

RESEARCH ARTICLE

EMERGING TRENDS IN KANNADA THEATRE

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**Abstract:**

Gender Impersonation rituals are undoubtedly one of the most important rites of Indian cultural and traditional practices. Spacing of this gender impersonation in ritual theatre in the contemporary times is the need of the hour. This is heading towards a newer perspective of understanding an art form and its importance. The fast and far growing ideology of today is demanding for addressing the role of impersonator in ritual arts to/by the various aspects of this cultural artistic ritual practice.

Despite the progress made by Indian feminist movements, women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination. India's patriarchal culture has made the process of gaining land-ownership rights and access to education challenging. In the past two decades, there has also emerged a disturbing trend of sex-selective abortion. To Indian feminists, these are seen as injustices worth struggling against.

Kannada theatre and Cinema had carved a place of their own in the National platform. There have been a few path breaking plays and movies in Kannada in the past. Kannada has always voiced the

concerns of the marginalised. The upper caste Brahmin, who had a strangle hold on most of the artistic forms earlier, had also gained control of the Kannada literary, theatre and cinematic worlds. But there have been different attempts by different groups to break free from this kind of unarticulated oppression and create space for the hitherto neglected and marginalised sections. However women issues and feminist questions have, for some strange reason, been kept at bay.

**Keywords:** feminism, marginalised, cinema, discrimination and theatre

Gender Impersonation rituals are undoubtedly one of the most important rites of Indian cultural and traditional practices. Spacing of this gender impersonation in ritual theatre in the contemporary times is the need of the hour. This is heading towards a newer perspective of understanding an art form and its importance. The fast and far growing ideology of today is demanding for addressing the role of impersonator in ritual

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

arts to/by the various aspects of this cultural artistic ritual practice.

WORLD IS A STAGE AND WE ARE MERE ACTORS -goes the saying, as we all know, it exactly reflects what a real human being is. A man with all his glory and errors seeks his life's quest. So is the woman, in every walk of life. Theatre in this sense, had its rise and fall, its good and bad days, committed and uncommitted causes, sustain and unsustainable capabilities.

Kannada Theatre existed by the influence of Parsi drama. It was Maharaja of Mysore who pioneered and nurtured the Kannada Theatre. The troupes staged plays periodically in towns and cities and also during jatras and important festivals in different regions. As the troupes were more or less Nomads, perhaps realizing the treatment given in the society probably had made Maharaja of Mysore to strictly ban woman acting in the theatre. But gradually her prominence in the theatre, gained momentum as the lightings adapted.

Modern Kannada theatre gave out the traditional forms and gave itself to new forms inspired from west. Amateur Kannada theatre began around 1950's in Karnataka with the "KARNATAKA RENAISSANCE". The concept of this theatre was an attempt to remove the stage from the hands of commercialism and to bestow it with decorum and self esteem.

With the new and talented theatre personalities of Karnataka taking up the responsibility of theatre promotion Kannada theatre has gained its recognition worldwide.

IT is said that in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century all avenues of knowledge were open to women, nothing was a taboo to them. But, it was Gubbi veeranna company first to introduce women artist to the stage in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women who entered theatre were from voiceless class. To maintain the women artists or to keep them not to go away, company owners married woman artist. It is said Gubbi veeranna had four wives.

The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati; the second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the Quit India Movement and independent women's organizations began to emerge; and finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women in the work force and right to political parity.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Kannada theatre and Cinema had carved a place of their own in the National platform. There have been a few path breaking plays and movies in Kannada in the past. Kannada has always voiced the concerns of the marginalised. The upper caste Brahmin, who had a strangle hold on most of the artistic forms earlier, had also gained control of the Kannada literary, theatre and cinematic worlds. But there have been different attempts by different groups to break free from this kind of unarticulated oppression and create space for the hitherto neglected and marginalised sections. However women issues and feminist questions have, for some strange reason, been kept at bay.

The history of the Kannada Cinema started in 1934, eighty years ago, when *Sati Sulochana* was made, followed soon in the same year by another successful movie called *Bhaktha Dhruva*. The movies made till the late 1970s were largely based on history, mythology and the epics. Most movies were devotional or patriotic. There were few social dramas that focussed on the actual problems of society.

The 1970s and 1980s was a decade of significance for Kannada theatre for then came a number of movie makers who

experimented with the Kannada films and brought National and International fame. Directors like P. Lankesh, Girish Kasaravalli, Girish Karnad, Puttanna Kanagal made serious movies which had more than amusement as their purpose. Some of the noted movies of this time may be considered to understand what kind of movies were made and with what concerns.

B. V. Karanth's *Chomana Dudui* was based on Dr. Shivarama Karanth's novel of the same title and dealt with the problems of the caste system of Hindus which was driving the lower caste people towards Conversions. The most critically acclaimed film based on the eponymous novel *Samskara* by Jnanapeetha award winner Dr. U. R. Ananthamurty is more concerned with the Brahminical theme of whether the corpse of the Brahmin Naranappa can be cremated with Brahmin rituals or shall that corpse not be shown and given the due final rites as he had had a sexual relation with the low caste woman Chandri and lived very immoral life. *Ghata Shraaddha* by Kasaravalli also is concerned with the Brahmin woman who is a widow and is pregnant with an illegitimate child. *Vamsha Vriksha* too is a similar attempt which tries to bring out the love between the Brahmin Father in Law and his widowed daughter in law. *Phaniyamma* is important for the reason that it is directed by the first woman director. It was made in 1984. *Kaadu* by Karnad was based on a novel by Aalanahalli Srikrishna. It looks at the problems faced by the women from a little boy's perspective. *Sharapanjara* by

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Puttanna Kanagal was also based on a novel by Triveni. Though it centred on the woman and her psyche it was made as a mass movie more rather than a serious one and hence had the ingredients of a commercial movie. *Accident* by Shankarnag had a political theme and hardly dealt with anything that could be called Feministic. *Tabarana Kathe* by Kasaravalli was based on a novel by Poornachandra Tejaswi and was a comment on the system and bureaucracy. The 1970s and 1980s was a good time for Kannada Cinema as many directors made serious movies and drew the attention of the entire Nation by winning several awards. But the number of such serious efforts dwindled and the movies were made with the sole intention of making money.

The later movies followed a kind of pattern and formula and were way behind their times. Movies like *Nanjundi Kalyana*, *Anjada Gandu*, *A*, *Upendra*, *Auto Shankar* and many more could be added to this list.

Recently there have been sparse attempts like *Gulaabi Talkies*, *Thayi Saheba* etc. with women as their central characters. But they have failed to make a strong enough impact as to create or to consider it a movement.

The year 1983 was important for the Kannada Cinema because Prema Karanth directed a movie called *Phaniyamma*. It was a significant attempt because it was the first time a woman director had ventured something like directing a movie, which was till then a forte completely dominated by men. It was also about a widowed woman

and her sufferings. But that too had little impact on the people of Karnataka probably due to the fact that it was about a Brahmin widow and the customs and traditions of Brahmin community. The majority of the people could not relate or connect to it as they felt alienated from what was being portrayed on the screen. Kashinath made movie called *Anubhava* which broke the conservative mode of thinking but his attempt too had a different concern than women emancipation or anything like that. He was trying to free the minds of people and compel them to think of sexual problems more freely instead of shying away from them. Recently there have a fleet of women directors in Kannada Cinema like Kavitha Lankesh, Sumana Kittur, Vijayalakshmi Singh. But they too have failed to make an impression on the Kannada audience as they have been making movies which are commercially viable than women oriented movies rather than women oriented movies with a couple of exceptions (*Devereri* and *Avva*).

The early Kannada theatre was influenced and inspired by the Marathi and Parsi theatre. Professional theatre in Karnataka began long back in 1882 itself, some 140 years ago, when Sri Jayachamarajendra Karnataka Nataka Sabha was established which existed till 1960. Mummadi Krishna Rajendra Wodeyar who had the habit of watching the visiting Marathi and Parsi Drama troupes patronised the Sri Jayachamarajendra Karnataka Nataka Sabha.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Most of these professional companies staged mythological and historical plays, like the early Kannada Cinema. There was little scope for social and realistic plays at that early phase of Kannada theatre. Yet as days went on, staging the historical and mythological plays became expensive and the company owners had to think about alternatives. They thought about new social plays which were quite different from the earlier plays that they had been staging. Plays like *Sadarame*, *Samsara Nauke* staged by Gubbi Veeranna Company became successful. But such plays were didactic or mere entertainers. The values those plays propagated were quite far from what could be called Feministic.

The early playwrights from Basavappa Shastry to Shrikantesha Gowda were mainly concerned with bringing plays from different languages into Kannada. Number of plays was translated from Sanskrit and English, making available Kalidasa, Shakespeare and others to the Kannada audience. Hence we find more romances from that early Kannada theatre period than Feminist attempts. The succeeding generations of playwrights like T. P. Kailasam, Parvathavani also gave more importance to comic representation of the everyday middle class life.

The recent major playwrights in Kannada theatre like Girish Karnad, P. Lankesh, Chandrashekara Kambar, Chandrashekar Patil, H. S. Shivaprakash were also more preoccupied with issues like

religion, caste, history etc than the problems and issues concerning women. Karnad's *Hayavadana*, *Heap of Broken Images*, *Nagamandala*, *Yayathi* cannot be called feminist. He largely deals with the man-woman relationship. Lankesh's *Sankranthi* is more about the 12<sup>th</sup> century movement. Though the character of the girl in that play, Usha, seems to have modern views, she is not given all importance in the play as the play revolves round Basavanna and his disciples. H. S. Shivaprakash's *Maha Chaitra* also is of the same theme. Kambar's latest play too is about Basavanna. These plays are more concerned with history than with the present. Chandrashekar Patil's plays are more absurd and experimental in nature. H. S. Venkatesha Murthy's plays are more romances than anything else. Some of the mythological characters have been reconstructed by few of these playwrights questioning the old values with new understanding and perspectives. Even such attempts seem to have failed to leave a lasting impression.

Surprisingly very few women have taken to writing plays in Kannada. Except for a few rare attempts of some women writers to translate some plays from other languages there has been no notable woman playwright in Kannada. Writers like Vaidehi have tried writing some children's plays. But those plays do not raise the gender issues. There have been some solo performances by some women artists. But they can only be considered as an inadequate and meek attempt of feminism.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Just because a play is performed by a single woman will not make it a feminist play. Looking at the theme of the major Kannada playwright's one can come to a conclusion that Kannada theatre has failed to represent the issues related to women in an able manner. How such powerful media like theatre and Cinema can be ignored by the thinkers and writers to represent issues related to women is something that cannot be easily explained. Perhaps the involvement of more number of women in theatre and cinema might help to improve the situation. The women have accepted the legacy from generation to generation through oral tradition initially and through the academic norms of the present day in most of the cases. Women expressions, actions, and roles are perceived as a commodity for artistic or cultural consumption. In Independent India a great number of women performers have represented the country as cultural

representatives and brought great reputation to the art forms

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