



The Transformative Power of *Bathukamma*¹: Gender, Representation and the Real

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Abstract

The paper seeks to discuss the transformative potentiality of the *bathukamma* ritual and its reality and gender in the performance. I have used Erika Lichte's conceptualization of "transformative" to gauge the significance of such art form from the point of view of performance which involves spectatorship, revelry and function and their relationship. I suppose such an art form is not only subversive to its core but also instrumental in bringing a new order of life that advertently seeks to evade the conventional divisions of art and life, male and female, present and past, particular and universal etc. With such theoretical concepts, the paper intends to show that *bathukamma* is a ritual theatre and its dimension of *seeing* is a potent vehicle for social awakening and change. This process engages us to reckon this ritual event as a social functionary and embodying a transformative power in itself. The paper also tries to suggest that ritual as an art form is very dynamic in compression of times, spaces and experience. The ritual is a reminiscence of the past or the memorial of women's sacrifices in the ancient Indian patriarchal system which simultaneously showcases a transformative potential for a just and better life in the present.

Keywords: Gender, Transformation, Performative, Reality, Representation, Patriarchy

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that India has rich performative traditions beginning from the *Natyashastra* or even before that in the forms of *slokasa*, *gathas*, and holy chants of Vedas. The performative tradition is customarily divided into two categories: *deshi* (folk) and *margi* (cultured, or *natyadharmi*) in

the conventional theatrical parlance. *Margi* or *Naytadharmi* convention has postulated fixed codes of character, of aesthetics and noble thought process as prerequisites for the stage so that the audience members/*sahridayi* can emulate them in their own lives and derive pleasure from that. The evocation of pleasure (*rasa* as perceived by Bharat) has been a prime objective of any artistic or representational enterprise.

In opposition to that folk conventions of performance in India have been immensely experimental, diverse and democratic in outreach and materialization of meaning. Unlike the *natya* tradition, it has a checkered history and has been deeply connected to the common folk/people. They do not follow any rigid dramatic conventions as far as dramaturgy is concerned. Folk drama and ritual theatres have been used for communication and other pedagogical purposes since time immemorial. They have always been performed in regional *bhasha* or everyday use of language. Their thematic preoccupations are diverse but essentially, they reflect upon the norms and issues of society with a critical perspective to offer an alternative system or order against the dominant one. Therefore, they are largely political to the core and message transmission remains indispensable in such form. Over the years, these folk drama and ritual theatre remained vibrant and display continuity between people and their interests even in the tumultuous time zones. A folk culture that is essentially based on orality had done a remarkable job in preserving the folk art form and practices that would have been otherwise extremely difficult to preserve in its multitudes. Folk forms in their entirety, thus, have been propelled by and thrived on the energy of the commoners without really getting any patronage or privilege as such. A lot of efforts have been put in by government organizations nowadays, to preserve the folk arts and their performative aspect. However, looks very necessary to patronise the folk artists as well to continue to foster and nurture the folk art forms amidst a technology-driven society.

The religious revelry in India is considered a site of rich experience of different emotions and passions that deeply affects our social and emotional life. Major Hindu religious festivals fall in the month of *Karthik* or September-October of the Gregorian calendar. It is the time of celebration of festivals as well as of divine revelation through the popular shows of *Ramlila*, *Raslila*, *Garba* etc. The major festivals such as *Dussehra* or *Vijayadasami* attract a wide range of audiences and instil in them a great enthusiasm for the celebration. *Dussehra* is widely celebrated to mark the victory of truth over evil. It overpowers the spirit of the commoners both in the northern and as well as southern parts of India. Around this time an equally popular and engaging festival is *Navratri*- a nine-day celebration of feminine divine power, goddess Durga: an occasion of the celebration to mark the unbridled feminine energy of divinity for the protection and as well as for ousting the negative psychic impressions from the individuals and society at large.

Bathukamma, the subject of my discussion is a folk ritual of Hindus in the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The equivalent festival to it is *Navaratri* which is well celebrated in the northern part of India. They, however, differ from each other because of their sociopolitical messages or correspondence with their followers. *Bathukamma* is purely a women-centric celebration and *Navratri*, on the other is celebrated by both men and women. Both, nonetheless are celebrated for about nine days. *Bathukamma* as a ritual is the celebration of the power of womanhood and woman's sacrifices for the family. In Hyderabad city I found it happening on a large scale and people regardless of class, and caste seem to indulge in ineffable revelry. *Bathukamma* has been made a state festival after the formation of Telangana State in 2012 in an effort presumably to reclaim or retrieve a (in)glorious Hindu identity by the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) Government. Whatever the reasons may be behind the declaration of such folk ritual as a state festival, it generated an immense value and interest in people's consciousness regardless

of caste and gender barriers. It ceases to be a 'folky' festival because of the state's recognition. It is now being celebrated in America, the United Kingdom and Australia and several other countries where the *Telugu* have settled in for their livelihood permanently or otherwise. And this ritual likewise has become a(an) inter/transnational phenomenon, so to say.

If we go down in the myth of *bathukamma*, we find that it commemorates the sacrifices of goddess *Sati*, the first incarnation of goddess Parvati² (she is the supreme power as a goddess, and the consort of lord Shiva. *Sati* immolated herself to save the dignity of her husband). The literal meaning of *bathukamma* means oh mother! Come alive. The myth that is attached to the ritual induces a special kind of reverence or *bhakti* (religious sentiment) among the revellers. It, therefore, celebrates life and women's energy amidst lots of hardship they are subjected to in their day-to-day life. If we look at the possible message in the rituals, immolation is the least cause for its celebration. In fact, it is an act of assertion and power show of *women collective* in the Indian social set-up where patriarchy is the dominant order.

The Rituals of *Bathukamma* as Transformative Performance

Bathukamma is an inclusive ritual form which incorporates not only the singing, dance, mimicry and show but also the revelation, an ineffable moment of divine appearance for the revellers, especially for the women who are both spectators and performers. The epiphanic experience in the ritual is intrinsic to women who feel quite enamoured while watching and performing the rituals. This ritual enacts certain acts which are transgressing: it evades the dominant, established order and questions power authority that helps build such order. The ritual inverts the status-quo of the Indian social hierarchy of male-female, poor-rich, powerful-powerless and so on. The performance of such a ritual must be read at the cusp of the practice of oppression as well as celebration and social transformation. Rituals always intend to "*boundary-cross*

sing...they are often transvestite, and often the epitome of an authority alternative to that paramount within the community...in ritual performance, as go-betweens come from afar, they are agents of change ...” (Werbner 8, emphasis added).

Bathukamma as stated above is a ritual of womanhood, female power and their self-assertion. In Indian social structure, it marks the arrival of a newly wedded bride to her parents' place. The meaning of this festival thus signifies the *homecoming* of a newly married daughter. This practice of coming home perhaps springs from the mythical narrative of goddess Sati who visits her parent's place after her marriage with Lord Shiva. The performativity of *bathukamma* makes this ritual an object of study from the historical and sociological points of view. If we look it purely at the performance, we find the ritual takes place in the evening when a group of women clad in colourful saris assemble at a particular place, preferably a square or *chabutara* near their house. Sometimes, it is also performed in public spaces such as a park or government buildings to incorporate as many women as possible. The gathering implies a signification that women as a collective are undivided, unfazed by all sorts of coercion. By having the ritual in a public space they also try to show that women are “empowered together” and may challenge any sort of oppression. The visuals of *bathukamma* are brilliant and appealing at the same time because of its scenic beauty. The preliminary decoration of *rangoli*³ is done on the plain ground to mark the beginning of the main event as sacrosanct. As in all major Hindu religious practices, the *swastika* (cross-like mark with a tilted edge) sign is essentially made to reckon divine energy, *rangolis* in *bathukamma* are made in a circular shape but they are primarily octagonal and spherical. It is interesting to note that the octagonal design which is like a star is a symbolic projection of eight sides. The performance of *bathukamma* with all its symbolic marks creates splendid spectacles that not only mesmerize the spectators but also make them witness women's power and their identity.

Performing women make a circle, and sing some devotional songs pertaining to the childhood of goddess Sati, her adventure in searching for her spouse Shiva, despite Daksha's, her father, deep abhorrence of Shiva. Singing and dancing are indispensable constituents of *bathukamma*. Its performance is extremely a subversive act and seeks to undermine the obnoxious masculinity and patriarchal power structures and their ideology of subjugation at different levels. As it's a nine-day celebration (*Navratri*⁴) each day a particular song is sung by the practising women that have a social value concerning the daughter and her spouse and their conjugal life. For example, a song is sung about the marriage and her children, her husband etc. With song, women place a flower of marigold each time in a mound from their platters. They place it where the image of the goddess is imagined. The locale is stunningly fragrant due to various seasonal flowers which are freshly picked up. Occasionally, artificial flowers are also used to build a huge mound or shape which looks like a giant phallus. The place which has been laid up with flowers and burning incense creates a deep reverence in the revellers. An earthen lamp is also lighted up and kept at the centre where the totem has been placed. Visually, light and flowers are all around which represents life and its celebration.

From the performance point of view, the most spectacular and symbiotically laden scene is the circular movement that the collective women make. They move back and forth in a circle or a row. Their bodily movement is in perfect synchronization with the song they sing. They clap three times while making movements in three directions, perhaps signifying the three phases that a woman plays in a man's life: as a daughter, as a wife and as a mother. They place flowers each time they move around at a particular place where the image of the goddess is configured. The whole process of offering flowers is intended to mitigate the painful experience of the goddess from the fire that had consumed her body. In the ritual practising, women deploy their creative imagination to symbolically liberate her and as well as themselves seamlessly. Hence, at the chronological and

artistic level, the ritual becomes amorphous in the performative which reminiscence of women's plight in the mythical past and contemporary present. Here women's subjectivity configures in the enactment. In performance women not only dance, sing and worship their deity, but also claim their "space" publically. On this sanctified occasion women perform their "identity" which is otherwise not available to them in a patriarchal set-up, and also show publically to disregard any oppressive system. Through the song and dance women, performers share their daily experiences and grievances that they might have harboured under different obligations. The performance thus becomes a medium for their self-expression and a source of creative fulfilment. Equally, it gives a fair chance for freedom when they practise it and opens up the channel of liberation from the hegemony of patriarchy.

On the last day of performing, women carry the mound of flowers on a platter on their heads. The beauty of it lies in their bodily balance and the poise they maintain while moving. Once the ritual of dance and singing has been solemnized, the practising women carry the totem of *bathukamma* to submerge into the sacred water body, a lake or river or pond. It is equally significant to note that the props used in the *bathukamma* ritual are flowers, fruits, leaves and mud pots, earthen lamps etc., and they are ecologically friendly and biodegradable. Practitioners avoid using plastic items as much as possible. However, there can be seen some attraction towards the usage of plastic ware and items in city dwellers these days. All the *bathukamma* items also have medicinal values in them. As a result of which, the water does not get polluted and remains significantly clean and healthy. This whole process of immersion of stacked flowers is a signification of the process of death and resurrection that alludes to the Hinduism belief system in the chain of continuity or the cycle of life and death.

In the ritual performance, the audience tends to encounter reality not as a *priori* but as an idea constructed out of a system of 'make-belief'. In this sense 'experience' I assume becomes a

“transformative moment in which incongruous elements were juxtaposed, often 'doubled up', plucked - with all their physiological and emotional connotations-out of the everyday world” (Werbner 7). Here revellers which include women *en masse* encounter a shock and as well an urge to become like a goddess. As practising women folk try to perform mythical reality (demonstrate as real) it also constitutes their imaginary plight. Here, the imaginary helps construct not only a ‘reality’ of women’s (past) plight but also re-enacts or performs it about the present-day oppression they encounter in private and public spaces. Performance facilitates in construction of women’s identity and space across historical times. This becomes tenable because of the active interaction of audience and performers which Erika F Lichte calls “bodily co-presence,” (47) of audience and performers/women.



Fig -1 Representation and the Paradox of Women’s Liberation in *Bathukamma*

The representation is one of the marked features of post-structuralism, postcolonial discourse that projects “reality” as a special effect of language. This logic presupposes that the world doesn’t exist outside of the linguistic terrain. This conception is understood as the ‘linguistic turn’ in the literary and cultural

theory. This constructionism was primarily postulated by Ferdinand de Saussure and but later reaffirmed by thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Julia Kristeva among others. The majority of the post-structuralists believe in the performative power of language and that there is no transcendent realm that stands beyond language that escapes the conventional and constructed categories of discourse. The value of representation has been polemical since the early twentieth century. Among other things, it may be best located in T. S. Eliot's cliché "individual talent" in the process of creation of imaginary work, which was considered in modernist writings a kind of skill or craft.

Representation has always been likened with a medium through which certain ideas or thought processes are communicated or materialized. In theatre and the performative practices that are engaged in the productions of theatrical pieces such as rituals, events etc., are the viable sites for representation and communication of aesthetic value, if any. It not only offers spectators a perspective to view the performance as a construct but also seeks to analyze the tensions between texts and contexts, which is largely the constitution of the social, cultural, and political institutions that make any representation possible. That is to say, it throws light on the material conditions that produce any event in the public domain. Representation thus helps spectators to identify not only the theatricals in performance but also the ideological imperatives that affect them. The chief objective of the representation is to display and more importantly to construct meaning in narratives. In the parlance of performance, the experience of reality which is coterminous with meaning is a much-debated topic from the artistic and as well practical dimensions. Reality more often than not is schematised between tangible (ontological) and intangible (imagery/universal). In a slightly different way, Lacan considers the same as 'real' which he defines as something unidentifiable, a lack that can't be easily located. In Lacanian disposition 'real' as a matter of fact does not exist: it is a myth. Likewise in deconstruction reality is the outcome of

“difference” which Derrida used both as a verb and as a noun to denote the sameness and difference within itself. In the narrative and performative parlance ‘reality’ is often equated with the ‘real’, or ‘natural’. The reality, instead, is opposed to the natural or self-evident. It is rather an attitude or sensibility which tends to project certain events that are necessarily drawn upon the actual phenomena we see or live with. Reality or more categorically realism, hence, is the *textualization* of the writer’s experience of the world he/she lives or sees around. In this intellectual framework, the reality is assumed as an “appearance of what is real” and the “appearance of what is true” (Earnshaw 4). It, therefore, is *mediation* among author, text and reader with a certain degree of *agreement* (emphasis added).

In the *bathukamma* reality is constructed in the moment of *seeing* and *partaking* by the spectators. On the one hand, it signifies the subjugation of Sati in a mythical time and narrative and on the other; it refers to the immediate condition of the women's community and becomes a ubiquitous phenomenon. Here the representation of women takes place at two levels: firstly, verbal and secondly visual. This dual-mode critically engages itself to re-produce the scene or vignette in sync with the audience not only as a special kind of *narrative* but also as an *ideology* that makes the thing or constitutes the narrative possible. Art and its imaginary in our daily life is a continual process. Hence, in *bathukamma* ritual theatre it largely depends on the perceivers’ view. The audience or spectators have special power to choose what to see and what not to. The very fact of seeing depends on what we see (seeing⁵ should be considered as a ‘performative act’ especially espoused by Austin), it is based on people’s choice of encountering a certain kind of experience. The real and imaginary or seeing and the seen thus become so fluid that the very difference between performers and revellers is blurred. The visualization of *bathukamma* is thus a significant experience in itself: it provides a vision to perceive the otherwise unperceivable. The prospect of *seeing* at and what is *seen*, therefore, becomes the locus of understanding the whole event. Gilles Fauconnier and Marl Turner promulgate that while

seeing performance or enactment often the audience members most likely “blend” cognitive categories together and then “unblend” them to get a more objective sense of what they are doing seeing” (Mc Conachie 558). With such theoretical imperatives art and its aestheticism coalesces into what Lichte calls “trans-formative potentiality” for the better prospect. It also increasingly becomes a moment of ineffable experience or reality in performance which oscillates between past and present, between particular and universal, and between self and society.

Historically feminist scholarship has focused on the liberation of women, women’s space, and their subjugation from the arch enemy-patriarchy. Postcolonial feminist discourse too undermines patriarchy but it also sheds light on the biasedness based on (white) race and ethnicity or caste, along with the supremacy of white women or western feminism. In the case of India and South Asian regions social formation, for example, is an excellent example to show women's subjugation. They are not only victims of gendered violence but also subjugated by religion, caste and social customs which are specifically applicable to *women* only. In this context, they are twice or thrice subjugated subjects looking for their liberation. The liberation of women in such a rigid patriarchal set-up should be a long and sustained engagement. Art and literary pieces here offer a unique service by spotlighting women’s oppression and their marginalized subjectivity. It is through such literary representations, the means of their liberation look imminent and inevitable.

Conclusion

In the rituals of *bathukamma* the hegemony of patriarchy is de-essentialised even though it enacts the death of Goddess Sati in mythological time which is happening in past and present time zones almost seamlessly. This practice envisaged revival of the suffering and as well as showing the immense power of the goddess and her resilience against all odds. It unfailingly occasions women to identify them with the divine power amidst

lots of violence: as though a sense of power is bestowed upon them through the goddess's sacrifice. The ritual, hence, works as palimpsest which commemorates not only Sati's sacrifice but also instil in them energy or valour to challenge the male(centred) norms. Immolating oneself is a clear case of suicidal acts under duress and it can be seen more as a social evil in Indian society today. Violence on women and abetting women to commit suicide due to dowry or sexual abuse etc are very rampant in the present scenario. And liberation from such devilish acts is contingent upon more social mobilization and sensitization.

In the *bathukamma* we see the enactment of the life-force of Sati and other women who partake in it in almost one image. The ritual exhorts women to fight together against the prevailing conditions. The violence on the individual self (goddess) thus becomes ubiquitous as all women identify themselves with her. The performance thus serves twofold purposes: firstly, it spotlights the women's subjugation across the historical times as incorrigible, and second, it attracts the attention of the viewers not only as a complacent spectator but also as active participants, what Augusto Boal famously called 'spect-actors'. In the process of constructing the idea of free self, spectators use their imaginary to imagine and re-structure the social system based on gender parity. This interchangeability of positions from viewers to partakers in *bathukamma* probably gives a sense of control over the historical event to retain it just as a 'memorial' and to abhor from its likelihood re(oc)currence. This 'transformative' in the *bathukamma* performance is possible with the perspective of *visuality* which works with the spectatorship. The reality (also meaning) in the *bathukamma* thus is a matter of interplay between the reveller's cognitive ability and performative experience or spectacles.

Endnotes:

1. The festival is a very popular religious ritual in Hyderabad, equally celebrated in the other parts of the states of Telangana and Andhra. During my stay at the EFL University

campus, Hyderabad, I happened to have a chance to watch this closely on the campus and in the vicinity about the colourful spectacles of *bathukamma* rituals.

2. Parvati is an embodiment of supreme cosmic energy and the consort of lord Shiva. Sati is her first incarnation but most beloved to Shiva, daughter of Daksha, a Brahmin king who provoked her to self-immolate in the Fire sacrifice.
3. Rangoli is a colourful design made on the ground as part of some religious or cultural celebration and it is the reckoner of holy sign to invoke or attract the favoured gods or goddess or holy spirit before the puja or main celebration in Hinduism.
4. Navratri is a nine-day celebration of goddess Durga and considered holiest months in Hindu calendar. Majority of Hindus observe fast to appease goddess for health, wealth and wisdom.
5. Seeing is used here as an action or active verb which performs the task it is assigned. This is advocated by J L Austin and his theory of performance where he defines a language on its function such as locutionary, illocutionary, perlocutionary etc. as the key ingredients in a given text /context. Here it is also used in the conjunction with the performative theory of Judith Butler where she theorizes 'gender' as the 'performative' act, not as a self-evident entity.

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