theatre is dispersed across various entities and operates through networks of relationships and practices. Despite progress towards gender parity, systemic barriers hinder women’s advancement in leadership roles and very often impact body representation on stage. The paper advocates for fostering equitable and inclusive theatre environments by addressing underlying power dynamics, promoting diversity in leadership, and challenging traditional norms.

Keywords: Theatre; power; gender; body; sexuality.

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1 Introduction

Modern power is encoded in a network of social relationships and practices rather than being possessed by individuals or groups (Foucault, 1975). In the theatre industry, the power is dispersed through various channels and entities such as theatre groups, producers, playwrights, and directors who majorly run the industry. Power functions through a network of connections and is wielded through different practices that include surveillance, discipline, and normalization. At the top of the hierarchical structure stands the director who has significant authority over the performers and crew members in a theatrical production. He or she may employ this power through a variety of practices, including casting decisions, script analysis, and rehearsal procedures even moulding and steering their behaviour in the process. These approaches generate a certain sort of performance, one that corresponds to their vision as well as the larger societal conventions and standards of the theatre industry.

Theatre is the field where power dynamics can be witnessed, highlighting the intersection of creativity and authority. Alongside the power that operates through a network of relationships and practices, societal norms surrounding appearance, gender, and behaviour have a major influence on body and sexuality which diffuse through theatre performances. Theatre, being highly physical, places the body as a vital element in the storytelling process. It becomes the site where gendered ideals are presented and negotiated while the performers navigate the norms in their character embodiment.

This paper is an attempt to understand the interplay between performance, power, and the embodied ideal. By investigating how power dynamics shape gendered performances along with the portrayal of body and sexuality, the complex structure of theatrical performances can be understood, reflecting the cultural norms and conventions that surround gender. The focus is placed on how authority figures like the directors exercise power over performers in theatrical productions; how societal norms related to gender and behaviour influence the embodiment of characters and the negotiation of body and sexuality in theatrical performances. By exploring these dimensions, the paper aims to uncover how power manifests in the theatre industry and intersects with broader cultural narratives.

2 Literature Review

In the examination of power dynamics within the theatre industry, Foucault's conceptualization of power, dispersed and enacted through discourse, is crucial for deciphering the hierarchical dynamics in the industry. Within theatre, power flows through intricate social networks, with directors, producers, and societal norms shaping the production process. These hierarchical structures play a significant role in determining gender representation and opportunities within the industry. His perspective highlights how power is negotiated and contested within the theatrical domain, providing insight into its complexities and challenges (Foucault, 1975). Aitken explores how applied theatre programs provide opportunities for participants to exercise agency within the confines of established power dynamics. Drawing on Foucault's theories, he emphasizes that power is pervasive in all human interactions, extending to the smallest details of daily relationships (Walshaw, 2007; cited in Aitken, 2009). Khurana and Ghosh's work highlights that the leadership of theatre organizations typically revolves around a core group of one to five individuals, often including the founder(s) with a strong commitment to theatre. This core group looks after the organization's operations, taking on essential roles like direc-

tion and financial management while making key decisions such as selecting plays, actors, and performance schedules (Khurana & Ghosh, 2023).

Power dynamics are not confined to top-down structures but rather permeate through societal practices, influencing everyday behaviour and interactions. It converges with feminist efforts to scrutinize power structures within personal relationships and challenge gendered hierarchies, particularly in intimate domains (Foucault, 1976; Sawicki, 1998). Gender representation in theatre is also intricately intertwined with power dynamics, as directors and other creative members influence how gender is portrayed on stage (Foucault, 1975). The directors wield significant authority over performers and crew members and shape performances through casting decisions, script interpretation, and rehearsal procedures, aligning productions with their vision and societal standards. This concentration of power in the hands of predominantly male directors can perpetuate gender biases and reinforce traditional gender roles in casting and storytelling. Female playwrights and directors often focus on stories that challenge gender norms and highlight women's experiences, contributing to a more diverse and inclusive theatrical landscape (Singh, 2009). However, power disparities persist, as the lack of female representation in positions of authority limits the diversity of perspectives and experiences portrayed on stage, as well as the opportunities available to female performers and creatives. Foucault's insights prompt a critical examination of how power operates within the theatre industry and shapes the positions of influence and authority. A research study conducted by *The Guardian* in collaboration with Elizabeth Freestone of *Pentabus Theatre* in 2012 affirms persistent gender inequalities, with a consistent 2:1 male-to-female ratio prevailing across the industry. Among the ten theatres analyzed, women accounted for merely 33% of directors on the boards, underscoring the ongoing underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Despite these disparities, women constitute the majority of theatre audiences, as evidenced by *Ipsos MORI* data commissioned by the *Society of London Theatre* in 2010, which indicates that approximately 68% of theatre-goers are women. Freestone's prior research further underscores the entrenched male-dominated nature of the industry, yielding notably low findings (*The Guardian* & Freestone, 2012). Moreover, *Purple Seven* conducted a survey in 2015 to find that female customers account for 65% of ticket revenue, but only 39% of actors, 36% of directors, and 28% of writers of plays performed are women. Male playwrights write 37% of parts for women, while female playwrights write for 62% of female casts (Hope, 2015). Despite more women entering directing, theatre remains male-dominated globally, including in Asia. In North America, women constitute around 69% of ticket buyers, but only 17% of plays were written by women, and 16% were directed by them (Chance, 2014). Similarly, British stages reflect male experiences, with women accounting for just 37% of artistic directors in Arts Council-funded theatres, dropping to 24% for higher-funded organizations (Gardner, 2014). In Nigeria, only a few women have made it as directors on major stages (Ilo & Owobamirin, 2021). Leiva Filiho (2022) aimed to quantify the gender disparity in theatre production in São Paulo by analysing 1,466 plays from 2018. The study highlighted significant gender imbalances, especially in key roles: men wrote 77% and directed 78% of the plays, leaving women underrepresented in shaping theatrical discourse. Although 46% of performers were female, women were less present in technical roles such as lighting directors and set designers, though they dominated as costume designers. Clements (2021) found that there is even persistent gender inequity in theatrical design, where cisgender men dominate, and women often leave due to discrimination, harassment, and lack of support. The gender gap widened when considering the number of performances, with women typically working less in higher-paying roles. However, when women were responsible for writing, directing, or producing, the gender gap in other functions was reduced (Clements,

2021; Leiva Filiho, 2022).

Moreover, the body serves as a crucial instrument through which gendered norms and expectations are both enacted and challenged (Shilling, 2003). One of Shilling's key insights is the notion that the body is not merely a passive vessel for conveying gender, but rather an active participant in the performative process. He argues that through their bodily movements and actions, actors actively contribute to the construction and reinforcement of societal understandings of masculinity and femininity. Shilling claims that the body not only serves as a product of biology but is also influenced by cultural behaviour and customs. Bordo (1993) contends that cultural factors, such as gendered norms and standards, continually shift and transform the bodies, allowing them to be regarded as "work in progress" at all times. How performers navigate and negotiate societal expectations regarding body image and behaviour sheds light on the complex interplay between individual agency and cultural scripts. McDowell (1995) highlighted that one's sexuality, body, and gender performance are a necessary part of the work, indicating the connection between the aesthetic and gendered nature of work.

The performative nature of gender emphasizes that gender identity is not fixed but rather continually negotiated and enacted through repeated behaviour and actions. Gender is a social construct that is constantly played and replayed via our behaviour and actions rather than being an inherent biological aspect. Gender is therefore not a trait we possess; instead, it is something we do (Butler, 1990). The fluidity of gender performances suggests that actors have the agency to challenge and subvert traditional gender norms through their theatrical expressions. The body functions as a site for the display and interrogation of gender within theatrical contexts, contributing to broader discussions about the intersection of performance, identity, and power.

In theatre, as in other cultural contexts, the body acts as a canvas upon which gendered scripts are enacted and negotiated. Actors' movements, gestures, and expressions not only portray characters but also reflect broader cultural narratives surrounding gender roles. By critically examining the performative aspects of gender embodied in theatrical performances, it can be understood how theatre shapes societal understandings of gender identity and expression. Theatre plays a significant role in questioning and defying typical gender and sexual conventions through its representation, portrayal, or participation of various individuals in its domain. In the theatre industry, the body emerges as a vital locus for the manifestation and enactment of gender and sexuality (Shilling, 2003). Performers embody various gender roles, male or female, along with the portrayal of varied sexual identities, including gay, straight, and queer. Performers actively construct and reinforce societal norms and standards related to gender through their physical presence and movements on stage. Both male and female actors frequently adhere to prescribed gendered norms concerning bodily appearance and conduct, as per the cultural standards of masculinity and femininity (Shilling, 2003; Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1990).

In many traditional theatrical productions, women's bodies are often sexualized and objectified, portrayed as weak, emotional, and dependent. This is reflected in their costumes, movements on stage, and interactions with other characters. For example, Shakespeare's men occupy seven times as many roles as women in his plays. His female characters have significantly less than half of the lines compared to his male characters (OUPblog, 2015). In Shakespeare's society, the ideal woman is valued for her youth, innocence, beauty, and passivity while being subjected to violence. Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Desdemona in *Othello* are caught in situations beyond their control, leading to their tragic ends. Ophelia's death results from the immense emotional turmoil caused by her father's death, Hamlet's rejection, and the oppressive expectations of a patriarchal society that suppresses and silences women. Othello's intense and ob-

sessive love for Desdemona is linked to his view of her as the ideal woman, but it is also mixed with a hidden fear, shaped by societal views of her as unfaithful, and ultimately kills her out of suspicion and jealousy. Their struggles against societal constraints and the male-dominated world highlight the consequences of female suppression (Rogers, 2009; Kadyan & Mahal, 2019; Gupta & Tiwari, 2017). These characters are portrayed as delicate and dependent, reflecting the constrained roles available to women in the 16th and 17th centuries. In contrast, traditional Indian literature and historical texts also depict gender stereotypes, though these are culturally specific to Indian society, where women are often portrayed in terms that emphasize domesticity and virtue. The Victorian era was marked by rigid gender roles, with men dominating public and professional spheres, while women were largely confined to domestic roles. This strict dichotomy reinforced a societal hierarchy that placed men in positions of power and influence. In traditional Indian society, gender roles were similarly rigid, with significant expectations placed on women to focus on domesticity. Both contexts often portray women as idealized figures of virtue, beauty, and loyalty, as seen in parallels like Desdemona in *Othello* and Sita in *Ramcharitmanas*, whose unwavering loyalty is questioned by their husbands, leading to their tragic fates. Similarly, Shakuntala's plea after being abandoned by Dushyanta mirrors Sita and Desdemona's own experiences of tragedy, reflecting women's worth being tied to their conformity to male-centric ideals and their value equated with their relationships to men — as dutiful wives, mothers, or daughters. This shared cultural ethos highlights a cross-cultural alignment where women are consistently marginalized and confined within restrictive gender norms, transcending geographical boundaries (Yadav & Yadav, 2022).

Actors conform to societal expectations regarding body image and behaviour, sustaining cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity. Habib (2017) explored the evolution of women's roles in Indian cinema — another significant part of the culture — highlighting that while there has been some progress, the portrayal of women remains largely stereotypical and constrained. From the passive wife in *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) to the more liberated characters like the main female lead in *Queen* (2014), women's roles have been redefined but still reflect cultural and historical contexts that limit their representation. The Indian film industry continues to portray women in a rigid, heterosexual framework that reinforces traditional roles, despite the industry's vast reach and influence. The film industry is male-dominated and heavily influenced by a patriarchal culture that reinforces gender norms and silences resistance to abuse, oppression, and discrimination. The lack of women's representation in the governing bodies of the film industry is a significant factor contributing to the persistent misogyny and gender bias within the industry (Habib, 2017; Mathew & Isac, 2021). According to Walby (1990), masculinity entails assertiveness, being active, lively, and quick to take initiative, whereas femininity entails cooperativeness, passivity, and emotionality. Hence, passivity and emotionality are perhaps the only two qualities not expected within leadership such as in a director.

Bordo's work highlights the body and the role it plays in reinforcing gender norms. It serves as a site for the display and enforcement of gendered norms, shaping audience perceptions and interpretations of gender representation in theatre. Bordo's analysis underscores the significant role of the body in reinforcing gender norms, a concept particularly relevant in the context of gender representation in theatre. The body becomes a crucial site where societal expectations and norms are displayed and enforced, influencing how gender is portrayed on stage and how audiences perceive these representations (Bordo, 1993 & 1999). The portrayal of bodies on stage, including the emphasis on appearance, conformity to ideals of femininity or masculinity, and the reinforcement of the male gaze, contributes to the reproduction of gendered norms within theatrical performances. In Indian films also, the male gaze reinforces patriarchal norms

by objectifying and sexualising women, placing undue emphasis on their physical appearance at the expense of their individuality and agency. This portrayal compels women to conform to societal expectations and perpetuates harmful stereotypes (Deb, 2023). The power relations dictate how actors should move, speak, and embody their characters, as well as enforce hierarchical structures within the production process. It underscores how power operates through the regulation and control of human bodies, shaping them to fit into desired social roles and structures. As per Foucault, docile bodies are disciplined, trained, and regulated by societal norms and power structures, that cater to audience expectations and reinforce existing power dynamics. Rehearsals often function as sites of discipline where actors are trained to follow directions, and the way they look, speak, and behave while perfecting their performances under the watchful eye of the director. Cultural images dictate societal standards for women, normalizing daily practices such as dieting, fashion choices, and cosmetic use. The body is portrayed as compliant, submissive, and mouldable, striving to conform to an idealized image, just as female characters are often depicted. The patriarchal structures perpetuate the male gaze by focusing on weight and appearance, reinforcing power hierarchies and societal expectations (Foucault, 1976; Bordo, 1999). Bassnett-McGuire (1984) argues that theatrical representation reinforces women's inferior status by confining them to subservient roles and depicting them as passive, idealized objects. This marginalization dehumanizes women and sustains hetero-patriarchal norms by valuing their experiences only in relation to men. Gregory & Miller (2009) stated that due to such gendered societal norms, perceptions, and expectations which significantly influence the uptake of work-life measures, women even face greater challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities.

3 Research Objective and Methodology

The objective of this paper is to investigate the interplay between power dynamics, gendered ideals, and bodily practices within the theatre industry. Through qualitative interviews with 25 theatre artists of Assam — 14 females, nine males, and two identifying as non-binary — and observation of multiple plays and rehearsals, the research examines how power is dispersed among various entities and how directors wield the authority to shape performances, along with the embodiment of gendered expectations, particularly focusing on how the body is constructed and perceived as a work in progress.

Snowball sampling was used to collect data for the study. Initial contact was made with two theatre artists who facilitated access to others. The study spans three years (2021–2023) and was conducted in Guwahati, Assam — a hub for young artists in Northeast India. The choice to focus on Assam's theatre scene stems from its unique position within Indian theatre. Assam has a rich cultural heritage and a diverse range of theatre practices, influenced by indigenous traditions, colonial history, and contemporary innovations. The state's theatre community is dynamic, with traditional forms like Bhaona, commercial mobile theatre — also called Bhramyomaan —, and modern experimental theatre. Compared to other Indian regions, Assam's theatre scene is notable for its blend of local and global influences with traditional and modern theatre scenes existing parallelly, making it an exemplary site for examining the intersection of power, gender, and performance.

The interviews, lasting around two hours each, were held in locations convenient for the participants, such as cafes or workplaces. The interviews were primarily unstructured but guided by key research questions focusing on the objective. Participants belonged to diverse backgrounds in Assam's theatre scene, encompassing a range of experiences from newcomers

to seasoned artists, and from various social, cultural, and gender identities. The participants' experiences span different types of theatre, including traditional, commercial mobile theatre, and contemporary forms. Several participants have taken formal training in performing arts or other disciplines, while others are self-taught or have gained experience through community theatre. Most participants were Assamese, with two Bengali artists.

The researcher built rapport with participants through pre-interview conversations and attending rehearsals, fostering open communication and trust. Ethical standards were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. The researcher ensured participants were fully informed about the purpose and objectives of the study, and consent was obtained at every step. Participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms. Photographs were taken only with prior permission from all involved. Thematic analysis was adopted in the study as it helped to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important, and use them to address the research or say something about an issue (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

4 Power Relations and Hierarchy

The way actors represent their roles, particularly how they express their gender, is highly influenced by core teams, mainly the director who plays the key role in taking major decisions (Khurana & Ghosh, 2023). With control over key functions such as dramaturgy, casting, and leadership, the director occupies a powerful position, holding significant authority in shaping the artistic direction of a theatrical production (Ilo & Owobamirin, 2021). Data from participant interviews indicated that directors with conventional views on gender roles may limit the variety of gender expressions depicted in a production. Several participants mentioned that such directors often demand adherence to traditional stereotypes; for example, male actors may be anticipated to perform in a more masculine style, while female actors can be expected to act in an increasingly feminine manner. On the contrary, directors with more liberal and inclusive perspectives on gender may inspire performers to experiment with gender-fluid performances. As a result, the production may represent gender in a more varied and complex manner.

Participants pointed out that the gender expression of a character can be interpreted differently by actors, and if they believe that the director's intentions do not match their perception of the role, they may disagree. The views and opinions of other creative members of the group, including the playwright or producers, might also have an impact on how gender is portrayed in the final performance. Power, as per Foucault's analysis, is not absolute or set; rather, it is continually negotiated by individuals and groups participating in the production process. For instance, actors can question or oppose the director's authority by emphasizing their creative input or suggesting other interpretations of the script. Despite the director's vision playing a significant part in moulding the ultimate representation of gender in theatre, it is the consequence of a dynamic interplay of factors. Few directors allow performers the leeway to enhance roles on their own. Others are rigid and impose stringent roles with no room for improvisation. Mrigakshi is a female participant who has worked in other mediums apart from theatre with a master's degree in performing arts and cultural studies. She shared,

Art via theatre or screen is mainly to sell to the audience. Some directors give open access to actors to use their creativity, while others control the whole thing as per their vision alone. I have done one play with a rigid director. There was no room for actor creativity but to follow their script blindly. Most directors who were themselves actors might give partial creative freedom to make the roles our own.

Participants discussed the hierarchical structures within theatre groups, noting that actors are often positioned at the bottom. Stage actor Rashi has her own theatre space in the city. Being a theatre artist herself, she highlighted that she provides creative freedom to her actors to alter minor things but majorly tries to retain her vision of the story.

In theatre groups, the hierarchy mostly exists. In that hierarchy, the actors are placed at the bottom. It is not a bad or good thing. The actors have autonomy over the work they do. The directors also have similar autonomy, so do the producer and the playwright. The actor has to sort of follow it from the get-go incorporating the budget given by the producer for the production, what the writer has written, what the director has envisioned, to how he or she has interpreted it. If I direct a play and the actor goes completely off-track, then it is a problem. That's not supposed to happen. However, I believe there should be room for discussion, communication, and negotiation.

These insights suggest that while some directors provide creative freedom, others maintain rigid control over performances, limiting actors' agency. Aitken (2009) notes that as the theatre event progresses, there is a gradual renegotiation of power dynamics. The facilitator often retains his authority as the director and expert, setting rules and guiding the theatrical process. Yet, he also uses his authority to create a fictional context where participants are positioned as figures of authority themselves. This dual role of the facilitator creates spaces of agency, allowing participants to explore and navigate alternative power dynamics. Mansi has been working in theatre since her university days, with experience as an art director and an assistant director apart from being a stage actor. She reflected on her own experiences over the years,

The director decides everything. He is considered elite, most important, and the main star of the production. Actors are often judged and not treated with dignity based on their background. They are like pieces of the chessboard that are placed as per what the director wants. The autonomy of an actor depends on the director again and mostly comes with experience in the industry.

Her narrative underlines that the director's power is validated by the theatrical industry's norms and practices which place him or her as the last arbitrator of creative decisions. At the core of this power dynamic is their capacity to determine what constitutes proper or normal behaviour for the performers. These power dynamics in applied theatre practices are inevitable and productive. Foucault argues that power is a mode of action upon actions, influencing the actions of others rather than directly dominating individuals (Foucault, 2001; Aitken, 2009).

One of the participants, Heena, comes from a small town of Nagaon. She is not a formal member of any group but freelances with two different theatre groups. She said,

Most actors come from small towns with no experience. They have very positive and often conservative outlooks. But if a female actor is not familiar or friendly enough to work with a male actor, the director opposes that thinking by calling it regressive. We are supposed to be *Maatir Manuh* — grounded, democratic, and work for the people. However, it is very patriarchal, even female directors have to work in a patriarchal environment.

Theatre is an effective platform for artistic creativity and social commentary, yet like other creative endeavors, it is not exempt from ethical questions, particularly those about the hierarchy of authority and decision-making in the theatre industry. A female participant, Mrigakshi shared,

I was in class 8, doing a workshop in Seagull theatre, and was spotted by a famous director for a play — which tells a man's story looking back at his lifelong relationships. I was cast to play his teen romance. After two days of rehearsals, my father saw that I had to romance a middle-aged person so he stopped me from participating any further. I was not even 15 years old then. Physical affection and everything were there in the script. But when a child actor is involved, especially a female, what are the ethics? It is unethical for a 40+ man to romance a minor. There were no ethics involved, and even now, no effort is made to look at the ethical side of theatre in Assam.

The ethical parameters of performances in Assam are a necessary point of discussion, especially concerning the depiction of sensitive topics and the portrayal of people on stage. The situation of the above participant who was chosen to play a youthful romantic interest to a middle-aged actor poses concerns about the ethics of such portrayals, particularly where minors are included. If individuals in higher structures and power positions do not use their decision-making authority responsibly and realize the moral ramifications of their choices, it might become a problem. Like in this instance, the casting decision was made without consideration of the possible distress or damage that may result from such a representation.

Gender dynamics also play a significant role in the relationships between directors and actors. Directors, specifically males, often form a bond with male actors, partially attributable to gendered power dynamics within the theatre industry. As a result of their shared experiences and viewpoints, male directors and actors may develop esprit de corps, shared pride, and brotherhood. Male directors may tend to experience a greater sense of affinity and ease when working with male actors due to shared cultural, social, and behavioural norms, as well as similar modes of communication and interests, as observed by certain female participants. One of the participants, Misha, has been proactive in the theatre scene of Assam for many years with experience in multiple forms of theatre. She highlighted,

A shared camaraderie between male directors and actors is a common scene in most productions. The males hang out after rehearsals or performances, sharing a cigarette, forming some kind of brotherhood bonding. With men holding positions of power, male actors benefit from that same gender association. With us, the situation is not the same at all.

This dynamic may foster a sense of insularity and gender bias while perpetuating a lack of inclusion. Female actors may experience a sense of marginalization and exclusion leading to hindrance of their ability to perform effectively. The old boys' club mindset that has persisted in many fields, including theatre, often fosters a culture where males are more likely to support and elevate other men, which can make it more difficult for women to enter the field and establish similar kinds of connections. In the case of female directors and female actors, a bond may develop. Female directors are well-established with failures, so they may share a connection with some other female peers who went through similar hurdles. Luna, a 28-year-old actor with experience in theatre and the Assamese film industry, stated,

An emotional connection may develop due to similar experiences shared between us, maybe because of our gender or anything. But if they are young or the same age as the cast, there is a possibility of favouritism or a sense of camaraderie. But it is not bad or exploitable like in the case of male directors. Even if a male director is a person of repute or incredible talent, they can have a dark side we may not know. There is often a fear or doubt which is not there in the case of females.

Participants reported that despite progress toward gender equality, gender disparities remain prevalent in Assam's theatre scene. Even though women do hold powerful positions within the profession, their capacity to advance the chances of female artists is frequently constrained. This is mostly because mobility is dominated by men. Along with the ingrained gender prejudice that impedes professional advancement and influence, theatre strongly depends on interpersonal connections and networks. These networks are frequently created through unofficial connections, mentorship, and referrals. Due to their historically low representation in positions of power, it can be detrimental to females as their ability to secure better opportunities can get restricted. Wandor (1986) argues that directing requires leadership, a role society is reluctant to associate with women, forcing female directors to battle societal conditioning alongside professional challenges. Women directors face challenges in gaining acceptance due to traditional gender expectations that conflict with their decision-making roles, prioritizing gender over professional ability. In an interview, emerging Nigerian director Awoba Bob-Manuel highlighted that women directors are often judged as a group, unlike their male counterparts, who are seen as individuals (Wandor, 1986; Ilo & Owobamirin, 2021). Misha affirmed,

Here networking plays a crucial role in securing opportunities. Individuals who express grievances are often labelled as difficult to work with. Moreover, the scarcity of women holding positions of authority further amplifies their vulnerability, burdening them with excessive weight.

4.1 Women in Leadership Roles in Theatre

Women and art are two important components that play a necessary role in connecting different generations to their cultural heritage. Women's character roles have always been a part of the history of drama but their participation in the appearance of feminine roles has been a recent development. Theatre, like many other art forms, has historically been dominated by men. When considering renowned playwrights, their list typically features numerous male figures, ranging from Shakespeare to Bertolt Brecht. Female dramatists, however, have been notably scarce in literary history (Pandey, 2016). Leiva Filiho (2022), in his study of women in theatre in São Paulo, found that when considering the number of performances, the gender gap widened with women typically working less in higher-paying roles. Similarly, other studies highlighted how women constitute the majority of theatre-goers, however, in terms of representation of women in leadership positions, it is considerably low (*The Guardian* & Free-stone, 2012; Hope, 2015). Males have traditionally held the bulk of leadership roles in the theatre, including those of playwrights, directors, and producers. Theatre directing has historically been male-dominated, reflecting the gendered nature of professional theatre. Although more women have recently entered the field and proven their capabilities, female directors remain underrepresented globally and locally. As per Ilo & Owobamirin (2021), this disparity

stems from socio-psychological conditioning regarding career choices and perceptions of leadership. As theatre mirrors societal roles, its practices align with the gender norms that society upholds. The demand for gender parity in the industry, meanwhile, has lately gained increasing attention, and more women have been nominated for leading roles. Notwithstanding recent strides toward promoting gender parity, the majority of playwrights and directors are still men. A few popular examples from Assam include *Seagull Theatre*, a prominent theatre group in the state established in 1990 by a group of dedicated theatre activists. The organisation is led by a popular National School of Drama (NSD) alumnus, male director Baharul Islam. Located in Guwahati, Assam, another well-known theatre group named *BA Studio* hosts performances, workshops, and theatre festivals. The group is led by Anup Hazarika, who plays a significant role in its leadership, alongside co-director Pakija Begum. *Samahaar Natya Goshtee*, founded in 1984, has been guided by Lalit Chandra Sarma, a distinguished theatre activist who has served as the president since the organisation's inception, and his leadership has shaped the group's vision and activities¹ (StageBuzz, 2019). The participant Mansi said,

Directors are mostly males, old and experienced in our industry. There is no one to question them. They will be friendly and sweet talkers but there are problematic things that are normalized here. This doesn't signify a healthy work environment.

Sen highlights that the Indian film industry, traditionally male-dominated and rooted in patriarchal structures, has only recently started to see greater participation by women in various roles, including producers, directors, scriptwriters, editors, and designers. Women filmmakers, especially from the 1990s onwards, have subtly challenged the industry's misogyny and traditional storytelling norms by exploring themes like professional autonomy, sexuality, and violence against women. Even though women remain underrepresented with minimal substantive progress in the portrayal and empowerment on screen, their work has expanded the representation of women and alternative masculinities in Bollywood, breaking into roles previously dominated by men and challenging the entrenched "old boys club" culture of Bollywood (Sen, 2017; Habib, 2017). Similarly, theatre has benefitted from the fresh perspective that women leaders have offered as it opened up opportunities for different narratives and viewpoints to be portrayed on stage. Further, they play a significant role in expanding the opportunity for women to work as writers, designers, creatives, and technicians. When women were responsible for writing, directing, or producing, the gender gap in other functions was reduced (Leiva Filiho, 2022). Their approach is very different from their male counterparts. Women playwrights frequently concentrate on stories that focus on female experiences and standpoints which more often highlight themes like gender inequity, parenthood, and relationships. They are more prone to challenge stereotypical ideas about gender in their stories and characters. They even offer a fresh take on staging and theatrical standards by utilizing unconventional settings or multimedia components. Conversely, male playwrights usually work more on macro areas like history, politics, or general social issues. Unlike patriarchal traditions, which supported power structures, feminist theatre emphasizes collaboration and writings focused on women's journey toward agency and empowerment, addressing intricate themes and issues that deeply impact their daily existence with greater depth (Singh, 2009; Pandey, 2016). Promoting women in leadership and authoritative roles can challenge the dominant patriarchal narrative catering to the male gaze, and mitigate its impact (Deb, 2023). The approaches taken by male and female directors to their jobs also differ significantly. The cooperation and fostering of relationships

1. <https://samahar.org.in/the-team/>

with the members of the cast and crew is more important to female directors than to their male counterparts, who may lay greater emphasis on their creative vision and authority. Rashi, with theatre experience in and out of Assam shared,

In my directorial venture or theatre space, I believe we are friends during and after rehearsals and if you have something that you would like to bring up, either personal conversation or professional suggestion, everyone is welcome to do so.

In the world of theatre, where the stage is filled with creativity and expression, females involved in the theatre industry face a distinct set of challenges. Women in the theatre have to overcome various obstacles including sexism, and underrepresentation in upper-tier positions. Due to the transient and project-based nature of theatre work, many provisions typically applicable to women lose their relevance within the industry. As observed by Gregory and Milner in their work on work-life balance, where they address issues such as time management, inter-role conflict, and care arrangements, with both internal and external constraints, priorities typically include working time arrangements, parental leave entitlements, and childcare support. Meeting these needs through organisational programmes can lead to increased job satisfaction and well-being, while unmet needs can cause stress (Gregory & Milner, 2009). Data from the fieldwork highlights specific challenges faced by women in theatre, including lack of maternity leave which is a hallmark of many formal workplaces, and the difficulties of balancing late-night rehearsals and performances with personal responsibilities. These factors contribute to a challenging environment for women, as evident in cultural industries like theatre where these entitlements often do not find its existence. One of the participants, Rinky, pointed out the difficulty of balancing professional and societal expectations, often exacerbating their professional and personal lives. Rinky asserted,

The challenges we face often cause disturbances in our lives, navigating between commitments and societal expectations and often hampering our personal space significantly, be it female actors or directors.

However, a notable distinction observed within the theatre industry, setting it apart from other professions, is the absence of gender-based pay discrepancies. Indian cinema has progressed towards nuanced portrayals of women, however challenges remain in creating a more equitable industry, due to pay disparity, underrepresentation, age discrimination, and unsafe working environments for women (Prasad & Tiwari, 2023). However, in theatre industry, pay disparities tend to emerge between senior and junior theatre performers and leaders, rather than along gender lines, specifically in Assam as gathered from primary data. Roma, who has experience on both ends of the spectrum, remarked,

In my experience, regardless of gender and age, pay discrepancies are more evident between senior actors with years of experience demanding higher compensation and newcomers facing exploitation due to their novice status in the industry.

A female participant recounted an incident where they had a well-connected senior theatre actor from Assam in their production. After the performance, the production house did not provide compensation for an extended period. Several months later, a message was sent to the WhatsApp group comprising all the show's members, requesting them to share their bank account details with the organiser. Almost immediately, a response appeared in the group chat,

and it was from the senior actor who asked, “*So, will I be paid again?*”, with a wink emoticon. Many of the young actors in the group saw the message, and after a while, the senior actor deleted the message from the group himself. This exchange strongly indicated that he had already received his payment a long time ago, while the rest of the participants had been made to wait for months. As of the interview, the other participants still had not received their payment, whereas the senior actor mentioned by the participant had received a payment ten times higher than what the other participants were supposed to get, simply considering his well-known status in the industry. It highlights how the actors who have made a name in the industry can quote their own pay demand — a stark contrast to the new ones who have to settle for whatever the production decides for them. It signifies that age discrimination commonly seen in fashion and film industries, holds less relevance in this field. Rather, individuals with more experience in theatre are valued and afforded greater respect. They also tend to demand higher incomes and benefit from better networking opportunities which play a key role in securing prestigious work.

Nevertheless, the gender ratio remains imbalanced within the upper echelons of the theatre industry, which is a significant worry. The study shows that power dynamics within the theatre industry remain predominantly male-centric, often resulting in male directors and actors forming exclusive networks that marginalize female participants. One participant noted that even when staging a production in prestigious venues like Rabindra Bhawan, they still needed the approval and involvement of male actors and directors, whom they would have to invite to bestow their blessings. In competitions, male judges hold sway, and when applying for grants from the government or other entities, the prevailing route is often dependent on male involvement. The researcher observed instances at prominent theatre events where panels consisted of a single female guest against a majority of five or six male counterparts. Additionally, this lone female representative was frequently subjected to belittlement by others, attributed in part to language barriers and other factors. Consequently, the prevailing power structure in the theatre industry remains largely intact.

The progress of female leaders within the theatre is hampered by gender discrimination, which is a pervasive issue in the industry. The treatment of female directors by male performers is a blatant example of the gender prejudice that still exists in this sector, despite significant advances toward gender equality. While some may convey their support and regard for their female peers, others might show a lack of respect for the leadership and decision-making skills of women. This could involve challenging their decisions, denying them the same amount of authority, or not giving credence to their knowledge and expertise. Mansi described the lack of respect she encountered as a young assistant director, particularly from older male actors who were dismissive of her authority:

I was an assistant director in a play in my early days with theatre experience. The majority of the actors in the production were older than me, in their 40s. If I was given the duty to read lines with the actor and he wasn't able to, the lack of respect was seen which was quite palpable. Maybe it is an age or gender thing. But the attitude was so obvious, like, 'I know more than you. Why are you here? I can do these lines; I have been doing this forever now'. They would casually boast in a conversation that they are experienced and have done 25 plays. I am like I get it but you are still not getting this part right so what am I supposed to do with your 25 plays?

Similarly, Farah, a full-time actor, and a female budding playwright and director, noted

that male actors tend to be more vocal and assertive about their ideas compared to their female counterparts, who often frame their contributions more tentatively:

We have done a piece with two men and I was directing it. That dynamic was different. I have noticed men are very vocal about what they want to do. Not like a suggestion but most of the time, they would say like, "I believe this is the right way to do it". It is a gender thing, not a capability. In my opinion, it is because men think they can be more vocal. But when I have directed women, the dynamic changes into a more cohort. With a woman, you go into a more brainstorming session as it becomes more of a suggestion. Maybe because these women have also faced male directors there is a sense of unsureness about how they convey their opinion. Like male actors come and tell me, "This scene just doesn't work". Women actors more often ask, "Do you think this scene works?".

This interview shows a vital pattern of how men and women approach and put forward their opinions very differently. Women tend to adopt a questioning tone, often asking if changes are necessary, while men assert themselves directly by making demands. This observation highlights deep-seated gender norms that pervade our society. The socialization of women is done in a way that they tend to seek permission or validation before expressing their preferences, while men are taught to assert their requirements confidently.

5 Gender and Sexuality in Theatre Work

Gender and sexuality are intricate and multidimensional facets of the human experience that are influenced by a range of biological, social, and cultural variables. They may be shaped and reinforced by cultural practices such as norms, social conventions, beauty standards, and dressing styles. Gender norms specify ways men and women must act, look, and communicate in different cultures. They are often perpetuated by social conditioning, including group pressure, or through codified procedures such as segregated lavatories or dress codes. Butler describes gender as a performance that people develop in their way of belief, scripted out as an act. Similar to this, sexuality is not an intrinsic characteristic of the body, but it is a collection of cultural practices, habits, and conventions that are exhibited and acted through our bodies. Their performative theory provides a helpful framework for comprehending how gender and sexuality are produced and portrayed in theatre, especially regarding the body. The body serves as a crucial stage for the display and embodiment of gender and sexuality in the theatre industry.

Theatre performances that question conventional gender roles and standards, such as a male actor performing a typically female character, are one way to illustrate Butler's idea of how norms and conventions are not static but continually renegotiated and reenacted by daily acts. Furthermore, these performances are not just isolated acts but address and react to larger social issues and act as a component of a wider discourse about gender and sexuality.

5.1 Role of Body in Shaping Gendered Performances

The body and physicality greatly impact how men and women behave and act. Amid the setting of male and female performances, gendered ideals and preconceptions are formed and enforced through the use of the body. For instance, observations reveal that male performers are expected to be muscular and athletic while female performers are expected to be delicate and petite. The societal behaviour of dieting, fitness, exercising, use of makeup and cosmetics, plastic surgery,

etc. serve to reinforce these ideals. Interviews with participants such as Richa indicate that physical appearance plays a crucial role in casting decisions, with women particularly facing discrimination based on their looks. Richa, who started as a theatre artist, but now venturing into television and web series, said,

Physical appearance, including good looks and body shape, often plays a significant role in casting decisions, as popular and glamorous individuals tend to have an advantage in getting jobs. Once, for a role of a village woman that required a realistic portrayal, the director was looking for someone with an attractive, glamorous appeal. This bias stems from producers' focus on selling their products and attracting customers by featuring dazzling and beautiful actors.

These gendered norms are not only the result of personal preference, but rather are a component of a wider cultural discourse about gender and the body. The portrayals of male and female bodies that frequently appear in the media lead to cultural expectancies and benchmarks around how an ideal body or physique should be. The body posture, gestures, and movements of male and female actors in theatre frequently reflect these standards. The societal expectations regarding gendered physicality are supported and strengthened by these displays. Just like Butler, Bordo maintains that these gendered performances are continuously altered and reshaped through our cultural practices as indicated by the data.

The theatre is an exceptional form of art, characterized by its progressive and thought-provoking nature. It serves as a cornerstone of cultural movements, transcending insignificant biases and prejudices. Regardless of gender, body type, race, or ethnicity, individuals have the opportunity to participate and breathe life into diverse characters on stage. However, the data shows that gender inequality persists within the industry, influenced by consumer culture, and perpetuates such disparities.

5.2 Gendered Differences in Representations of the Body in Theatre

The body is a powerful tool for communication in theatre. It can be used to express emotions, convey ideas, and create a sense of realism. However, the way that the body is represented on stage can also be shaped by gender norms and cultural standards. In traditional theatre and literature, women are often sexualized, objectified, and confined to roles emphasizing dependence, beauty, and virtue, reflecting patriarchal ideals. Shakespearean and even Indian texts portray women like Ophelia, Desdemona, Sita, and Shakuntala as tragic figures, whose struggles stem from societal expectations and male dominance. These depictions highlight cross-cultural parallels in marginalizing women and reinforcing rigid gender norms (OUPblog, 2015; Rogers, 2009; Kadyan & Mahal, 2019; Gupta & Tiwari, 2017; Yadav & Yadav, 2022).

However, the contemporary world including India presents a more complex and evolving landscape regarding gender roles, with significant shifts occurring in both urban and rural contexts. Women are now represented on stage in a variety of ways other than as the stereotypical wives, mothers, or daughters, due to the efforts of female playwrights and directors. Indian theatre is a significant force in the struggle for gender parity and challenging social conventions. The portrayal of women in Assamese theatre has significantly changed as a result of women's involvement in the performing arts. Notwithstanding these developments, traditional Indian theatre still manages to hold onto the conventional portrayal of gender roles. Women's roles in traditional Assamese theatre are still affected by a patriarchal society and inspired by Hindu

mythology, in which women's positions are often categorical and determined by their connection to males concerning the traditional theme of the plays. The female character roles were often simple, secondary, and deferential to those of their male counterparts who are often represented as being strong, powerful, and in control. They are often portrayed as the heroes or saviours of the story. Male characters are portrayed as strong and domineering, while female ones are frequently docile and subservient. This is evident in a vast number of stories and narratives as female characters are more or less depicted as desirable objects or as victims. In the Rama-Vijaya play, Srimanta Sankardeva depicted Rama's victory at Sita's *swayamvar* (a kind of marriage where a woman chooses her groom from a group of suitors) and how he beat all the other powerful rulers present there. The play presented the woman's role as a virtuous, obedient, yet submissive wife. Nonetheless, the dialogues of the male characters in the plays were quite forceful and dominant, reflecting their valiant and domineering attitude (Saharia, 2016).

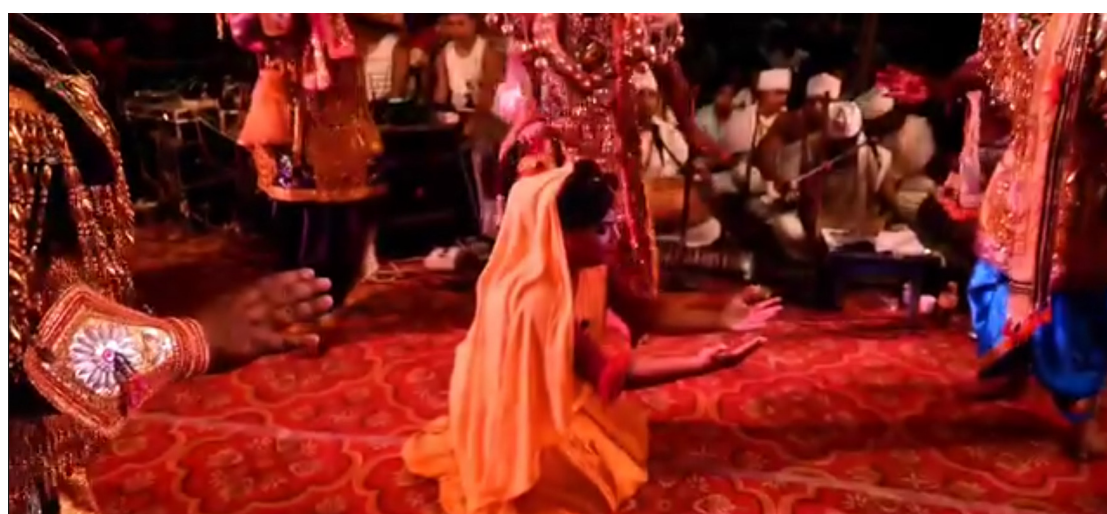


Figure 1: A scene showing Sita's plea of her fidelity to Lord Ram and other men folk from the traditional religious drama; *bhaona* "Ram Parajay Sitar Pataal Gaman" in Dergaon, Assam – Source: Primary data

The researcher observed theatrical performances of traditional Assamese theatre called *bhaonas*, titled "Ram Parajay Sitar Pataal Gaman" and "Rukmini Haran". Both the *bhaonas* featured the participation of both female and male actors. Notably, the characters of Sita and Rukmini were portrayed by female actors, depicted in these traditional narratives adhering to conventional storytelling, perpetuating the notion that women's destinies were determined by the actions of men.

Contrary to that, the researcher attended a houseful show of a mobile theatre play (also known as *bhramyomaan*) called "Moi Natok Kora Suali", which featured a prominent Assamese film actress playing the lead role. The story, set in contemporary society, showed the female character trying to establish her position as an actor and the hurdles she goes through. Her role was similar to that of heroines in contemporary popular movies, both outgoing and strong-headed. While the use of exaggerated characters can be a theatrical convention, the mass-oriented theatre included stories and characters with female roles quite similar to the ones depicted in mass films. Looking glamorous and visually appealing was a common feature with elements like romance, music, and dance, all of which can add to the glamour of the performance. As and when the storyline demands, their graceful movements, expressive gestures, and

synchronized choreography add beauty, energy, and a visual spectacle to the performances.

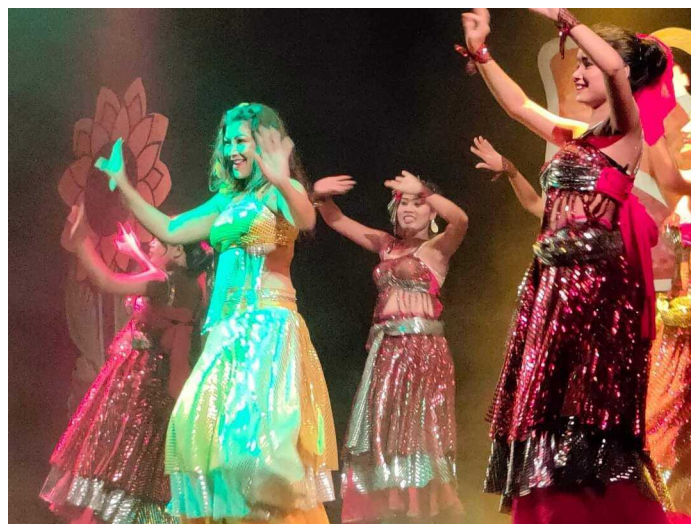


Figure 2: The female lead and backup dancers performing in a mobile theatre play, i.e *bhramyomaan* “Moi Natok Kora Suali”; commercial theatre – Source: Primary Data

While both theatrical forms present distinct narratives and styles, they ultimately reinforce gender stereotypes in their portrayals of female characters. Again, costumes and makeup contribute to these gender representations. Female performers wore form-fitting costumes that accentuated their femininity and sexuality, while male performers were asked to put on more concealing outfits that represented their maleness and virility. Women even wear makeup to draw attention to attractive features such as eyes, lips, or long eyelashes while dancing to the beats. This division reinforces societal expectations of gendered physicality.

Ritu, a 32-year-old participant has been acting since her teenage years. She has performed in different places nationally and internationally. An interview with her revealed her dissatisfaction with roles lacking depth and agency for women and instances of male directors treating female actors as emotionally fragile. She shared that in her years of experience as a stage actor, she played a wide range of characters and recalled reading a script where the role she was offered lacked agency and depth. She said,

Even in contemporary times with so many stories being shared from various stand-points, such stereotypical views persist for some. Once a female co-actor was told by the director that her emotional scene needed to be toned down because he believed women couldn’t handle intense emotions and it might overwhelm her.

5.3 Managing Body Consciousness for Actors on Stage

Performing on stage places heavy physical demands on theatre performers as they must manage their bodies while under continual inspection, in addition to successfully portraying a character. Being on stage, the participants’ views depicted that theatre artists are acutely aware and conscious of their bodies and how they are perceived by the spectators. Actors often carefully evaluate their posture, mannerisms, and nonverbal cues to accurately represent the emotions and motives of their characters and employ several strategies to manage their bodies while subjected to the spotlight on stage. From collaborating with choreographers or mentors to employing breathing techniques, stretching, and relaxation exercises, along with temporary fixes like

makeup and costumes, they use any of these to create gestures or motions that depict the appropriate physical and emotional aspects and keep their bodies and emotions in balance. Harsha has a bachelor's degree in performing arts and is new to the theatre circuit of Assam. With around three years of experience in both traditional and contemporary theatre, she has managed to form certain connections in the theatre circle. She was doing rehearsals for a play that was a Greek adaptation during the time of the interview. She asserted,

Our costumes and makeup give us more control over our characters and how they can be presented to our audience. The costumes frequently boost our confidence by accentuating or concealing physical features or attributes that we are not confident about. We as actors also engage in warm-ups, yoga, and other physical exercises to unwind our bodies and assume the physical control required to fulfill the physical demands of the role.

Harsha's statement highlights how the industry's emphasis on physical appearance and societal beauty standards affects their self-perception and performance. Female actors are subjected to pressure to conform to societal expectations of femininity, which can include wearing revealing clothing, performing sensual scenes, and catering to the male gaze. Portraying characters that revolve around male experiences, mainly as sexual objects, perpetuates the view of women in these roles as inherently and consistently sexual (Paterson, 2017). Such actions can lead to embarrassment or unease when performing in revealing attire. This phenomenon can be attributed to the cultural norms and expectations that women are subjected to, which often dictate that they should conform to certain standards of beauty and sexuality. These expectations can manifest in various ways, such as the pressure to maintain a certain body type, wearing bold outfits, or engaging in intimate scenes on stage.



Figure 3: A glimpse from the play “Moi Natok Kora Suali” – Source: Primary data

The media and advertising channels of consumer capitalism often project a narrow and unrealistic standard of beauty, featuring slender physiques, fair complexions, toned abdomens, etc., effectively shaping cultural notions of the ideal body. Exposure to such sexualized media images can lead to increased body dissatisfaction and negative self-perceptions among women. The pursuit of aesthetic perfection often demands significant effort and persistence from women, as they undertake long-term body projects that involve managing their weight and investing considerable time to sculpt a physique that aligns with societal beauty standards, especially to keep up appearances at work (Shilling, 2003). The *Natyashastra* also focused on physical fitness and highlighted how actors should engage in regular exercises to maintain their bodies. Alongside this, it specifies various items like ornaments, garlands, and costumes

to decorate the actors and prepare them for the performance (Richmond et al., 1993). Harsha added,

I have never had any insecurity about myself, never analyzed my voice, looks, or how I appear or sound in front of people. But being in this space has made me aware of how I present myself in front of others. People tend to scrutinize and objectify in this space. They comment on how slim or fat I am, which is harmful but normalized in the cultural industry. Now I have joined the gym to reduce weight. Once when I was rehearsing for a role, I was told that I was heavier. As per my BMI, I was already thin and underweight, but I was asked to lose weight to fit the role.

Harsha's experience of being asked to lose weight despite being underweight illustrates the unrealistic expectations placed on actors. The issue of female actors experiencing hesitation or embarrassment when performing in tight or revealing attire is again multifaceted. In addition to cultural norms and expectations, family and values also play a vital role in it. In some cultures, wearing revealing clothing or engaging in intimate scenes is considered inappropriate or unacceptable, especially for women in the context of Indian society. This can lead to female actors feeling ashamed or embarrassed about performing in such roles, as they may fear judgment or disapproval from their social or familial circles. Instances such as the experience of a newcomer in a theatre workshop, Himashri, reveal the double standards and scrutiny faced by women, contrasting with the freedoms afforded to male actors. She recalled,

I remember one incident in a theatre workshop I participated in, where a male authority figure told a woman artist to not wear shorts but to wear something long with a covered neckline while allowing men to wear whatever they wanted. Instead of telling women how to dress, why not tell men to remove that inappropriate gaze? It is frustrating to see this double standard, where only women are subjected to unwarranted scrutiny.

Foucault's theory of disciplinary power highlights how institutional power subtly shapes participant behaviour and power dynamics are heavily influenced by traditional structures. Nicholson builds on this idea by asserting that all social encounters, including drama workshops, are governed by social narratives and varying perceptions of power (Nicholson, 2005; cited in Aitken, 2009). Female actors may not always find themselves comfortable in certain situations. The impact of social norms and standards on female actors can be significant, leading to feelings of shame, guilt, or anxiety, affecting their mental health and well-being in the process. However, as consummate professionals, they adeptly navigate the expectations placed upon them as the requisite of their craft.

5.4 Gendered Vulnerability: Objectification and Sexualization of Female Actors

Directors have the responsibility to recognize the impact of their behaviour and the power dynamics at play in the theatre industry. However, some may misuse their power and use it to objectify and sexualize the actors, specifically females, creating a toxic work environment. Directors objectifying and exploiting female actors in theatre is one serious problem that involves power dynamics, gender relations, and representations of femininity. These individuals often have the power to make decisions about casting, production design, and artistic direction, which can impact the actors' experiences on stage. When this power is wielded inappropriately,

female actors may be subject to sexual harassment, exploitation, and objectification. The female actors' presence in public challenges patriarchal control, but her autonomy is undermined by the perception that her visibility equates to sexual availability. This expectation, paired with the dehumanization of women, fosters toxic attitudes that facilitate abuse (Paterson, 2017). Female performers frequently find themselves subject to a distinct kind of insecurity when working under male directors. This vulnerability stems from a pervasive tendency to sexualize and objectify female bodies, often overshadowing their artistic contributions. While male actors also face difficulties, the experiences of female artists are compounded by the heightened risk of exploitation. It can range from directors scrutinizing their physical appearance, to making inappropriate comments, and demanding sexual favours in exchange for roles or opportunities. For instance, one participant recounted an experience involving a famous married director in the Assam theatre circuit who took advantage of a new female member in his theatre group, reflecting a broader issue of vulnerability faced by female performers.

Male actors encounter distinct challenges, often divergent from those faced by their female counterparts, including conflicts with directors or producers overseeing a production. These challenges primarily manifest in physical or verbal altercations, devoid of any sexual connotations. For instance, Kunal, a thirty-five year-old experienced stage actor, recounted an incident where he witnessed a male director engaging in a heated confrontation with a male actor. The altercation escalated to physical violence, with the director resorting to slapping the actor in a public setting. Consequently, the actor experienced a profound sense of humiliation, compounded by his tears, attributable to the director's perception of his lack of commitment to the work at hand.

The presence of males in various settings can contribute to feelings of insecurity among women, as some men may attempt to gain unwarranted access to women. In certain cases, female artists may agree to advances from directors to secure better opportunities, while others find ways to navigate such situations. A personal experience from a participant exemplifies this issue, as she recalled an incident from her initial days in the theatre industry:

As a newcomer at the age of fifteen, I observed that the male director in a theatrical production exhibited touchy behaviour towards the female cast members, who, despite feeling uncomfortable, responded with giggles. Speaking out against it would have potentially resulted in others dismissing my concerns, deeming me as an inexperienced troublemaker, and jeopardizing my position within the production. To safeguard myself, I opted to associate more frequently with the male members of the team and started sitting with them. By doing so, I strategically minimized opportunities for the director to engage in inappropriate behaviour.

This approach allows the female actors especially the young and vulnerable newcomers to protect themselves without openly confronting the situation. After the participant decided to tactfully handle the situation, the director could not do anything due to the changed dynamics of the social interactions. Such instances illustrate the pervasiveness of gender discrimination in the performing arts from a larger cultural viewpoint. When it comes to access, participation, and acknowledgment, women are frequently misrepresented in theatre and face several difficulties. Directors who objectify and take advantage of female actors serve to uphold damaging gender stereotypes and power imbalances in this field. Mrigakshi highlighted,

Being a female actor, I often find myself vulnerable and constantly need to be cautious during rehearsals and performances, as instances of physical assault by

directors are unfortunately common. These issues should be addressed and discussed openly, but due to the hierarchy in the industry, renowned directors often go unquestioned and unchallenged. It is disheartening that actors aren't always respected and don't have the same social status.

The hierarchical nature of the industry often leaves these issues unaddressed, as renowned directors may go unquestioned. Mansi noted that many a time, family status, class, and background of the cast and crew impact the treatment they receive from the seniors. She shared,

With my good command of English, diverse city experiences, and a solid education, I have experienced differential treatment due to my background. However, I recall a female coworker from a small town who was physically active and engaged in gym and yoga and wore clothing like tights and crop tops. Unfortunately, she received criticism for her attire and asked to change during a physically intensive play. In another troubling incident at Kalakshetra, a senior artist and instructor from Assam pulled a female artist's tank top during rehearsals, claiming it was inappropriate for a theatre setting. These incidents reveal a problematic sense of morality within the theatre industry, where we inadvertently perpetuate problematic attitudes in our approach to theatre.

The participants even shared certain instances where directors may resort to extreme measures, including the utilization of physical force, as a means to accentuate their hierarchical power and establish their authority on set. Such actions, although infrequent, may manifest as intimidating or aggressive behaviour directed toward both cast and crew members. Initially hailing from upper Assam, Misha has been exposed to performing arts since childhood. She recollected one distressing incident:

Five years ago, a group of actors and one renowned director were gathered in a circle, when the director said something to one of the girls. Due to either the girl's inability to hear or her lack of reaction, the director resorted to an extreme act of violence by kicking her in the back, causing her to vomit blood. The horrifying incident left everyone present in shock and fear, as the individuals involved held significant power and influence within the industry. They later managed to take the girl to a doctor and got the necessary medical treatment.

This shocking episode sheds light on the unfortunate reality that some esteemed directors can be extremely difficult to work with, prompting them to strive for an independent career path, as Misha did. Such incidents often go unspoken of, with physical assault being a concern for male artists as well, even though emotional assault is more prevalent. This kind of sexualization of female actors along with unrealistic expectations and pressure to engage in compromising situations generates a hostile work environment, undermining their agency, and eroding control over their actions in their professional careers within the context of the entertainment industry. Sounding disappointed and annoyed, Richa, with fourteen years of experience in the field, shared,

I have noticed persistent gender prejudices in the cultural field, specifically in theatre and acting. There is a regressive belief that women in these professions are easy, assuming that they work with males, and stay out late for rehearsals, hence

they engage in personal relationships with directors and influential people. I have been the recipient of the same. Even the success of female actors is often attributed to such scandals rather than their talent, unlike male actors who do not face such assumptions.

The art and entertainment industry, renowned for its allure and glamour, frequently encounters biased perceptions. A prevalent belief is that women involved in the acting profession are more readily available and prone to engaging in unprofessional relationships with directors. However, these misconceptions persist despite their inaccuracies and affect how the success of female actors is perceived compared to their male counterparts.

6 Conclusion

The multifaceted nature of the theatre industry encompasses varying power dynamics concerning hierarchy and gender relations. Directors often wielding significant influence can shape the gender portrayal on stage. However, this power dynamic is continuously negotiated by different individuals involved in the theatrical process.

The experiences of the participants highlight the ethical dilemmas along with the challenges they endure regarding gender disparities and the existence of male-dominated networks. Persistent obstacles exist that hinder the advancement of women in leadership roles despite progress that has been made toward gender parity. The ongoing challenges and progress reflect the journey of women in leading positions in the industry. Amidst multifold advancements and changes, gender discrimination and barriers pose difficulties in the access of women in important decision-making positions and opportunities in this creative field.

The body as a medium of cultural projections and expectations helps in shaping gendered performances on stage. Gendered norms influence the representation and perception of bodies alongside societal expectations placed on actors in the productions. Theatre is a platform that has the potential to question, challenge, and alter conventional representations and gender norms. However, it also often perpetuates power imbalances and social biases evident in the sexualization and objectification of the female characters and actors in particular.

Female actors often undergo unique challenges including objectification, sexualization, and unequal treatment compared to their male counterparts. Directors with their significant power in the creative field and their sway over the actors' experiences often contribute to a misogynistic culture and gender discrimination in the industry. Stories of exploitation, harassment, and abuse highlight the need for systemic change and reevaluation of the hierarchical structure and power dynamics existing within theatrical spaces.

This research underscores the intricate relationship between power dynamics and gender in theatrical settings. The data reveals the embedded biases and structural barriers within the industry, which perpetuate gender inequities. Participant narratives provide direct insights into the pervasive challenges faced by women and other marginalized groups and instances of resilience and negotiation within these power structures. For example, the accounts of female performers navigating casting processes and rehearsal environments illuminate the subtle mechanisms of control and influence exercised by directors.

Challenging and dismantling such biased gender norms is essential, as it can help everyone have equal agency and empowerment, not only within the theatre industry but also beyond. The theatre community needs to foster an inclusive and equitable environment by advocating for ethical practices and addressing the challenges to harness the full potential of its diverse

talent and artistic expressions, irrespective of community, class, caste, gender, age group, etc. From a just portrayal of gender on stage to creating safe spaces for dialogue and collaboration, actors of all genders should be able to assert their agency and contribute to the creative process without any discrimination and barriers to enrich cultural discourse and narratives.



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