



A FANTASY OF FREEDOM FOR DALIT WOMEN



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**ABSTRACT**

Women have remained the oppressed, though being a big chunk of society. They seem to be victim of the patriarchal social structure that is evident in the cultural performances like Circus and Lavani (Tamasha). In the proposed paper, the emphasis is given to the idea of fantasy of freedom, discussed by Peta Tait, an Australian theatre critic who has described how the freedom given to aboriginal women in Australia during the performance does not last beyond the time and place of the performance. The similar scenario is witnessed in case of dalit women. The writing of Sharmila Rege, Meera Kosambi and Kumud Pawade contributes to this cause. Thus, the present paper aims at two issues from different cultures together.



**KEYWORDS:** Marginalization, Museumization, Freedom, Dalit, Theatre, Marxism and Performance.

**INTRODUCTION:**

The marginalized elements in society are given space to represent themselves. It is being done not to recognize their socio-cultural identity but bring them in the centre as opposite to what they are at the periphery for certain reasons. The recognition of marginalized social elements is limited to the place and time of performance/representation. This aura of freedom is created in order to cater to the gaze of the privileged and sometimes to museumize marginalized. Peta Tait has discussed the aforesaid points with reference to circus in Australia in 19<sup>th</sup> century. She has emphasized the display of female body in circus to substantiate her point. The display of female body with masculine acts, for her, does not seem to be the freedom of female body but something else and she calls it a fantasy of freedom. She illustrates it by taking into account some performances in circus, especially solo trapeze and triple somersault. Thus, for her, the fantasy of freedom is nothing but the museumization of marginalized people like women.

The Museumization of Dalit women body and fantasy of freedom is evident in Marathi folk art *Tamasha*, especially *Lavani*. Before going into detail, one has to understand the words like, 'Dalit and *Tamasha*. The word, Dalit has been in the centre of the academic discussion for the last few decades. The origin of the word is traced to the appearance of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar before the Simon commission in 1927 in Pune. He has defined the word, Dalit as an equivalent of the terms like the Depressed Classes and Scheduled Castes. Though, the controversy is created in case of the use of this word, the word, Dalit still captures the attention of the academic world. It is the presence of marginalized voices through literature that has made the word, Dalit globally accepted. In the first Marathi Dalit Literary Meet, organized in Mumbai in 1954, the chairperson of the concerned meet, Baburao Bagul made it clear that Dalit literature

has got immense future as far as its scope is concerned. Later on, in 1980s the Dalit auto-biographical writing like Daya Pawar's *Baluta* has remained the mile stone in the tradition of Marathi Dalit literature.

Peta Tait thinks that solo trapeze work has been dominated by women since its inception in circus. Further she says that in this performance female body was perceived as feminine like a ballet dancer because according to her, performers have to begin like ballet dancers with some feminine features. From her point of view, the scenario changed when a catcher became a part of this performance because the display of female body along with male performer made the audience of circus to view female body differently. It seems that female body has become free from social restraints but actually the freedom remains within the circus, limited to the time and place of performance.

The similar perception of female body in *Lavani* has been noticed in the writing of Meera Kosambi (2014) especially in her views about how the perception of Dalit female body has gone through transformations according to the socio-cultural class of viewers. She says that when it was viewed by the upper caste urban viewers, the Dalit female body was compared the garden of love and other places for romance. When the viewership was moved from urban to rural, the images like sugarcane field and birds like *Myna* were used to talk about Dalit female sexuality. According to her, there were women from some other upper castes, performing in *Lavani* performances but the most of the women are still from the lower castes in the society. Gail Omvedt (2008) in *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India* also has addressed this issue of women. She refers to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's meeting with the sex workers women in Bombay. According to her, he told them to be educated and to get rid of the life of humiliation.

The aforesaid freedom was noted across age, race and gender according to Tait. She has given examples of two performers to discuss how age and race are ignored in the circus. Mary Sole, an Australian trapeze performer continued to perform till she was fifty years old and Winnie Colleano, an Australian aboriginal performer got recognition as trapeze performer when aboriginals were not allowed to travel and participate in social spheres, dominated by European whites. Thus, it seems that the display of female body with masculine attributes in the circus overcomes all sorts of social constraints, imposed on female body though limited to that specific time and space.

Dalit Women feminists differ from Tait's above-mentioned view that if female body is presented as masculine other socio-cultural issues are ignored at the time performance. As per the views of Sharmila Rege (2013) the issue of caste is not separated from Dalit female body in *Lavani* and *Tamasha* performances. She says that women in these performances are not free from their socio-cultural identities. It may be, according to her, because the art of these performances is related to particular castes in India, especially lower castes like Dalits. In case of Tait's case the idea of circus is the art of privileged and the art of oppressed, through performed by aboriginal women in Australia.

Apart from the fantasy of freedom in performances, there are issues outside the life of performances which are still creating the exclusion of freedom for Dalit women. Kumud Pawade (2013) has pointed out that economy does not work in case of Dalit women's liberation. It is noticed in the writing of Karl Marx that economy governs the social structure. As per his views, economically independent person enjoys the freedom. Kumud Pawade has found out the opposite scenario in case of Dalit working Women. She has noticed that though Dalit women are working from the early morning to evening along with her husband as a wage labourer, she is not able to spend money on her needs without her husband's consent.

The economy of the spectatorship also contributes to the perception of female body in performances in both the cases: in Peta Tait's case, circus and *Lavani* in case of Dalit women. Peta Tait looks at the economy of spectatorship as the main reason behind the trapeze performance by 'scantly clad women' because the female body in this performance is visible from all the angles as trapeze is performed in the space. According to her, though initially it was considered immoral outside the circus, the male spectators would enjoy the display of body. In this sense, she thinks that it is 'spectatorial economy', based on male gaze seems to be the force behind 'freedom masked with exploitation', enjoyed by female body in circus. The same thing can be applied to *Tamasha*, a Marathi folk art in which mostly Dalit women would perform. It was once considered as vulgar performance but at the same time it was enjoyed by the upper caste people in Maharashtra.

The same aura of liberation is witnessed in case of Dalits in India as they are revered on certain occasions but the act for which they are revered does not carry reverence beyond the time and place of

performance. As far as rituals like marriage are concerned, Dalits were allowed to take part in the procession of marriage. They would participate as entertainers with their musical instruments especially tambourine and clarinet. Apart from these rituals, they were not revered for their musical performance. In this instance also, it seems that they would enjoy freedom in social life but actually this freedom is masked with exploitation and it keeps them within the social restrictions.

Thus, the impression of liberation, which benefits the privileged in society, is created in order to legitimize the exploitation of marginalized elements in society. Dalits are made to serve the upper castes by making the servitude as a supreme thing in religion. In case of women in India, they are given freedom to wear ornaments but when it comes to the ownership of those ornaments, they are deprived of their rights. It seems that the aura of liberation is created in order to disguise the exploitation which appears to be true across all cultures in the world.

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