**Feminism: Concepts and Theories**
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**Guest Speaker: Dr. Harmony Siganporia**

**Female Impersonators in Parsi Theatre**

Feminism Concept and Theories, welcome back to week 9. 9, 10, 11 and finally Learnings and Conclusions. Congratulations you are in the home stretch and the last few weeks are arguably some of the most enjoyable, interesting concepts that I am going to be able to speak to you about.

Today for lecture 20, I am also very pleased that I have been able to find time for Dr. Harmony Siganporia, associate professor at MICA, Ahmedabad to be able to come here and speak to you about her work.

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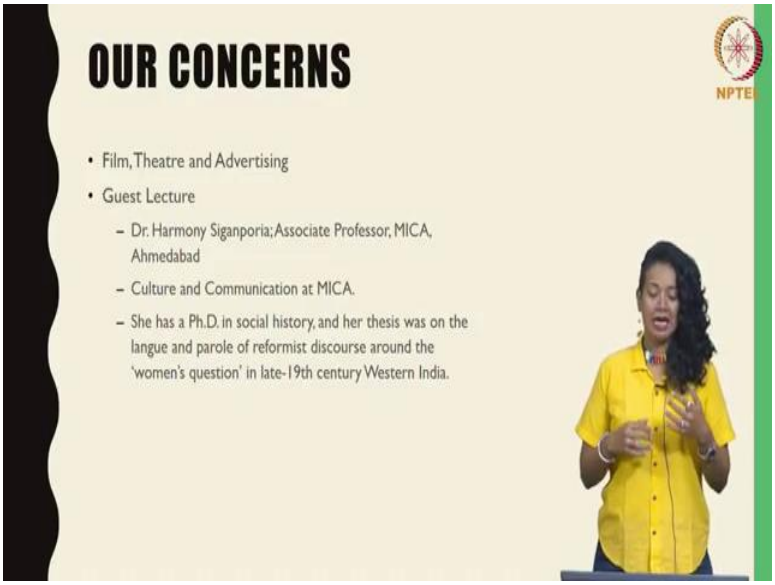


So todays hour is going to be a guest lecture by Dr. Siganporia, who as I mentioned teaches at MICA, Ahmedabad. Her areas of work are culture and communication. She had a PhD in social history and her thesis was on the language (langue) and parole of feminist reformist discourse around the women's questions. So when I say feminist, it's in quotes; it is about ways in which feminist work deals with the women's question and reform movements around it in late 19$^{th}$ century western India. Some of these aspects have already been introduced to you in Dr. Karunakaran's lecture in relation to post independence India.

But today's lecture, given that our week concerns film, theatre and advertising will spend these concerns very specifically to do with Dr. Siganporia's work on female impersonators in Parsi theatre in pre-independence – post-independence India.

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So without further ado, please join me in welcoming Dr. Signaporia, who is the author of the wonderful book, I am the Widow: An Intellectual Biography of Beheramji Malabari, which was recently awarded the professor Sneh Mahajan Award at the 80th session of the Indian History Congress. Without further ado, Dr. Harmony Siganporia.

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Today we are going to be talking about a period in… towards the end of the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th when within a certain codified space known as Parsi Theatre,

there is a liminal moment where female impersonators and women are vying for the same roles and competing for what it would mean to occupy the space as performers.

I am going to start by reading to you a very tiny extract from a scholar called Kathryn Hansen who is a theatre historian and has worked on this space significantly. Parsi theatre is immensely under-researched, which is why it is both exciting as well as a bit of a challenge – to work on a space without an archive – the archive that we do have for Parsi theatre is in fragments, and exists across, primarily Gujrati, and some, some texts comes to us in Hindustani as well, which is why the work of the scholars like Somnath Gupt who Kathryn Hansen translates into English and Mrinal Pande become very valuable to any scholar from the present attempting to reconstruct a period that we otherwise have very little access to.

Kathryn Hansen says that "Contrary to the argument that performing women were unavailable, records show that the Parsi Theatre employed both female impersonators and actresses for a considerable duration. In a sense, they competed against each other, and companies and publics made choices about whom they wished to represent women on stage – men or women?"

Now this is a really telling extract. It is an extremely succinct, if you will, summation of precisely what we are going to spend the rest of this lecture unpacking, which is this notion that if gender is performed then who would we have preferred to see perform feminity, I am sorry, femininity on stage in the late 19$^{th}$ and early 20$^{th}$ century.

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For a moment, I am going to have to dial back and explain what I talk about when I talk about Parsi theatre. In some senses, the term Parsi theatre is somewhat misleading. It only came to be because the earliest theatre houses as well as theatre companies were funded and owned by the tiny Parsi community, initially in and out of Bombay, but quite soon spreading across the rest of India.

The primary languages as I mentioned earlier of Parsi theatre were Gujrati, Hindustani, and Urdu. The first play that… the first Urdu play that we are familiar with within the space is something called *Sone ke mul ki Khurshid* and it was written by a Parsi playwright who went by the pen name *Aaram*. It was despite the name, as I said earlier, a very – in the Indian sense of the word – secular site, in that, Parsi theatre saw representation from people of myriad faiths and all kinds of persuasions. It was considered to be a more rational form of entertainment than all the folk traditions, which proceeded it for a number of reasons, some of which are as follows:

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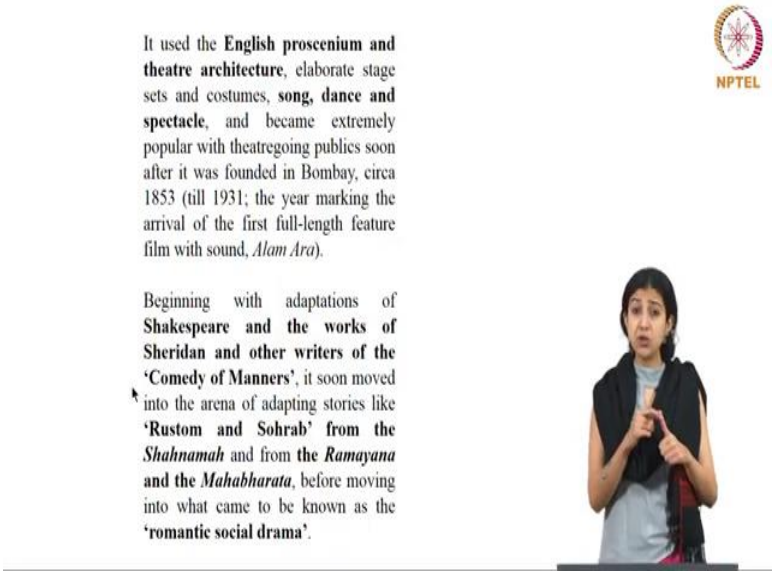


Parsi theatre uses what is known as the proscenium – the notion of the stage and a separation between the performer and their audience. This is a convention that it takes from, well all kinds of modern theatrical practice, and that was part of why it was considered to be a more, as I mentioned earlier, rational form of entertainment than the folk media that come before it.

There would be elaborate stage sets and costumes, and of course, something that we recognize even in present times, much song and dance. These are conventions that film actually acquires from Parsi theatre, which is the first, in some senses, form of modern Indian theatre practice.

The period that we are looking at – since I started by saying we were looking at the late 19$^{th}$ century oozing in to the 20$^{th}$ century to put some kind of fixed boundary around it – what we are looking at is roughly the period between 1853 when you see the first of these performances come to be in Bombay. And we can take 1931 as a rough-cut off date, which is primarily because it corresponds with the arrival of *Alam Ara*, which is the first Indian talkie – the end of silent cinema and birth of the talkie – is an effective hard stop, in some senses, to certain forms of Parsi theatre. I will speak more about this later in the lecture but this is roughly the time period in question: 1853 to 1931.

And as we move on, I will also elaborate on how this period itself is one that is extremely contested for several other reasons because it also marks the beginnings of several social reform movements, the culmination of others and the beginning of what in India came to be called the women's question all of which are ideas that we will unpack as we go.

The earliest pieces that we performed for Parsi theatre came from Shakespeare, came from people like William Sheridan and other writers of the Comedy of Manners, but they quickly transitioned into tales that would be adapted from Persian epics like the *Shahnamah* for example.

And soon after that, the stories that we share in common, the Indian epics, the pan-Indian epics in some senses, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Stories form these, but very particular stories from these, and if we had access to more scripts, we would have been able to ascertain how closely, or perhaps not, they followed the more hegemonic tellings of a tale as contested and plural as the Ramayana. But since we do not have those scripts, it is impossible for us to be certain whether they maintain fidelity to the canonical tellings of these epics, or took certain liberties with them.

What we do know is that after a period where these were the dominant stories that one came across on the Parsi stage, we soon transition into something known as the romantic social drama, which contains elements recognizable to us, to date in the form of the domesticity that is at the heart of the some of the telllings that one still witnesses in tele-novelas or soap operas for example. But domesticity and negotiating it is largely what we are talking about when we speak about the romantic social drama which comes to be the dominant form of Parsi theatre.

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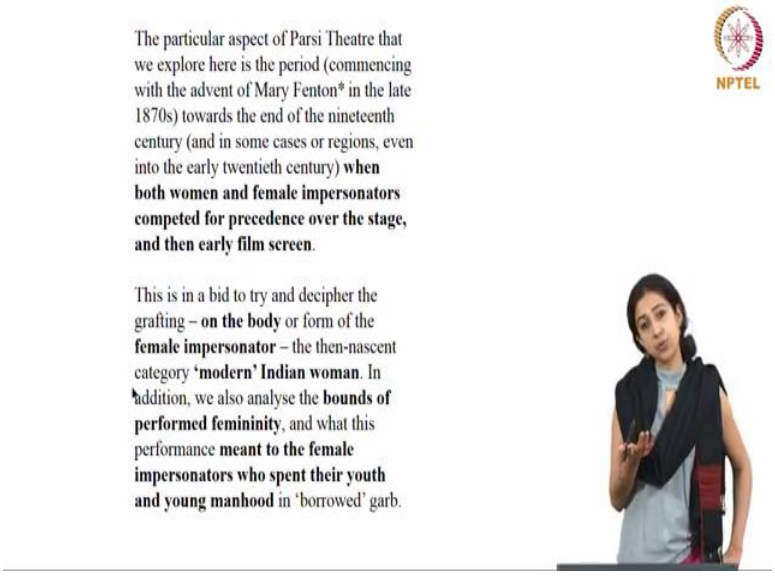


The particular aspects of Parsi theatre that I am going to be speaking to you about today are about this time period that we have etched between 1853 and 1931. In specific terms, we are going to be looking at the overlap between the availability of female performers and female

impersonators – which was the norm before female performers became available for the stage – and, as we started by saying, what it means for publics, theatre-going audiences obviously, theatre troops, and performers themselves, what these choices might tell us about an incipient form of Indian modernity slowly coming to be crafted in this period.

What did it mean when publics were much more willing to encounter the body of a female impersonator on stage rather than the body of a women playing a woman. These are choices that tell us something about the period, they tell us something about society in flux and the kinds of negotiations that we are constantly engaging in, in the performativity of gender roles. In this case, rather literally because it is specifically gender that is being performed on stage.

The period in question ought to be clear to us by now, but I am going to tell you more about a woman called Mary Fenton in a moment; but… Mary Fenton is one of the first female stars of the Parsi stage and she becomes available to perform in Parsi theatre as early as the 1870s. Now, despite the presence of not just Mary, but a whole bunch of other female actors like her, it is still female impersonators like Master Chamaplal, and later the stars of the scene, Jaishankar Sundari and Bal Gandharva, who will have precedence over these female performers for a couple of decades into the 20$^{th}$ century and it is interesting for us to wonder why or how that may have come to be.

Now the reason that I focus on this is, "This is in a bid to try and decipher the grafting – on the body or form of the female impersonator…" What it is that we speak about when we speak about the modern Indian women of the nationalist imagination? The body becomes the site where some of these signifiers come to be stabilized even as others come to be attendant upon this body; they are grafted on to it; and some are obviously dropped in the process and it becomes interesting to see which markers become more dominant in different periods – that we look at even within the space.

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We also engage, in the words of theatre historian Mrinal Pande, with the kind of continuities that we see between the performance of gender in a sight like Parsi theatre and what remains to us in the world we live in today; in the form of the spaces that are available for women and female performers in a medium like film. As Mrinal Pande puts it, "There is a direct connection between the young and baby-faced Parsi theatre players of female roles and the present day portrayal of women in Hindi films," because "while the 'femininity' on display may well be "different in scope and degree," it is not different in kind.

I told you a moment ago that I will tell you more about Mary Fenton, the first female performer, who was a huge celebrity within the Parsi theatre space. Now Mary Fenton is the daughter of someone who used to be a soldier in the British Indian army and once he retired he continued to live in India travelling from place to place with 'Magic Lantern' shows. Mary Fenton, his daughter, would be on the road with him. At some point, she meets a young Parsi theatre actor / director / writer called Kavas Khatau; they fall in love, they marry and she takes on the Parsi stage name, Meherbai. Now it is held that Meherbai, or Mary Fenton if you prefer, had impeccable addiction and could deliver excellently in Gujrati, Urdu and Hindustani. This made her a very coveted figure within the Parsi theatre space. She and Kavas Khatau separated in later times but Meherbai continued to perform for a long-long time.

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Now, why did female impersonators enjoy the kind of currency that they did in the first modern form of Indian theatre that became available to us. It because there are several folk traditions of long standing, which have deployed female impersonators before we arrive at this juncture and Parsi Theatre; regardless of whether you are talking about *Jatra* as a tradition, *Yakshagana*, *Bhavai* from Gujrat, these are obviously folk traditions that come from different regions and parts of what we now call the nation state of India, female impersonation was the norm. Female performers were not then, and to date, they do not remain a major part of each of these imaginations, of each of these… of each of these performance traditions. For that reason, Parsi theatre had an abundance of choices, when it came to recruiting the finest female impersonators for the stage.

This was a tradition of long standing, it made a ready sense both for the theatre troops as well as audiences to continue or to perpetuate what was already the established norm when it came to the performative body. There is no challenge being mounted to it in the early years because it is easiest.

Now each company of course had to vie for the prettiest young boys with the most beautiful voices and they knew that it would bear very rich dividends. What do I mean by that?

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What I mean by that is that audience response, or reaction, to some of these young performers was somewhat extreme. This is Mrinal Pande again who tells us about records that she has come across about fan followings in Bombay which were enormous. Each master, well, each female impersonator, each master female impersonator would acquire large fan followings and they were not past falling into a little bit of the swoon when they saw their chosen master female impersonator perform on stage. So we have accounts of people literally falling in the aisles when they encounter, say, a Bal Gandharva, playing Shakuntala on stage, or perhaps, Jaishankar Sundari playing Sita as he did.

There is a huge and rich kind of mythos around the kind of effect that these master female impersonators had upon theatre going publics, which were obviously comprising men but as we draw into the early years of the 20$^{th}$ century included also spaces for women. So these audiences are also mixed and we are going to spend some time thinking about the composition of this audience as we go, but I think it is important to bear in mind that it is not exclusively men that these plays are being performed to, you have an increasing number of women also being part of theatre-going publics perhaps for the first time. There are instances, and again this is Mrinal Pande, there are instances of certain rather well known master female impersonator like master Wasi from Lahore or a master Nisar, whose voice was, in her words, "a golden soprano, it is said that could rise above the scales available on the keys of the harmonium." He died young and of very tragic circumstances and this also forces us to reckon with something that perhaps is not immediately the first thing that we arrive at, which is the boundaries that circumscribed obviously, the lives of these female impersonators

because there were a stringent set of rules about what it meant to continue to stay in character even when you were not performing, and the kinds of boundaries that that would place around the mobility in literal, as well as metaphorical terms, for these female impersonators was immense and it took something of a, one could argue, physic toll on these young child actors – for they were very young when they would have started working in the Parsi theatre space. Because you are talking about young boys who were rosy cheeked and have beautiful golden soprano like voices, these are children and sometimes we lose sight of that fact – that is definitely something worth bearing in mind.

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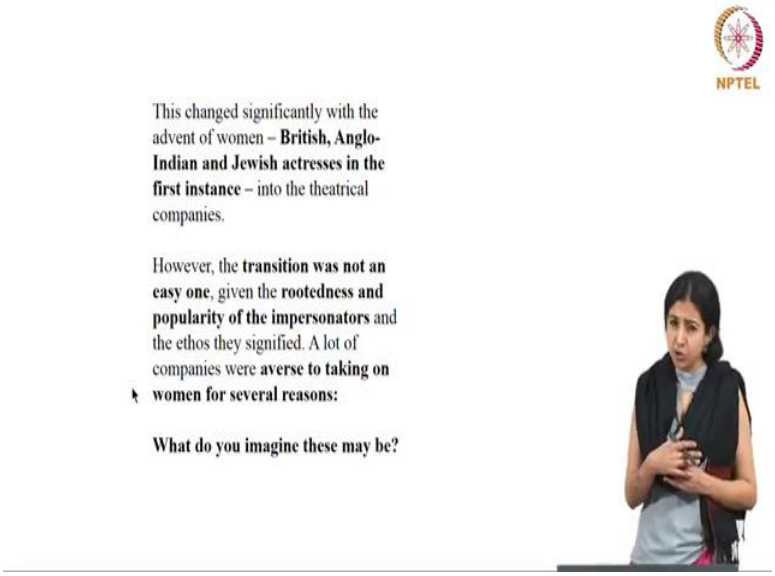


Now all of this was modified, or, I hesitate to say it changed overnight, because it did not, it changed eventually and we will get into the reasons for it, but the beginnings of these change start with figures like Mary Fenton, and later, several other women who were in the first instance either British, Anglo-Indian, or Jewish actresses who started to make themselves available to these troupes' and these were traveling troupes, like I said some of the earliest theatres that we are familiar with were constructed in Bombay. But quite soon you had a spate of theatres around colonial cities, metropolises, so these troupes travelled a fair bit. Calcutta had a series of playhouses for instance, and there is a tiny repository of a very fragmented archive as we have spoken about still available in Calcutta because it had something of a tradition of troupes, Parsi theatre troupes, coming through this colonial city.

The transition even when it happened was never going to be an easy one, given the popularity, as well as the rootedness of the ethos that surrounded the figure of the female impersonator. Both audiences, theatre troupes, as well as the performers themselves were

extremely averse to taking on women players into their midst. There are a series of reasons why, but I would urge you, before you continue with the lecture, to think about what those reasons may have been.

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Some of those reasons were obviously of a rather practical nature. If you had women travelling with you, you'd have to make separate accommodation arrangements, you had to arrange for them to travel in separate compartments from the rest of the troupe because it stood to the reason that for moral reasons there had to be a separation of the women from everybody else who was a part of these outfits; and there were a lot of people who had to work on each production because remember we started by saying that the Parsi theatre had elaborate stage sets and costumes for example, which would… which would lead us to imagine that each theatre troupe must have been of a rather significant size.

Apart from those separate practical concerns, there was also, as we are suggesting, the question of whether it was right for a women to be travelling at all, whether it was correct for a women to be seen in as public a sphere, as a stage were her body was up for consumption by a theatre going public.

What did it mean for a woman to work? What did it mean for a woman to work the stage? What did it mean for a woman to put herself in the public sphere in quite this visible a fashion? These were questions that made a lot of people uncomfortable and the Parsi theatre found various ways of dealing with it, but it was glacial.

The pace of change at which women performers became the norm – as you can tell from the period that we are looking at, which is approximately eight decades – clearly change was slow in coming; and most communities, including the supposedly progressive Parsi community, held such deeply naturalised notions of gender segregation that they believed, and I quote from Pande again, "[t]he presence of real flesh and blood women in theatre groups and on stage would corrode moral values and lead to extremes of debauchery."

This is obviously indicative of two things: first, that it was widely accepted that reality not only mirrored life but was also responsible for being able to form it, formulate what happened off stage. We are making a case here that art imitates life imitates art, and it is cyclical. It is not as simple as the fact of performance ending when the performance ends; it bleeds into our lived realities and helps shape them in myriad ways. There is a keen recognition of this fact.

In addition, it also tells us something about the attitudes that were widely prevalent in the period, for female bodies attempting to navigate what is slowly going to develop into a full blown public sphere by time we get to talking about the nationalist movement proper. A public sphere that in theory ought to be equal, and equitable, and accessible to everyone, but in reality, has always had mitigated levels of access based on our lived gendered realities.

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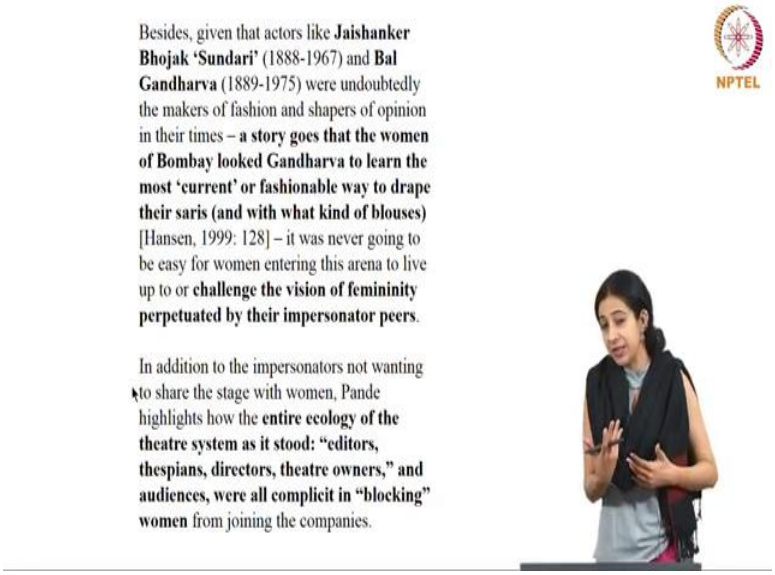


Given that actors – and you have heard me talk about both of these – the two stars, the two female impersonators who were absolutely the leading lights of this time were a Gujrati actor by the name of Jaishankar Bhojak – who was given the stage name Sundari, Sundari or the beautiful one, the beauteous one – and Bal Gandharva were undoubtedly the makers of fashion and shapers of opinion in their times.

A story goes that the women of Bombay would be taken to the theatre by their bothers, husbands, fathers, and so on and so forth, to learn how to perform being a women by watching the body of Bal Gandharva. You learnt how to most fashionably drape a saree – fashionably but also modestly – you learnt what kind of a blouse was in fashion at a given moment by watching the body of Bal Gandharva traverse the stage.

So it was an education, going to the theatre was clearly an education and notions of womanliness and femininity were constantly being iterated and performed by female impersonators and were meant to then be regurgitated by the women who would witness these performances.

I am going to give you more examples of this in a minute, but apart from the saree and the blouse, and so on and so forth, if the Nathni is popular, if and wearing it in a particular way on one particular side of one's nose etc., if carrying a handkerchief is popular at one moment in time, these were largely because of Bal Gandharva, but more on that in a moment.

In addition to the impersonators not wanting to share the stage with women, Mrinal Pande also highlights how the entire ecology as we have been discussing, everybody from the

publics to the troupes themselves, the theatres, everyone – in some senses because of all the reservations that they have about the "performing woman "– have, one is not going to go as far as saying conspired to make it happen, but they are all complicit in blocking access to the stage for female performers for a rather significant period of time.

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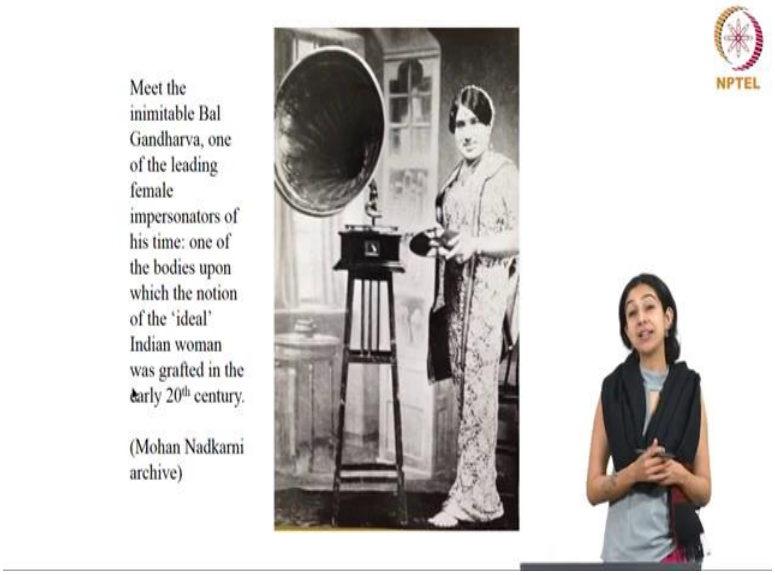


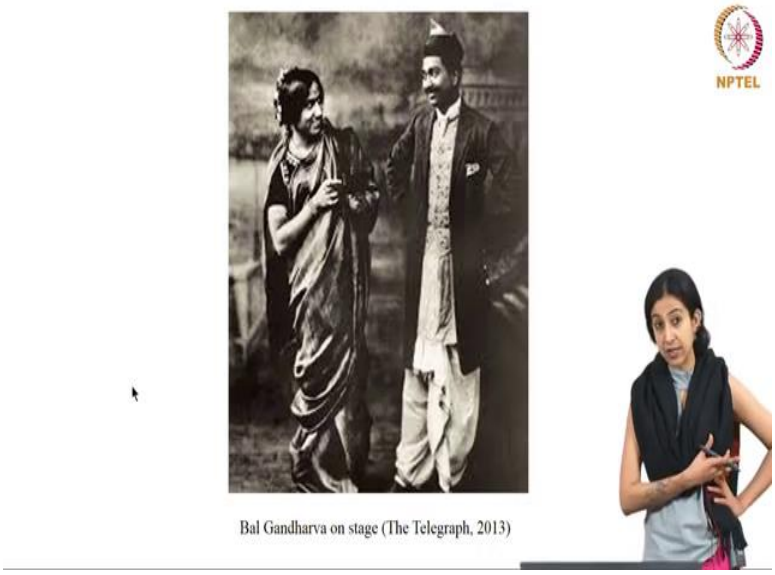


This is Bal Gandharva right here. Bal Gandharva who as I have been repeating rather endlessly is one of the leading female impersonators of his time. This particular photograph is from the archive of Mohan Nadkarni who does a beautiful book on Bal Gandharva in the 80s; and this is him with a phonograph and notice how the saree is draped just so, more importantly pay attention to the blouse. If you can zoom in on this a little bit, if you can see it better, the kind of … well this image, okay, wait… this might be a better image to be able to

witness this… but a bunch of the blouses that one sees Bal Gandharva – even more than Jaishankar Sundari – sport are also what ultimately come to be called the Parsi blouses. The style of the draping of the saree in both these images as well as the previous one are things that at least in one period a lot of the female impersonators based on the comportment of the Tagore women for example.

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What becomes obvious from iterations and performances of womanliness like this is that it is a very particular vision of femininity that is on display. It is a very particular vision of what it meant to be a woman that is on display here. This women is not outside class, she is not outside caste, in some instances, she is not even outside region; there is a keen location of this body along several class and caste axes, which give us a particular vision of what it meant to be woman. And what kind of women would be valued in a given society at a given moment; what kind of performance of femininity, or womanliness would give one social currency and acceptance in a given society during this period of time. Bal Gandharva as I was saying earlier was pretty much the last word when it came to setting the latest fashions in women's attire and behaviour and he was also something of a marketer's dream come true.

Bal Gandharva's face would be plastered across a range of female cosmetics, matchboxes, calendars, visual culture towards the earlier 20$^{th}$ century is rife with photographs of female impersonators spread across an array of products, some of which makes more sense than others. I mean matches genuinely do not make sense because of female impersonator could never be seen smoking in public. It would have caused an absolute riot, because it would have broken the continuity of the spell; the woman on stage would not be able to smoke in

public and therefore the female impersonator who brought her to life could not be seen smoking in public regardless of whether he was on stage or off it.

He popularised as we were discussing saree styles, draping the saree in particular ways, items of jewellery such as the Nathni, use of flowers to adorn one's.. and scent the hair and as I mentioned earlier, carrying a handkerchief on one's person. Hold on to the handkerchief because we are going to go back to why it might have been required in just one moment.

It is said that photographs of Bal Gandharva graced the drawing rooms of many a home in Bombay during this period; so it would be entirely par for the course to find images of Bal Gandharva in his most iconic performances, and Shakuntala is once such, in several drawing rooms across the city of Bombay in and across the early part of the 20th century, sending no doubt a number of people into a swoon.

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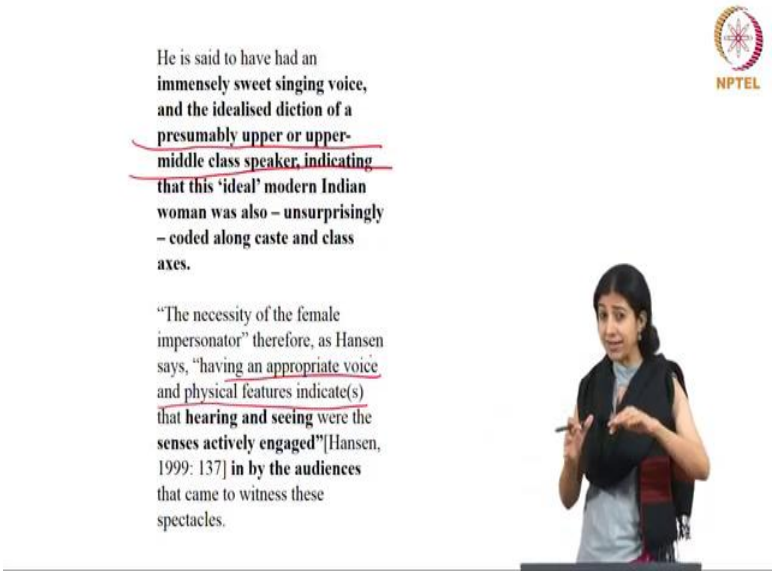


Bal Gandharva is said to have had an immensely sweet singing voice and the idealised diction, please pay attention to this, of a presumably upper, or upper middle class speaker, indicating again as I was mentioning earlier that this ideal Indian women that is slowly coming into being across the array of performances that we witness from people like Gandharva, and Sundari, and Champalal and so many others of their ilk is a very coded creature. She is very-very particularly a woman that comes from a certain location along as we were saying caste, class and other axes. "The necessity of the female impersonator," as Kathryn Hansen puts it, "having an appropriate voice and physical features," both of which we are talking about here because Gandharva obviously had a sweet singing voice etc.

“indicate(s) that hearing and seeing are the senses” that audiences were meant to have largely processed these female impersonators and their performances in.

Now, again it became important for us to remember that the conventions of the Parsi theatre because it was meant to have used a proscenium meant that there were spaces between the performers who are on stage, on a raised platform, and audiences who would have been at a fair distance removed from them. That space becomes vital in maintaining the illusion of woman and womanliness that the female impersonators are performing on stage. It is vital to remember that the architecture, the physical architecture of this theatrical practice would have allowed that illusion to linger; if there is a camera and it is shoved very closely into the face of aforesaid female impersonator, that illusion is a little bit harder to maintain and that is part of the reason why with the advent of film, this practice is going to die something of a natural death.

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The other star in this period that you have heard me mention is Jaishankar Sundari. Jaishankar Sundari, Jaishankar Bhojak, also known as Sundari, wrote that he relied on a method of "total identification"; this is in his autobiography which is in Gujrati. He writes that his method is based on total identification. He would study the women around him, the women in his family, the women that he had access to and adopt some of their mannerisms. I am going to read to you a tiny extract from this autobiography where he talks about what happens to him the first time he wears a blouse.

"I saw a beautiful young girl emerging from myself, whose shapely, intoxicating limbs oozed youthful exuberance; in whose form is the fragrance of a woman's beauty; in whose eyes feminine feelings kept brimming;" which is why it's useful that she had a handkerchief, "in whose gait is expressed the mannerism of a Gujratin; who is not a man but a woman… I saw such a portrait in the mirror. Momentarily I thought that I was not a man." We are going to spend some time unpacking this. Now as is obvious, there are physical traits that are going to emerge from this.

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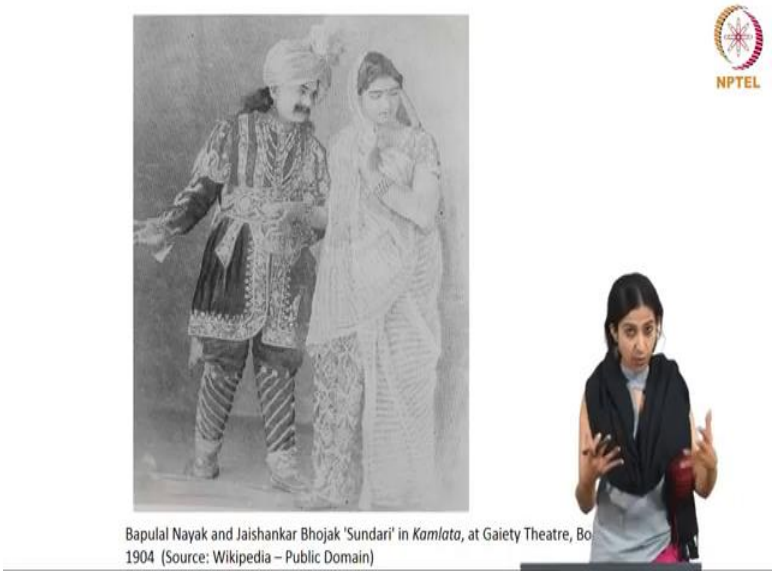


This is Sundari right here and next to Sundari you see Bapulal Nayak who she was in a very popular established couple with. So this couple is replicated across a series of plays over a rather long period of time, this image is from 1904.

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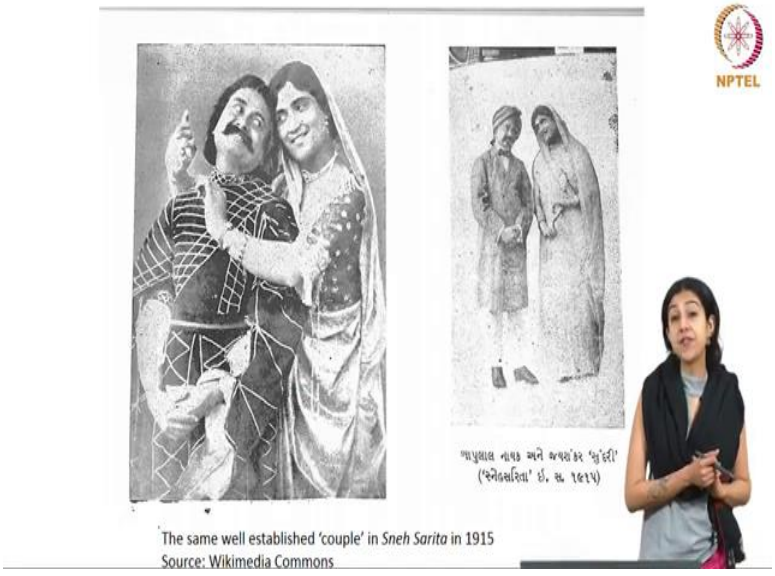


And the next one is from 1915 which is 11 years later and it is the same couple, it is still Bapulal Nayak and still Jaishankar Sundari.

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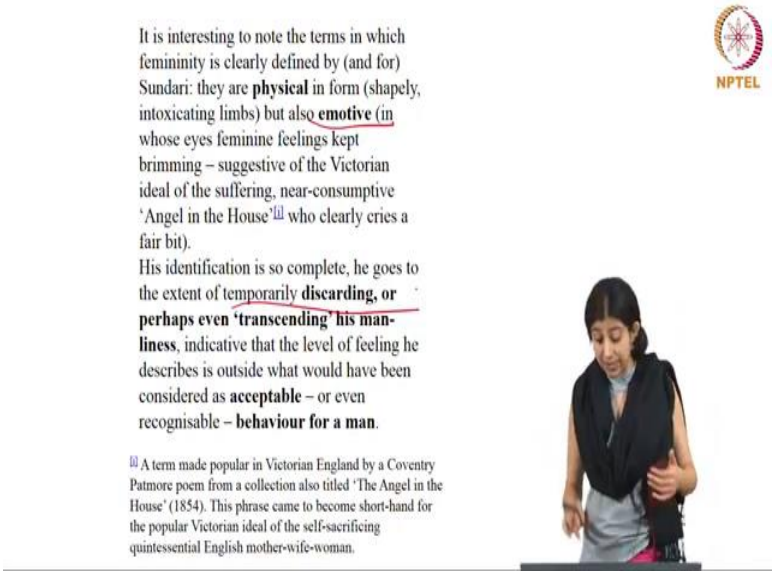


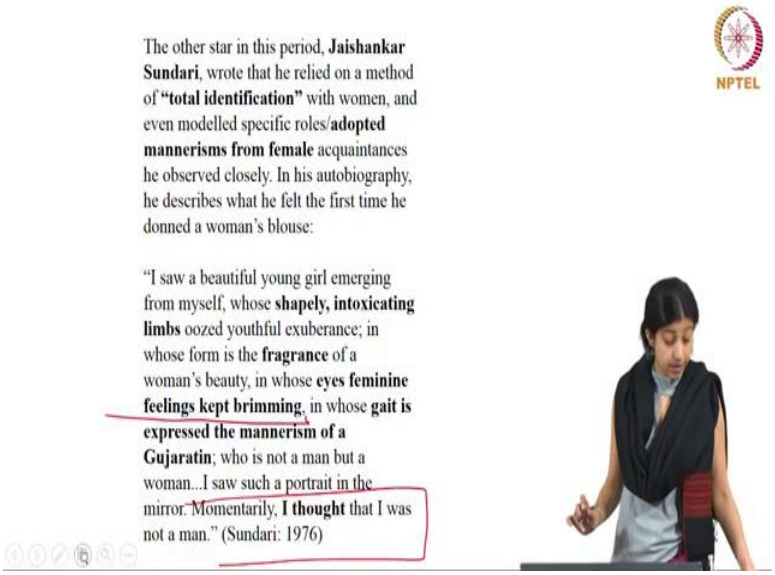


Go back to that extract that I read you; it become obvious that there are physical traits that Sundari identifies with performing women. She talks about shapely intoxicating limbs, and so on and so forth, but there are also emotive aspects when she speaks about eyes that are constantly brimming with feeling. There is the implication, or the suggestion of a concept that perhaps you are familiar with on this course, that of "the angel in the house," which is a reference to a Victorian ideal of performed femininity; the angel in the house stands in a binary with the working women; with the… basically the woman who made herself available in a public sphere; and this binary clearly found in favour of the angel in the house, and this is the term that becomes extremely popular in the late 19th century. It comes from a poem by Coventry Patmore and this is more or less the illusion that kind of creeps in in Jaishankar Sundari's analysis of what it means to be woman as well.

His identification is so complete, he goes the extent of temporarily discarding or perhaps transcending his manliness, indicative of the level of feeling he describes as outside what would have been considered as acceptable or even recognisable behaviour for a man, which is why he says briefly, that "Momentarily I thought that I was not a man. "

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But again it is important to look at the phrase in there because when he says that he thought he was not a man, there is agency; he decides, he gets to choose whether momentarily he is or is not a man, which is not the same thing at all as the society around him making those choices for him. So there is still agency in this choice, there is agency in this identification because ultimately the female impersonator is precisely that – a female impersonator, even though in these liminal figures there is a blurring of a too easy kind of binarized notion of what it meant to be a man or what it meant to be a woman and figures like this queer that binary in extremely interesting ways.

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Next we turn to an autobiographical account that one gets from master Champalal. This is from an interview he gave Mrinal Pande many years ago and part what Pande is quizzing him about is the injunctions that were laid upon the body of the female impersonator; what was it that a female impersonator could do? what was it that was outside the preview of a female impersonator? And he brings these out very interestingly in a list of injunctions. There are very clear sets of dos and don'ts that anyone who wanted to perform femininity, a woman on stage with any kind of authenticity would have to rely on.

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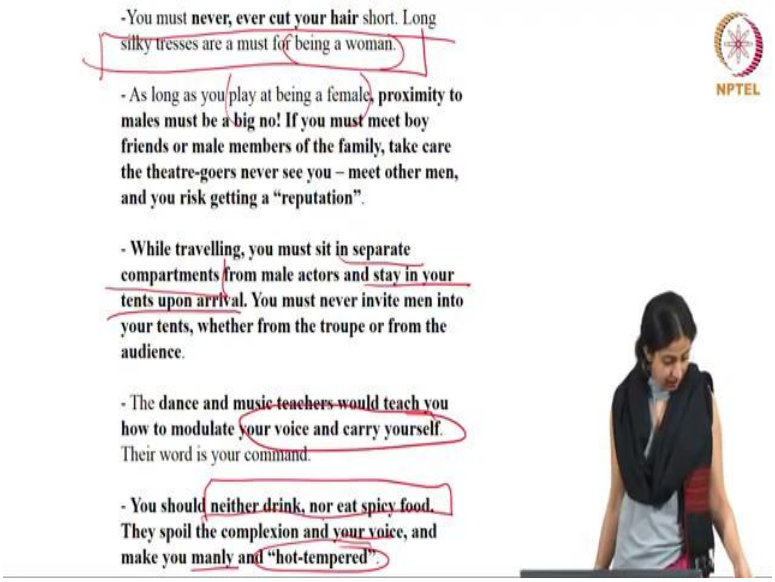


And these are very interesting, so we would go over each one as we go but these are all in his words; this is all master Champalal. He starts by saying that the first visible marker when one encounters another body is the hair and he says for a female impersonator it was a rule of thumb that you could never cut your hair.

Now hair is a uniquely and immensely feminist issue. Body hair tell us much about the ways in which the notion or the site that is the body of the woman is coded but hair upon one's head and the way that it is styled, the length at which it is worn can be carriers of class, can be carriers of experience, can be carriers and markers of age which determines how a female body will be consumed by anyone viewing it.

And master Champalal is extremely unequivocal about this when he says that long silky tresses are a must for being a woman and it is interesting to me that he says, being a woman not playing a woman because that is the kind of level of identification that we are talking about regardless of whether you look at that extract from Sundari who we heard from recently, just before this, or Champalal himself.

Next he says, "as long as you play at being a female," notice that there is a shift, here we are talking about being a woman, here we are talking about play at being a female because there is also that space that needs to constantly be negotiated, "proximity to males must be a big no!" Exclamation point; I love the exclamation point right there. "If you must meet boy-friends or male members of the family take care that theatres goers never see you – meet other men and you risk getting a "reputation.""

“While travelling you must sit in separate compartments,” you will remember that this was part of the argument that was forwarded by troupes for suggesting why they could not hire female actors. But if female impersonators also had to sit in separate compartments that kind of dents the argument a little bit because those separate provisions clearly also had to be made for female impersonators; “separate compartments for male actors and stay in your tents upon arrival,” so social distancing. Social exclusion and a self-imposed quarantine if you will are clearly the lot of these female impersonators, “you must never invite men into your tents whether from the troupe or from the audience.”

The next bit of advice is practical in the extreme. Champalal says that “the dance and music teachers would teach you how to modulate your voice and carry yourself” because the visual and the auditory you will remember are the senses most engaged in when a theatre going public witnesses a female impersonator or any other performer on stage. And the idea here is that the dance and music teachers will allow the female impersonator to transform themselves into the characters that they must play and if they are to do it authentically, that is if they are to perform the category “woman” authentically, they must let the words of the dance and music teachers be their command.

The last injunction and this is the one that I find most interesting is that you should neither drink nor eat spicy food, they spoil the complexion – aka, again the level of the visual/physical – and your voice and this is where it gets interesting might make you manly and “hot tempered.” The implication that spicy food or alcohol could make one manly clearly put the realm of alcohol outside of the reach of the sphere “woman,” which is an injunction that has long existed but the notion that a women is not allowed access to the notion of anger or to the idea, or the practice, or the act of anger, being angered is something that clearly master Champalal seems to imagine is impossible for us to reconcile with the category “woman.”

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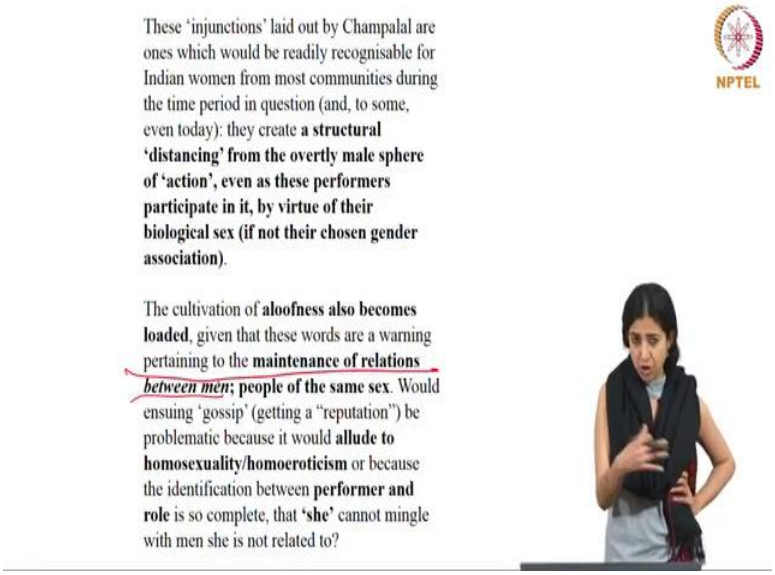


There are a range of issues that emerge from this, one of which is the notion of social distancing that I mentioned earlier, or the aloofness that he recommends female impersonators engage in – because what is problematic about this? What precisely could the problem have been?

The aloofness becomes loaded because these words are a warning pertaining to the maintenance of relations between men, people of the same sex; so would that ensuing gossip or getting, what in his words, getting a reputation be problematic because it alludes to homoerotic or homosexuality as a possibility? Or is it problematic because the identification between performer and role is so complete? That the… looking at the notion that a reputation, the character would acquire a reputation? that the performer would acquire a reputation? Because it was unseemly for a woman to be seen with a man who was not her immediate kin? Which of these is the problem area here? And that is something that we need to think about some more.

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The embargo on the consumption of the liquor and spicy food for its disruptive qualities is, like I said, interesting because it collapses the categories between the physical and the affective. The physical at the level of the skin and the voice immediately related to the affective because the other aspect of this is obviously the notion of being hot-tempered and how it would not do for a woman to be seen as being angry.

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Now, we started by saying that we would go back to the composition of this audience that I have been referring to. This theatre-going public is interesting because it in some ways it becomes the cache, the ready audience for Indian film when it comes into being with *Raja Harishchandra* being the first Indian film in 1913.

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*Raja Harishchandra* made by Dadasaheb Phalke also gives us an introduction to this incredibly beautiful young actor called Anna Hari Salunke. Anna Hari Salunke who you see here in his avatar as Sita in a movie called *Lanka Dahan* in 1917 was the quote-unquote female lead for *Raja Harishchandra* which allows us to suggest that this young female impersonator was actually the first female lead in Indian film altogether.

Anna Hari Salunke played the female lead in *Raja Harishchandra* and a local… a bit of an urban legend goes that Dadasaheb Phalke found him when he was a young cook in a restaurant that Dadasaheb was eating in, and he heard him sing and discovered this beautiful young boy who he then recruits and has play his female lead in *Raja Harishchandra*.

Now in the early years of Indian film, the female impersonators that we have been speaking about including Gandharva, including Sundari, and obviously Anna Hari Salunke are the female leads; but this is a short lived experiment for a number of reasons, but the reason primarily, and I have already alluded to this, that this experiment is doomed to failure almost from the get go is that the camera is unforgiving.

The illusion that we were talking about, the contract that any theatre-going public engages in when they enter a theatrical space is the "suspension of disbelief." The suspension of disbelief is a concept that we get from Campbell and in it he holds effectively that the theatre-going audience when it enters a space as coded in particular ways as the theatre will no longer ask questions about things like a chronological continuity. You will not, for example if you have been in the audience for 15 minutes but if you have seen the action on stage shift a period of about 5 years, you know that you have only been there 15 minutes but the suspension of disbelief allows you to maintain the illusion that the continuity of narrative on stage requires you to engage in.

So the suspension of disbelief was a contract between audience, performer, and troupe; and this only became possible in a theatrical space. When we move from theatre to film, it is harder to maintain that illusion because the camera as we have been saying repeatedly is less forgiving.

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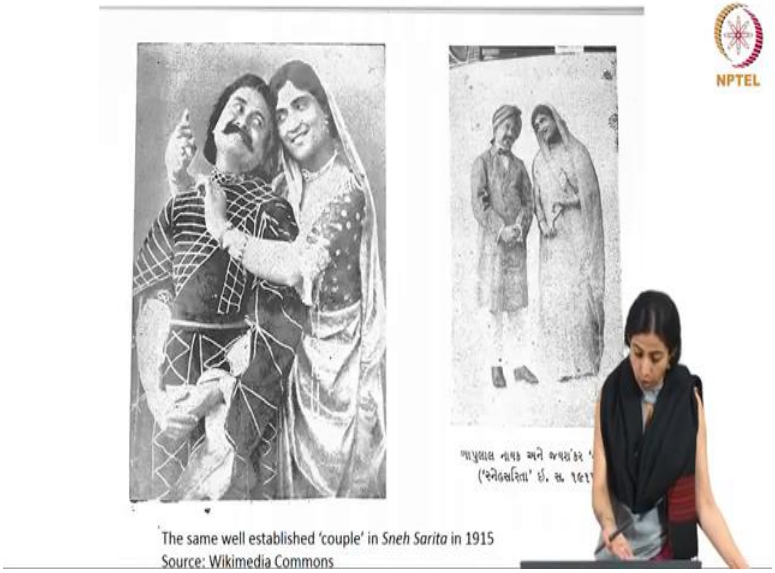


The same well established 'couple' in *Sneh Sarita* in 1915
Source: Wikimedia Commons


Bal Gandharva on stage (The Telegraph, 2013)


The distance afforded by a proscenium and the spaces that there were between performer and audience meant that it was possible for us to imagine that this (pointing to image of female impersonator on the slide) was a woman, that this (pointing to image of female impersonator on the slide) was a woman, or that this (pointing to image of female impersonator on the slide) was a woman. It becomes harder when the camera insists on closing in on the face of Sundari; perhaps a young Sundari; but at this (pointing to image of an older Sundari on the slide) stage, it becomes slightly untenable to sustain the illusion that who you are witnessing is indeed "woman." And for this, among other reasons but primarily this, it becomes, as we said, a little bit of a short-lived and failed experiment to try and insert female impersonators into the Indian film scene, which is slowly coming into being after 1913 and certainly from 1931 when we arrive at the talkie; because at that point the illusion is no longer merely a visual one, it is also auditory and it becomes that much harder to sustain.

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"By the time female performers" therefore finally "become the norm," in Kathryn Hansen's words, "impersonators had already structured the space into which these female performers were to insert themselves effecting the transition from stigmatised older practises to the newly consolidated Indian women of the nationalist imagination."

Now what are these stigmatised older practices that she is referring to? The notion of a performing woman was one that was readily understandable in terms of dance tradition, in terms of certain musical traditions, specifically this fear of vocalising perhaps much less than a female instrumentalist if you will.

But music and dance were still spaces where one could concede the presence of a female performer. Some of those traditions were rather closely allied to courtesan tradition, were closely allied to something called the *Indrasabha* as a space, from where some of these woman performers finally enter a Parsi theatre and from here into the Indian film industry. And these are stigmatised practices for a variety of reasons a) the presence of the working woman and the implication that what they did was closely allied to sex work in some cases in the courtesan tradition, which has been a connotation that has been extremely difficult to shake from the body of the working women especially in as public a space as theatre and later film.

And this is something that slowly begins to be mitigated in this period. "In fact, by the apparent anomaly of Indian males passing as females and foreigners passing as Indian women, the Parsi stage," and this is Hansen again "established a paradigm for female performance even before Indian women themselves had become visible."

This is really interesting because the implication here is that what women are not able to do in a public sphere that is not ready for accommodating them, it is still possible for us to witness on the stages not perhaps in the form of the women themselves because women performers and Indian women performers were rare to come by, but you see 'woman' performed, the 'Indian woman' is performed before she actually becomes visible off stage; she is visible on stage before she becomes visible off it, is the case that Kathryn Hansen is making here.

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Now the world of these cross-dressing impersonators can be traversed as I said in a very fragmented form today. Few if any of the scripts survive and that is also partially because a lot of this material was improvised within loose structures; a lot of the material that one imagines the Parsi stage comprised of, and this is something that we become familiar with because of interviews with people who were directors, writers, and actors on it they talk about the amount that the high levels of improvisation within loose structure of parameters that has been set in terms of narrative of each performance, but a lot of this material only becomes accessible to us today in the forms of autobiographies, journals, and some newspaper reviews of plays that did rather well, etc. But a lot of this material is not in English, a lot of it is in Gujrati, a lot of it is in Hindustani, and not much of it has been translated, which is why at the national level it is difficult to talk about the legacy of Parsi theatre except in very-very specific pockets linguistic and otherwise where these were forms that it remains possible for scholars to access.

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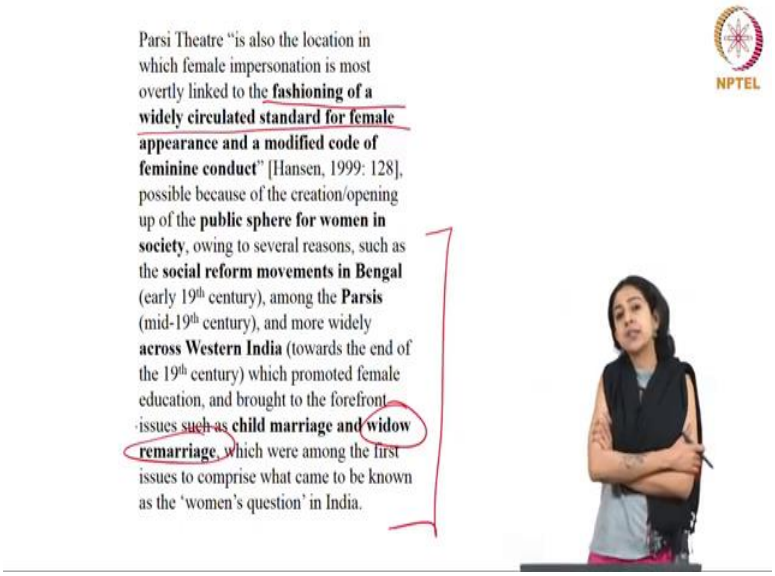


Parsi theatre is also the location in which female impersonation is most overtly linked to the fashioning of a widely circulated standard and this is important for female appearance and a modified code of feminine conduct possible because of the creation or opening up of the public sphere for women in society. And as I have started this lecture by saying part of the reason why this became possible was the spate of reasons you see listed here: the Bengal renaissance, so the social reform movements in Bengal in the 19th century followed by an internal reform movement in the Parsi community starting in Bombay but spreading widely outward from the mid-19th century, and ultimately the social reform movement more widely extend across western India in the end of the 19th century. This also marks, it can be argued the beginning of what came to be called "the women's question" in India and some of the earliest people voicing these questions, the women's question were male reformers; its stands to reason that this would have been because the male reformers were the ones with access to the channels, the media channels of the dissemination that the women simply were not; which is not to say that women's self-help group or women reformers did not exist during this timeframe. They very much did and there were tensions between them and the benevolent male reformers who sought to voice these problems. But some of the earliest issue that the women's questions revolved around were child and infant marriage and widow remarriage, which in theory was possible because of legislation to this end about widow remarriage from the 1850s onwards but was not practiced because of social ex-communication which remain the norm all the way into the 20th century.

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For a moment, talk now about the role of the spectator in the choices that Parsi theatre makes about whether female impersonators or women performers when they were both available ought to be playing the women characters in this space. Now if and we have said this before, life was the mordel reality and not merely imitated then it becomes important to see at what point it becomes untenable for this medium to actually continue to force the body of the female impersonator upon its audiences and this is a point that is going to arrive only in the 1900s, the 10s, the 20s, the 30s; by the 30s, this will finally die out.

And a part of the reason for this, as I mentioned in passing earlier, is that the composition and identification of certain classes or sections of men and women as comprising our theatre-going audience is important, because this is the first kind of audience that one has that is not patron driven, that is in some senses slightly more democratic because it is a non-aristocratic audience. It has working professionals, it has a bunch of people who have been through what is known now as modern Indian education system, which becomes largely possible after 1835 and the Minute on Indian Education which in some senses forces English medium education, I do not, it was not a nation state, upon British India, let us just go with that, upon British India.

There were women in this audience and therefore perhaps for the very first time it became important to take into cognizance whether the women in the audience could relate most to women performing women on stage or female impersonators and needless to say that choice actually fell to female impersonators for rather longer than one would have imagined.

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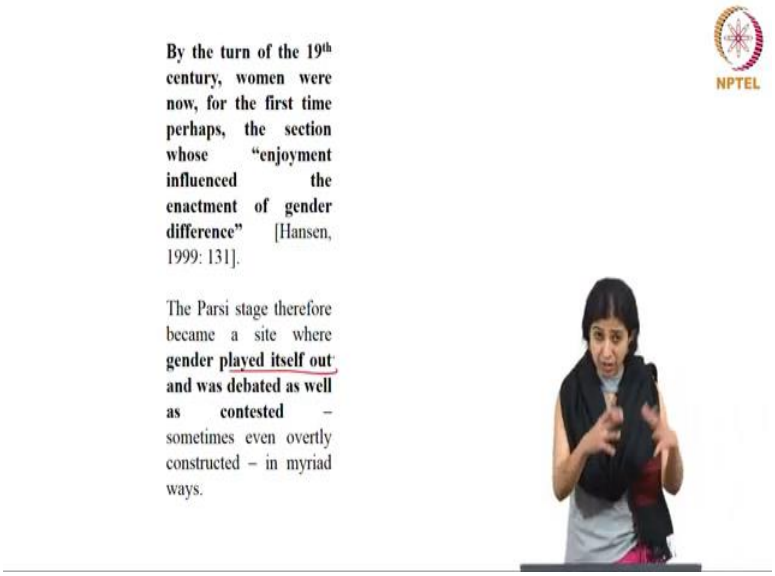


By the turn of the 19th century, women were now for the first time, as we were saying, the section whose enjoyment influenced the enactment of gender difference and this is something that allows us to postulate that the Parsi theatre was indeed a site where gender both played itself out, and was debated, as well as contested, sometimes actively constructed in front of these audiences.

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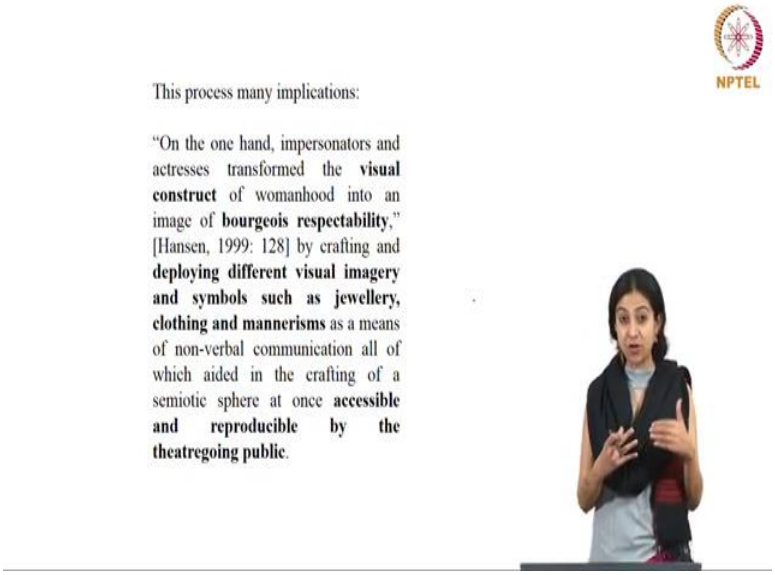


Our processes, everything that we have outlined so far, has several implications. "One the one hand, this is Hansen again, impersonators as an actresses transformed the visual construct of womanhood into an image of bourgeois respectability by crafting and deploying different visual imagery and symbols," everything we were speaking about earlier. A particular drape of the saree, a particular inflection in one's voice, a particular accent as one spoke, the carrying of a handkerchief because, one must always be prepared in case "one's eyes brimmeth over." All of this put together gives us a vision of what it meant to play an acceptable body, "woman."

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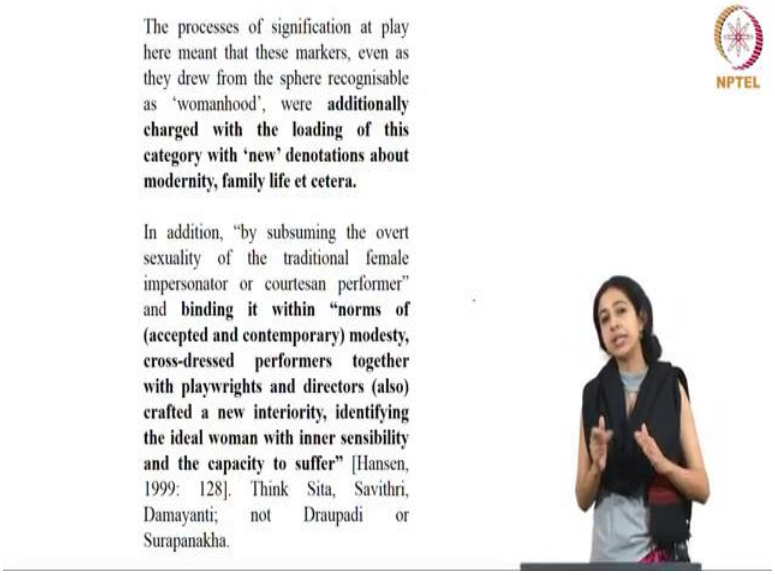


Further the process is of signification at play here meant that these markers, even as they drew from a recognisable sphere of womanhood, were necessarily adding denotative layers to the bodies of these female impersonators and that becomes indicative of the fact that this is a continuous process. It was not a stable signifier, it was not something that once or that a single iteration of would have been enough. This was a continuous process and it was a negotiation that was engaged in on a fairly continuous basis. In addition "by subsuming the overt sexuality of the traditional female impersonator or courtesan performer and binding it within the norms of (accepted and contemporary visions of) modesty cross-dressed performers together with playwrights and directors crafted a new interiority identifying the ideal woman with inner sensibility and the capacity to suffer."

An easy way to understand what Hansen is talking about here is to think about the choices for role models that the nationalist movement will throw up. It will always be Sita, Savithri, Damayanti, not so much Surapanakha, or Draupadi. Think about the spaces between these characters and the kind of agency that is implicated by each, and a vision of the kind of womanliness that is being constructed emerges clearly.

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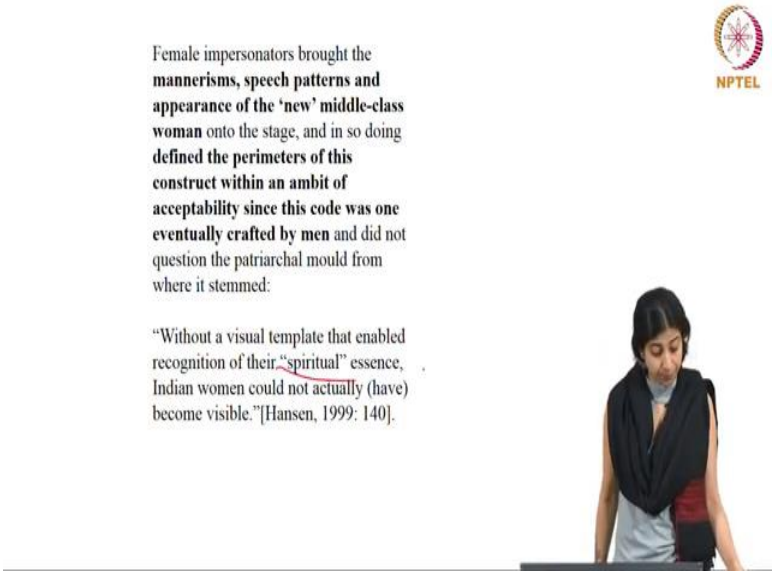


Female impersonators brought there for mannerisms, speech patterns and appearance for the new middle-class women on to the stage and in so doing define the perimeters of this construct within an ambit of acceptability. As becomes obvious since this is a code that is ultimately both grafted and then crafted upon the body of men, female impersonators who were men, this is not a challenge to the patriarchy in any way, shape or form. Without a visual template that enabled recognition of their spiritual essence, Indian women could not actually have become visible at all at is Hansen's contention because of this reason.

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Though this phase may have been forgotten, in the light of everything that came after it, that is the creation from 1915 onwards of a public sphere that is genuinely conducive to the

entrance of women as equal, in some senses, participants within the nationalist movement and everything that comes after it. This remains a period worthy of our consideration not only because it highlights just specifically how gender roles are constructed but also for the continuities that it affords us into the ways in which these performative practices continue to influence and create our extremely gendered, lived realities.

For this reason alone, the period under study, the turn of the 19th century remains a fascinating one. It can be argued that it was the era of the female impersonator came to be eclipsed with the arrival of Indian film but the truth is that as we have discovered not a few moments ago the first Indian female character to have been performed for Indian film was still grafted on the body of a young female impersonator.

And for that reason alone, this backstory I think remains worthy of investigation and allows us to remember how gender is both performative and since it is a category that is up for constant negotiation, how certain forms of negotiation over others may allow us to queer it meaningfully. Thank you.