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Subverting Patriarchy: Feminist and Dalit Narratives in Dalvi's *Purush*

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Abstract

Jaywant Dalvi's play, *Purush*, is remarkably feminist and anti-caste, and it critiques the dominance of patriarchy, the oppression of the caste system, and power politics prevalent in Indian society. Through the character of Ambika, the protagonist of the play, it raises an interesting narrative of resistance against gendered violence and oppression. This paper analyzes *Purush* as a play exploring feminist assertion and Dalit consciousness.

This paper will examine *Purush* in the framework of Dalit feminism with a focus on the critique of mainstream feminism by Sharmila Rege on the silencing of caste-based oppression in feminism. *Purush*'s representation of gender and caste-based violence in theatre has a resonance with women's experience in life and hence it is important in understanding the experience of layered oppression in Indian society.

By contextualizing *Purush* within a broader discussion of women's liberation and Dalit awakening, this paper asserts that the Dalvi drama remains a vital intervention within Indian theatrical culture. On one hand, the drama unmasks the ingrained inequities of Indian society, and on the other, articulates visions of how Dalits and women might resist and seek justice. This paper aims to reveal the significance of *Purush* for gender and caste justice within Indian society, through the analysis of feminist dramaturgies and politics of intersection, the significance will be revealed.

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The Marathi play *Purush* (1987) by Jaywant Dalvi is a landmark in modern Indian theatre: it is hailed for its fearless take on the politics of gender and power. *Purush* is a play contextualized in the socio-political environment of the rapidly modernizing but very patriarchal society of Maharashtra. Furthermore, the play tries to present the complex experiences of the protagonist, Ambika, and her resistance to sexual and structural violence. While *Purush* is celebrated as a feminist play in mainstream culture, specifically for the powerful female protagonist and the stereotypes of toxic masculinity, there is a need to read the play in the framework of feminist theory and Dalit studies.

Ambika, a fearless school teacher, symbolizes the struggle against the oppressiveness of Gulabrao, a corrupt politician who represents the historically deep-rooted interlocking of caste and patriarchies. Through her resistance against the sexual abuse of women in her society, especially women of lower castes, Ambika's character defies traditional gender norms and rearranges concepts of agency. The final turn of power, where Ambika performs an act of retributive justice against Gulabrao, is both an affirmation of feminist politics and a moment of dramatic transference of hegemonic masculinity.

Another important figure in this play is Maya Gawai, a Dalit woman who is raped by an upper-caste police inspector when she goes in search of a job as a maid in his house. Maya's tragic story represents how systems of caste and gender comprehensively suppress individuals by marking Dalit women's bodies as sites of violence and oppression. Through the contrast of Ambika's story and the narrative of Maya's tragic life, Dalvi raises the structural impunity that enables dominant males in terms of power to exploit women of any caste without any fear or restraint, thus extending the critique of caste and gender dominance in this play.

The social context in which Dalvi weaves *Purush* is crucial for decoding *Purush* as a social commentary. Historically, Maharashtra has had strong anti-caste movements headed by Jotibha Phule and B. R. Ambedkar, as well as feminist movements. But when it comes to Marathi theatre and other performance arts of mainstream India, it largely remains a stronghold of upper-caste.



This paper argues that Jaywant Dalvi's *Purush* uses performance as a tool to subvert patriarchy in upper-caste society by pointing towards the intersectionality between the oppressions of both gender and caste, using dramaturgy in order to bring feminist and Dalit resistance in the foreground in the theatre of Maharashtra. In so doing, the paper will encompass an area which is commonly overlooked in Indian theatre in terms of how performances demarcate between either reinforcing or subverting the more common hierarchies.

In order to perform a critical observation of *Purush* using the framework of feminist theories and Dalit studies, it would be important to consider feminist theories about oppression on the grounds of gender and Dalit aesthetics about oppression in terms of caste. The combined effect of these approaches would allow for an observation about the way in which the play performs violence, resistance, and compliance in terms of both caste and gender.

Feminist thinkers like bell hooks and Judith Butler have been arguing for a long time that patriarchy is experienced not only in the mode of domination but also in the mode of subtle exclusion, silence, and control over women's bodies. In this context, the Indian feminist Sharmila Rege has expanded the idea by focusing on the manner in which the caste system renders the experience of patriarchy more complex for women. Rege criticizes the idea that "Savarna feminism has ignored the question of caste to the extent that it makes no difference that the woman movements participate in the constitution and maintenance of the caste system" (15). The importance of Rege's ideas becomes clearer when placed in the light of the feminist debates regarding body. In the case of *Purush*, the rape of the character Ambika by the politician Gulabrao symbolizes more than just a crime committed against the characters. Gulabrao's rape of Ambika represents the use of systemic power by suppressing the bodies of women when they do not conform to their expected subordination. When Ambika decides to stand up to her rapist in public, it symbolizes a form of feminist protest against her rapist as well as the social institutions that promote rape.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to state that there are various complexities involved in



Dalvi's feminist representation. Ambika's boyfriend, Sidharth, who is a Dalit and holds views that make him look like an 'activist,' leaves her as soon as she is 'tainted' by rape. His previous act of solidarity with Maya Gawai, who was a Dalit, when she is raped by an upper-caste police officer, is starkly different from his lack of commitment when it comes to Ambika.

First of all, there is no way of characterizing Ambika within the conventions typically expected of victims in plays characterizing female protagonists in Indian theatre. To start with, it is important to comprehend that a school teacher proposing progress in terms of educating girls and boys within co-ed schools makes her a victim, when Gulabrao, a renowned politician, engages in sexual violence against her. The rape is more than a heinous act of bodily invasion. It is an oppressive strategy to break her spirit and force conformity from her.

However, instead of giving into the shame and silence mandated by society, Ambika decides to go on record against her rapist and those institutions that are working to protect him. Ambika's defiance of the 'polluted' stereotype of the woman, no longer fit to be respected or married, is a revolt against the societal mandate of womanly virtue and modesty. By choosing to stand by herself, even when deserted by her companion, Sidharth, and even by society, Ambika exercises what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her theory of feminism, puts forth as the "ethical responsibility to speak, even when speech is fraught with danger" (Spivak 284).

An important element in the feminist critique presented in this play is the way it shows the hypocrisy in Sidharth's activism and betrayal. Sidharth is presented as a dalit activist in the beginning, supporting the cause of Maya Gawai, a dalit woman who has been raped by a police officer belonging to the upper caste. However, his passion for justice evaporates as soon as his own lover, Ambika (his upper-caste lover), is raped. Sidharth holds one rally in support of Ambika, and then he betrays her by refusing to marry her as soon as Ambika's father requests him to do so.

This betrayal reveals the hypocrisy of patriarchal ally politics that is conditional and



self-serving and tends to unravel when it comes to attacking a hegemonic discourse on caste and gender roles. Sidharth's duplicity supports "the limits of liberal sympathy" which feminists like Nivedita Menon argue that "liberal men, despite their politics of justice in the public realm, will not engage with patriarchal relations in their personal lives" (112).

The fight between Ambika and Sidharth, where the latter's cowardness and hypocrisy are revealed, also contains a message about feminism and progressiveness that does not involve solidarity with womanhood in both literal and figurative ways of patriarchal oppression. The allyship is conditional to the rules of society when those are challenged or disturbed, the allyship is dissolved revealing the true nature of pseudo-liberal-feminist activists. Although Sidharth did not perform any kind of violence and oppression against Ambika yet his hypocrisy and betrayal hurt Ambika more than Gulabrao's evil actions.

The dramatic highlight of *Purush* involves one of the strongest feminist statements made within Indian theatre. In a deliberate plot twist, Ambika agrees to a meeting with Gulabrao, intending to sleep with him as a ruse. The encounter involves Gulabrao's terrifying monologue, where he expresses his arrogance of masculinity and the role of women's subservience, especially in a situation of rape. The speech encompasses the ideological foundations of patriarchal violence, where masculinity is natural, and defiance is abnormally 'feminine.'

However, as Gulabrao celebrates his monologue, the same place where Ambika is raped and denied her agency, Ambika takes advantage and performs his castration. This act, which is also just but violent, is not only an act of revenge but also an attack against toxic masculinity and the systems that propagate it. Through the maiming of the representation of patriarchal power, Ambika carries out an act that feminist scholar Judith Butler calls "gender insubordination," which is essentially an act that disregards all codes linked with female subordination and male dominion (Butler 95).

The dramaturgical implementation of this scene, as performed by the Rangmohini theatre group, is quite striking. The harsh, stark lights pulled the two characters apart, increasing the tension between them. As Gulabrao's monologue progressed and reached its



crescendo of ‘male entitlement,’ the violent and shocking act of castration disrupted the dramatic illusion of invincible manhood. The audience is presented not with a sanitized ending but is instead faced with the ‘shocking image of feminist revenge.’

Purush, which simply translates to “man,” is deconstructed and debunked in the play. Not only does the play remove the façade of “male dominance,” but the story actually peels away the superficiality of “male dominance” to reveal how it is actually brittle, performative, and violently oppressive. *Purush* ultimately takes on a different meaning in Ambika’s final outcome, shifting from one of dominance to one of castration and defeat. Nevertheless, Ambika’s triumph is in no way couched in terms of reinforcing “social order” because instead, the play actually puts the audience in the difficult position of having to consider what “justice” would actually look like in a society predicated upon gender and caste oppression.

Dalit aesthetics, as formulated by thinkers such as Daya Pawar and Limbale, is based on the experience of humiliation, violence, and marginalization embedded in the experience of caste segregation. Dalit aesthetics becomes the antithesis of the classical ideals of beauty and order as represented by mainstream culture. Dalit theatre, in particular, practices a politics of aesthetics, in which the taste of the oppressed is foregrounded.

Nonetheless, *Purush* is not a play about Dalits per se, insofar as it is authored and narrated through the perspective of a Savarna character. Nevertheless, it tangentially addresses the struggles of Dalits in so far as it is about caste atrocities. Nevertheless, it is important to note that while Sidharth’s struggle revolves around Maya’s torment, he is powerless to help Ambika when she turns out to be a victim.

The play begins its critical assessment through the example of Maya Gawai, a Dalit woman who is raped by an upper-caste police inspector. Such an occurrence is not only an example of criminal behavior but is instead representative of institutional sexual violence that is based on caste, as the bodies of these women are considered locations of domination. Dalit feminists such as Sharmila Rege state that sexual violence is placed on Dalit women as a means of ensuring that the caste system is maintained (125). *Purush* reaffirms this view when it places the rape of Maya as one example of the overall violence perpetuated by the caste



system.

The hypocrisy of Sidharth's politics is exposed when Ambika, a Brahmin, is raped and becomes the cause that Sidharth refuses to support when she struggles to uproot Gulabrao, her rapist. Sidharth had previously supported Maya Gawai, but that struggle had an externally defined notion of justice, wherein he, the socially privileged individual, could champion the cause of the downtrodden while supporting the struggle from the sidelines, untouched and unaware of the reality of the struggle he claimed to support.

In fact, such selective solidarity is what a Dalit theorist, Suraj Yengde, terms "caste liberalism", a form of progressivism wherein a liberal attitude towards the ideal of anti-caste is maintained, but such ideals are repudiated if they conflict with one's own privilege and social capital (Yengde 89). The desertion of Ambika by Sidharth marks a powerful sign of the invisible chasm of caste and gender within liberal and progressive circles.

One of the themes that run through this play is that of silence and politics, whether silence is kept and whose suffering is acknowledged and whose voice is heard and whose silence is broken. While the cause of Maya Gawai gets hijacked and results within the silence broken by the dalit movement, Ambika gets no response at all in her struggle.

By reflecting these aspects, *Purush* identifies itself with the effort of Dalit feminism, which highlights the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender in the oppression of women. The play doesn't provide easy answers but instead forces the viewer to acknowledge the unpleasant truths about violence in relation to caste as well as gender in Indian society.

The theatricality in *Purush* is not merely in the written word but also in its performance element. The theatre in *Purush* in terms of its structure, staging, aesthetic, et cetera, exacerbates its commentary on patriarchy and caste in a way that is realized in performance, a point that is especially clear in some performances like the one in LTG Auditorium for the Bharat Rang Mahotsav, directed by Adarsh Sharma, which effectively incorporated aesthetic minimalism in order to amplify the play's critical standpoint on the social aspects it contains.



The minimalistic and realistic set design in the production heightened the primal themes in this play. As opposed to providing a distracting background setting, this play utilized necessary prop elements and empty space: a run-down village square, repressive government agencies, and dark alleys, all in order to highlight and draw attention to the mental and physical violence that occurs to these characters on these settings.

Spatial politics was an important element in reinforcing the thematic elements in the play. Gulabrao's territory, be it the government office, political platform, or the courtroom, was aesthetically constructed to emphasize power and dominance. Raised stages, oversized furniture, and the strategic use of darkness in lighting designed a setting where power towered over the characters, representing the larger system of upper-caste patriarchy in power. Conversely, the territories of the lower-class woman, be it the home, school, or the village square, were open and receptive, representing collective defiance through the power of resistance.

Dialogue delivery is one of the most important aspects of the production of *Rangmohini* that added largely to the realism of the play. The writing is sharp, direct, and to the point, revealing the reality of patriarchal and caste violence in its raw form, without sugarcoating it. The performances were quite nuanced, especially while delivering the dialogue related to confrontation and intimacy, which imparted realism to the story and contributed largely towards making the audience members uncomfortable, reflective, or cathartic, depending on their perspective.

For example, in the scenes where Ambika accuses Sidharth of abandonment, the controlled yet passionate way in which the dialogue was delivered by the actors was reflective of the way in which the trust of a partner and a whole social movement calling for justice is breached when it is threatened by its own prejudices of identity. The poisonous monologues of Gulabrao delivered in a very calm and collected manner reflected how often systems of power function through decorum.

The lighting effects of the production further intensified the play's dramatization effect. Harsh lights were used when Ambika is confronted by Gulabrao, and afterwards,



when she is assaulted by him. These lights functioned effectively to draw attention to the brutal exercise of patriarchal power, where the audience could not help but notice the wounds on the bodies of women metaphorically and realistically through the lights used on stage. Similarly, softer lights were used when Ambika is talking to Madhura Deshmukh, which could be interpreted as an old family friend, or when she is supported by her father. Thus, the conflict between light and darkness dramatized the oppression and hope of the characters on stage, which were symbolically different on the point of light and darkness.

Another area that contributed a lot to the suspense and atmosphere of the play is sound design. Ominous yet minimalist sound effects like the resonance of footsteps in a shortcut, the hum of an agitated mob, or the ominous silence that follows a violent crime created a heightened level of engagement in the audience with the themes of the play.

In this way, through the staging of such contradictions, it was revealed how caste and gender intersect and code social relationships and institution-building in response to violence. Such dramaturgy, minimally theatrical and highly charged, is what has lent most emphasis to these aspects in *Purush* and has raised it beyond mere personal tragedy to a political statement.

Purush by Jaywant Dalvi is a landmark play in modern Indian theatre, significant not only for its thematizations of gendered violence, but also by its incisive deconstruction of caste, power, and resistance. The play reveals in its complex narrative and characterizations, as well as its provoking theatricality, the interlocking systems of patriarchy and casteism that determine Indian society's fabric. Even more significantly, it locates theatre as a space of political intervention and aesthetic resistance.

In essence, *Purush* shatters the construct of the supremacy of the male sex that is embodied in the very title of the film itself. *Purush* strips away the layers that comprise the balustrades of male hubris to lay exposed the vulnerability and violence that define them. The transformation that takes place in the character of Ambika, from that of a school teacher to a rape survivor who refuses to remain silenced, becomes both a testimony to the individual struggle and a politicized act of defiance against the forces that seek to silence the voices of



women. When Ambika finally castrates Gulabrao, it becomes a gesture that is far beyond the bounds of basic revenge but becomes the act of de-masculinizing the very social and cultural factors that contribute to the violence that women face.

However, the criticism in the play transcends gender to primarily highlight the dynamics of caste underpinning patriarchal domination. Through the dichotomy between the experiences of Maya Gawai, a Dalit, and Ambika, a Brahmin, the play highlights the performative solidarity of activists such as Sidharth, who wills the cause of the Dalits so long as it does not disturb his own social location. Sidharth's betrayal is a stinging commentary on how caste and gender combine to establish the parameters of solidarity and justice.

On the performative level, too, *Purush* breaks the boundaries of mainstream theatre. It is not merely a narrative of sexual violence or caste oppression but rather a political and aesthetic intervention that requires a critical reading from the audience. It neither offers easy solutions nor sentimental gestures. Rather, it proposes that justice not only entails change at the institutional or legal levels, but also the uprooting of the entire social and cultural construct of violence and inequality.

The importance of the play can be seen in its capacity to disturb, challenge complacency, and provoke reflection. The text asks each member of the audience to engage both individually and collectively with their own complicity within oppressive systems and to contemplate the possibilities for acting in opposition to these systems. In this way, the text's impressive fusion of feminist and Dalit discourses, and the experimental quality of theatricality, makes *Purush* a highly important text in the fight for gender and caste justice in India.



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