

# THE THESPIAN'S VOICE: MAYA RAO AND HER ARTICULATE DISCOURSE

Vineetha Krishnan <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English, N. S. S. College, Nilamel, Kollam (Dist)



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.3472](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.3472)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

The intersection of articulate discourse and feminist theatre in India exemplifies the power of performance as a transformative medium for social critique and cultural introspection. Rooted in classical traditions like Kathakali and enriched by Brechtian techniques, feminist theatre challenges patriarchal norms, amplifies marginalized voices, and fosters critical engagement through nuanced storytelling. Practitioners like Maya Rao blend traditional aesthetics with experimental forms, creating performances that provoke thought, inspire action, and bridge local and universal feminist concerns. Using irony, participatory methods, and meta-theatrical commentary, these works interrogate societal structures, critique gender-based violence, and envision equitable futures. The fusion of cultural resonance and innovative storytelling ensures that feminist theatre remains a dynamic space for inclusive dialogue and social change, with articulate discourse at its core driving equity, collaboration, and activism.

**Keywords:** Feminist Theatre, Performance, Social Critique, Cultural Introspection Kathakali, Brechtian Techniques Patriarchal Norms, Marginalized Voices Nuanced Storytelling Maya Rao, Experimental Forms, Gender-Based Violence, Equitable Futures

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Articulate discourse in academic settings bridges the gap between knowledge and understanding, fostering inclusivity across gendered perspectives”. (Hooks, 2014, p. 77)

Articulate discourse refers to the ability to express oneself clearly and effectively in conversation or debate. It implies the use of well-formed and persuasive language to convey ideas or arguments. Articulate discourse in academic settings serves as a bridge between knowledge and understanding by facilitating the clear and inclusive exchange of ideas. It ensures that complex concepts are not only learned but internalized and applied meaningfully. By embracing diverse perspectives, especially those shaped by gender, academic discourse fosters an environment where all voices are valued, challenging traditional biases that have historically marginalized certain groups. This inclusivity enriches the academic experience, as different viewpoints contribute to a deeper and more holistic understanding of subjects. Ultimately, articulate communication promotes equity and collaboration, ensuring that academia evolves as a space of shared learning and growth.

The intersection of articulate discourse and feminist theatre in India represents a dynamic landscape where narratives of gender, power, and social justice converge. Within this context, articulate discourse refers to the nuanced and persuasive exchange of ideas surrounding feminist themes within the theatrical domain. Feminist theatre in India, on the other hand, encompasses performances, scripts, and productions that challenge patriarchal norms, advocate for gender equality, and amplify women's voices and experiences.

In exploring this intersection, one encounters a rich tapestry of theatrical works that employ articulate discourse to interrogate societal norms, critique oppressive structures, and envision alternative futures. Playwrights, directors, actors, and activists collaborate to stage performances that address issues such as gender-based violence, unequal representation, and the complexities of identity.

## 2. DISCUSSION

Maya Rao is a prominent feminist theatre practitioner, playwright, director, and actor in Indian theatre. Her work is known for its incisive critique of patriarchal structures, social injustices, and gender inequalities. She uses theatre as a medium to amplify marginalized voices, particularly those of women, and address pressing socio-political issues. Rao's theatre is rooted in feminist ideology, tackling themes such as gender violence, societal norms, and women's agency. Her work often challenges traditional narratives, offering alternative perspectives on history and culture. Rao seamlessly blends art with activism, making her theatre a powerful tool for social change. She draws from the traditions of political theatre, focusing on grassroots issues and highlighting the lived experiences of common people, especially women. Known for her experimental techniques, Maya Rao employs a mix of storytelling methods, including physical theatre, satire, and multimedia. Her work frequently breaks the fourth wall, directly engaging the audience and urging them to reflect on societal structures.

Maya Rao's works stand as a bold testament to the power of feminist theatre, seamlessly blending her eloquent contention with sharp political critique and innovative storytelling techniques. Renowned for her articulate discourse, Rao's ability to express compelling and persuasive viewpoints is mirrored in her productions, which challenge entrenched social norms and patriarchal structures while creating spaces for marginalized voices to be heard. Her theatre not only provokes thought but also inspires action, although some critics argue that the overtly political nature of her work can occasionally overshadow narrative depth, making certain performances feel more didactic than organic. Nonetheless, Rao's mastery of both artistic expression and articulate advocacy ensures her work remains impactful and relevant, solidifying her as a transformative force in contemporary Indian theatre. In the context of Maya Rao being renowned for her "eloquent contention," it suggests that she is highly skilled at expressing her viewpoints in a compelling and persuasive manner during discussions or debates.

Walk by Maya Rao explores the intricate relationship between gender and public spaces, delving into themes of safety, surveillance, and the politics of movement. Through Brechtian techniques, Rao breaks the fourth wall to directly engage with the audience, questioning their perceptions of safety and freedom while interspersing her monologues with statistics, societal critiques, and meta-theatrical commentary that disrupts the narrative flow. The act of walking serves as a potent metaphor for reclaiming autonomy and resisting patriarchal control over women's mobility, transforming a mundane action into a symbol of defiance. Additionally, Rao integrates rhythmic movements and stylized gestures inspired by traditional Indian dance forms, grounding the global feminist discourse in a culturally resonant framework that bridges local and universal concerns.

Brechtian techniques and the use of folk and traditional forms in Indian feminist theatre create a dynamic interplay between critical engagement and cultural resonance, enriching the articulation of feminist discourse. Brecht's methods, such as *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), disrupt emotional immersion, prompting the audience to engage intellectually with the issues presented. Techniques like breaking the fourth wall encourage viewers to critically evaluate societal problems such as domestic violence or gender inequality, as characters directly address the audience, challenging complicity and sparking reflection. Fragmented and episodic narratives focus on specific feminist issues—dowry, marital rape, workplace harassment—presenting each as a distinct critique while dismantling the linear storytelling norms. Additionally, exposing the constructed nature of theatre (visible props, lighting changes) highlights the artificiality of gender roles and societal structures, enabling audiences to imagine their reconstruction and redefinition.

The integration of folk and traditional forms like Therukoothu, Yakshagana, and Baul amplifies feminist discourse by connecting deeply with diverse cultural contexts and audiences. These forms draw upon familiar storytelling traditions, making feminist themes accessible and emotionally impactful. Symbolism and allegory often convey complex ideas in simple yet profound ways, such as a Baul song exploring autonomy and resistance. Participatory elements in these performances blur the lines between performers and spectators, fostering a collective dialogue on gender concerns. Feminist reinterpretations of folk tales or epics, like presenting Sita from the Ramayana as a figure of agency,

subvert traditional narratives and challenge patriarchal norms, encouraging audiences to rethink entrenched cultural portrayals of women. By blending critical theory with cultural tradition, these approaches make feminist theatre a transformative tool for discourse and change.

Maya Rao's *Deep Fried Jam* stands as a multifaceted exploration of societal apathy and global crises, with gender inequality as a central axis of critique. The play addresses the overwhelming nature of these issues, portraying the paralysis that often accompanies large-scale systemic problems such as environmental degradation, economic disparity, and violence against women. By situating gender within this broader context, Rao expands the feminist narrative, presenting it as inseparable from other intersecting oppressions. This thematic complexity challenges audiences to reflect on their complicity in sustaining these structures while urging them to consider their potential for resistance.

The performance's use of Brechtian techniques is particularly notable in disrupting conventional storytelling. Rao employs tonal shifts, juxtaposing humor with tragedy to create discomfort and prevent emotional catharsis. For instance, a comedic monologue might abruptly transition into a poignant commentary on violence, forcing the audience to engage intellectually rather than passively empathize. Her meta-theatrical approach—where the artifice of performance is deliberately exposed—reinforces the idea that societal norms, much like theatrical narratives, are constructed and open to deconstruction. These elements align with Brecht's goal of fostering critical spectatorship, making *Deep Fried Jam* a tool for consciousness-raising.

Rao's participatory approach further enhances the play's impact, transforming the theatre into a dialogic space. She incorporates real-life anecdotes and audience feedback, blurring the line between performer and spectator. This integration fosters collective reflection, resonating with traditional Indian storytelling practices where audience interaction is integral. By making spectators active participants in the narrative, Rao not only deepens their engagement but also cultivates a shared sense of responsibility for addressing the issues presented. This participatory dynamic positions *Deep Fried Jam* as both a critique of apathy and a call to action. Ultimately, *Deep Fried Jam* exemplifies how feminist theatre can effectively merge form and content to provoke thought and inspire change. By blending Brechtian disruption with culturally resonant participatory techniques, Rao creates a performance that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant.

*Khol Do* is a powerful and haunting performance by Maya Rao, based on the short story of the same name by Saadat Hasan Manto, a renowned Urdu writer known for his bold exploration of the human psyche during the tumultuous times of Partition in India. The play adapts Manto's poignant narrative, using theatre to delve into themes of violence, trauma, and human dignity, set against the backdrop of the post-Partition violence of 1947. Maya Rao's adaptation of *Khol Do* brings Manto's raw and powerful narrative to the stage with intensity and nuance. Her use of physical theatre and innovative staging makes the traumatic events of the Partition and its aftermath all the more visceral. Rao employs a minimalist set to allow the performance's emotional power to shine through. The characters are not just portrayed as victims; they are active participants in their tragic circumstances, making the audience question their role in perpetuating systems of violence and oppression.

Through *Khol Do*, Maya Rao highlights the intersection of gender and violence, specifically focusing on the sexual violence that women endured during the Partition, which is often glossed over or forgotten in historical narratives. The play insists that we must reckon with these forgotten histories in order to understand the full impact of communal violence, especially its effect on women.

Maya Rao's training in Kathakali, a classical dance-drama form of Kerala, significantly informs her theatrical practice, imbuing it with a unique blend of traditional rigor and contemporary relevance. Kathakali is a highly codified art form that emphasizes stylized gestures (*mudras*), facial expressions (*navarasas*), and a dynamic interplay of rhythm and movement. Rao's mastery of this tradition serves as a foundation for her ability to convey complex narratives and emotions, enriching her performances with cultural depth and artistic precision.

Kathakali demands exceptional physical discipline and control, qualities that are evident in Rao's performances. Her ability to use her body as a medium of expression reflects the rigorous training characteristic of Kathakali actors. This physicality allows her to inhabit diverse characters, seamlessly shifting between strength and vulnerability, and embodying the emotional depth required in feminist narratives. For instance, in performances like *Walk*, Rao's movements often echo the precision of Kathakali's *kalasams* (dynamic sequences), lending a visual intensity to her critique of gendered restrictions on women's mobility.

The *navarasas* (nine emotions) form the emotional palette of Kathakali, enabling actors to convey intricate psychological states. Rao's ability to draw on this training allows her to articulate the subtleties of feminist discourse

with depth and nuance. Whether portraying anger, despair, or defiance, her expressions resonate with an intensity that engages audiences viscerally and intellectually. This emotional range, rooted in her Kathakali practice, enhances the power of her performances, ensuring that her feminist critiques are both relatable and impactful.

Kathakali, historically dominated by male performers, often relegated women's participation to marginal roles. By mastering this form, Rao not only asserts her agency as a female artist but also subverts the traditional gender norms embedded in Kathakali's history. Her performances become a site of reclamation, where the classical language of Kathakali is repurposed to critique patriarchy and explore feminist themes. This subversion is particularly evident in her reinterpretation of mythological narratives, where she challenges the portrayal of women as passive or subservient figures.

Rao's ability to merge the traditional aesthetics of Kathakali with modern theatrical forms creates a unique hybrid style. By incorporating mudras, dramatic eye movements, and rhythmic storytelling into her contemporary works, she bridges the gap between classical and experimental theatre. This synthesis not only makes her performances visually compelling but also anchors her feminist critiques in a culturally resonant framework. For example, her use of Kathakali-inspired gestures to narrate stories of resistance transforms traditional techniques into tools for contemporary discourse.

The discourse surrounding gender and feminist theatre in India encompasses a multifaceted exploration of gender dynamics, power structures, and social justice within the theatrical realm. This discourse involves critical analysis, dialogue, and artistic expression aimed at challenging patriarchal norms, advocating for gender equality, and amplifying marginalized voices.

In India, feminist theatre has emerged as a powerful tool for social change, addressing a wide range of issues such as gender-based violence, unequal representation, and the intersectionality of identities including caste, class, and sexuality. Through performances, scripts, and productions, feminist theatre artists engage audiences in thought-provoking narratives that confront societal norms and inspire dialogue. The discourse surrounding gender and feminist theatre in India also involves interrogating the historical and cultural contexts that shape gender relations and women's experiences. This includes examining traditional narratives, myths, and stereotypes that perpetuate gender inequality, as well as celebrating the resilience and resistance of women throughout history.

Theories of performativity, particularly influenced by scholars like Judith Butler, have delved into the question of iteration and repetition in the formation of subjectivity. At the heart of these theories lies the idea that identity and subjectivity are not inherent or fixed but are continuously constructed and enacted through repeated performances of norms, behaviors, and language within social contexts.

Iteration refers to the act of repeating or reiterating certain actions, behaviors, or speech acts over time. Within the framework of performativity, repetition is crucial because it is through these repeated performances that norms and identities are established, reinforced, and perpetuated. For example, gender identity is not something one simply "has" but is rather something that is continually enacted through repetitive performances of gendered behaviors, gestures, and speech patterns. In exploring the role of iteration and repetition in the formation of subjectivity, theories of performativity highlight how these repeated performances not only shape individual identity but also contribute to the production and maintenance of broader social norms and power structures. By continuously enacting certain behaviors and conforming to societal expectations, individuals both reproduce and are subject to these norms, which in turn shape their understanding of themselves and their place in society.

Rao employs irony and wit in her cabaret shows to deliver pointed social commentary on diverse subjects, including urban consumerism and prevalent sexism in present-day India. As a charismatic and bold performer, Rao emanates a genuine sense of vitality, bravery, humor, and sincerity, challenging societal norms with her unapologetic demeanor.

Staged across a spectrum of public settings, spanning from the bustling streets of New Delhi to the prestigious venues of the Jaipur Literary Festival and the vibrant campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University, "Walk" emerges as a performance that ignites audiences with a realization of their collective potential as citizens. It serves as a catalyst for prompting legal, cultural, and social shifts within urban landscapes.

The future of articulate discourse in Indian theatre is poised to evolve as a dynamic space where tradition meets contemporary expression. With its deep roots in classical forms like Kathakali, Bharatanatyam, and Yakshagana, Indian theatre has always been a medium of rich storytelling. However, modern theatre increasingly adopts articulate discourse as a tool to address complex social, political, and cultural themes, including gender equality, caste dynamics, and

environmental issues. As theatre becomes more experimental and interactive, the emphasis on clear, impactful dialogue—both verbal and non-verbal—will grow, enabling deeper audience engagement.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The integration of digital technologies, like virtual and augmented reality, is likely to expand the ways discourse is presented, blending physical performance with immersive storytelling. Additionally, multilingualism and regional narratives will continue to strengthen Indian theatre, ensuring diverse voices find representation. Platforms for street theatre and grassroots productions will also serve as spaces for articulate discourse, democratizing access and fostering critical discussions on pressing societal issues. As Indian theatre navigates these changes, its future will rest on balancing its traditional storytelling ethos with innovative approaches to communication, creating a vibrant space for cultural introspection and dialogue.

Articulate discourse serves as the medium through which traditions are reclaimed, myths are dismantled, and new narratives are forged. Maya Rao's work exemplifies how traditional forms of expression, when combined with the clarity and intentionality of articulate discourse, can become powerful tools for feminist advocacy. It is through this intersection that cultural transformation is not only imagined but also realized, reinforcing the vital role of articulate communication in driving social change.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

### REFERENCES

- Case, S. (2014). *Feminism and theatre*. Routledge.
- Dalmia, V. (2008). Folk theatre and the search for an Indigenous idiom: Poetics, Plays, and Performances, 153-233. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195695052.003.0005>
- Das, P. R. (2021). *A theatre of their own: Indian women playwrights in perspective*. Partridge Publishing.
- Dutt, B. (2022). *Maya Rao and Indian feminist theatre*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hooks, B. (2014). *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge.
- Lehmann, H. (2018). Brecht translating / Translating brecht. *The Brecht Yearbook / Das Brecht-Jahrbuch* 42, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787441903.002>
- Mukherjee, T. (2005). *Staging resistance: Plays by women in translation*.
- Roth, M. (1983). Notes toward a feminist performance aesthetic. *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 1(1), 5-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407708308571047>
- S., S. K., & Chatterjee, S. (2023). *Gendered violence in public spaces: Women's narratives of travel in neoliberal India*. Lexington Books.
- Singh, A. (2021). *Staging feminisms: Gender, violence and performance in contemporary India*. Taylor & Francis.
- Singh, A., & Mukherjee, T. T. (2013). *Gender, space and resistance: Women and theatre in India. Toward a theorization of gender in world theatre*. (2017). *World Theories of Theatre*, 209-226. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315742496-7>
- Zarrilli, P. (2003). *Kathakali dance-drama: Where gods and demons come to play*. Routledge.