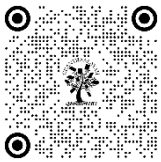


WHO SPEAKS FOR WHOM?: REPRESENTATION, IDENTITY POLITICS, AND THE ETHICS OF CASTING IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the contested politics of embodiment and voice within contemporary Indian theatre, with particular attention to the ethical stakes of casting practices as they intersect with structures of caste, gender, and queer identity. Framed by the critical provocation—“Who speaks for whom?”—the study situates the theatrical stage as a charged site of cultural mediation where questions of visibility, authority, and legitimacy are continuously negotiated. Drawing on the theoretical interventions of Judith Butler’s performativity, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s subaltern critique, and Rustom Bharucha’s reflections on interculturalism, the inquiry foregrounds the tensions between artistic agency and the moral imperative of representational justice. Through close analyses of selected performances that centre Dalit, transgender, and queer experiences, the paper interrogates the asymmetries of access, authorship, and affect that shape contemporary dramaturgical practices. It further attends to the role of audience reception and the politics of spectatorship in legitimizing or contesting representational claims. Ultimately, the paper advances a decolonial ethics of casting—one grounded in self-representation, epistemic accountability, and collaborative authorship—urging Indian theatre to confront its complicities and reimagine itself as a site of affective solidarity, critical resistance, and ethical enactment.

Keywords: Representation, Identity Politics, Ethics of Casting, Indian Theatre, Performance Studies, Embodiment, Subaltern Voices, Cultural Appropriation, Dalit Aesthetics, Queer and Trans Performance, Caste and Theatre, Spectatorship, Decolonial Praxis, Self-Representation, Theatre and Social Justice

1. INTRODUCTION: FRAMING THE PROBLEMATICS OF REPRESENTATION

Contemporary Indian theatre has emerged as a critical arena where cultural expression is inextricably entangled with political contestation. It serves not merely as a performative space but as a charged discursive site wherein questions of identity, embodiment, and representational legitimacy are staged, negotiated, and frequently subverted. In the context of proliferating social justice movements—spanning anti-caste activism, feminist struggles, queer assertion, and intersectional solidarities—theatre in India increasingly grapples with the ethical imperatives of artistic practice. No longer relegated to the realm of aesthetic gratification or artistic autonomy, the stage now functions as a politically saturated space that interrogates the structures of voice, visibility, and exclusion. Within this critical milieu, the inquiry into “who performs whom” transcends the pragmatics of casting to invoke deeper epistemological concerns about cultural authorship, symbolic capital, and the mechanisms that govern access to representational platforms.

Theatre, in its very constitution as a medium of embodied enunciation and dialogic exchange, is uniquely poised to reflect—and refract—the complex politics of identity. As playwrights, directors, and performers engage with narratives that traverse the matrices of caste, gender, sexuality, religion, and class, the performative act becomes increasingly fraught with ethical consequence. Provocative and unresolved questions animate this landscape: Can a Savarna actor ethically portray the lived realities of a Dalit subjectivity? What are the implications of cisgender performers assuming transgender identities on stage? How do queer experiences find articulation within heteronormative dramaturgical frameworks? These interrogations expose the fragile boundaries between artistic interpretation and cultural appropriation, and bring to the fore anxieties surrounding the commodification of subaltern voices in a deeply stratified socio-cultural context.

These tensions have been further magnified by public debates and critical ruptures surrounding both institutional and avant-garde theatrical practices that engage with marginalised identities. Productions that render such identities legible through the lens of hegemonic frameworks—without sufficient ethical engagement—have faced increasing scrutiny for perpetuating symbolic violence, epistemic marginalisation, and the aestheticization of suffering. Conversely, performance practices rooted in lived experience—particularly those emerging from Dalit theatre groups, feminist performance collectives, and queer dramaturgies—offer powerful counter-narratives. These embodied interventions resist the logic of appropriation by asserting a politics of presence, authenticity, and narrative self-determination. Such practices herald a paradigmatic shift in the Indian theatrical ecology—one that foregrounds ethical accountability, experiential authority, and the reconstitution of cultural voice from within.

This study undertakes a critical examination of the politics and ethics of representation in contemporary Indian theatre by mobilising a constellation of theoretical perspectives. Judith Butler's theory of performativity provides an analytic framework to understand the iterative construction and deconstruction of identity through performance. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal critique of subaltern representation enables a rigorous interrogation of epistemic violence and representational asymmetries. Rustom Bharucha's work on intercultural theatre offers further insight into the complexities of authenticity, embodiment, and cultural translation in the Indian performative context. Methodologically, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon performance studies, cultural theory, and critical discourse analysis to interrogate both textual dramaturgy and embodied performance.

By centering the problematics of casting, performative ethics, and narrative sovereignty, this article reconceptualises theatrical representation not as a neutral aesthetic exercise but as a profoundly political act. Theatre, in this view, is reimagined as a contested cultural terrain wherein the struggle for justice, equity, and collective rearticulation of identity unfolds through acts of performance, resistance, and remembrance.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THEATRE, IDENTITY, AND THE POLITICS OF PERFORMANCE IN INDIA

The historical evolution of Indian theatre reflects a nuanced and often contested negotiation between continuity and rupture, tradition and innovation, aesthetic experimentation and political assertion. Emerging from deeply embedded ritualistic and performative practices of premodern India, the theatrical idiom has continually adapted to shifting socio-political paradigms while retaining its capacity for both symbolic expression and ideological intervention. The colonial encounter constituted a significant rupture, ushering in Western dramaturgical frameworks—particularly those grounded in realism and psychological depth—which came to dominate the urban proscenium stages of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. Influenced by Shakespearean and European theatrical traditions, this new dramaturgy privileged linear narratives, moral didacticism, and bourgeois sensibilities, thereby establishing a normative theatrical canon that systematically marginalized indigenous forms such as Jatra, Tamasha, Yakshagana, and Nautanki. These vernacular modes, once integral to regional performance cultures, were relegated to the periphery under colonial epistemologies that framed them as 'folk' or 'popular'—aesthetic categories marked by both condescension and romanticization.

Nevertheless, traditional performance forms endured, preserving intricate systems of embodiment, gesture, and stylized enactment. In classical and folk traditions such as Kathakali, Yakshagana, and Bhavai, the convention of male actors performing female roles was deeply institutionalized. Rooted in aesthetic frameworks such as *nāyaka-nāyikā bhāva*, and the semiotic codes of *rasa* and *abhinaya*, these impersonations were not understood through contemporary lenses of gender transgression or queer subversion. Rather, they emerged from metaphysical and symbolic taxonomies that conceived gender as an artistic essence rather than a socio-political identity. The absence of female performers was

symptomatic of broader caste and gender taboos, which circumscribed women's participation in public performance and normalized male impersonation as both ethical and conventional.

The post-independence phase introduced a new ideological urgency to Indian theatre, particularly through the institutional interventions of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), established in 1943. Aligned with the anti-colonial struggle and socialist thought, IPTA reimagined theatre as a medium of social awakening and collective mobilisation. Theatres of this era gravitated toward didactic realism, addressing themes such as economic exploitation, social inequality, and the injustices of colonial rule. Yet it was only in the wake of post-liberalization India—especially from the 1990s onward—that theatre underwent a paradigmatic reorientation. This period witnessed the emergence of caste-conscious, gender-aware, and subaltern-centric performance collectives. Artists and ensembles such as Jyoti Mhapsekar, Satyabrata Rout, Samudaya, and Adi Theatre articulated dramaturgies rooted in Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, and feminist epistemologies, often rejecting the architectural and ideological constraints of the proscenium in favour of community engagement, orality, and spatial mobility.

Street theatre, particularly as practiced by groups like Jana Natya Manch (JANAM), became a vital instrument of ideological critique and public pedagogy. Drawing upon Brechtian alienation techniques and Marxist materialist frameworks, such performances disrupted the bourgeois theatrical apparatus by employing minimalist aesthetics, ensemble acting, and direct address. Simultaneously, queer and feminist theatre collectives—such as Mukhatib and The Patchworks Ensemble—expanded the theatrical terrain to include intersectional politics, embodied resistance, and affective dissent, thereby challenging heteronormative and caste-patriarchal structures from within.

Together, these diverse yet interlinked trajectories constitute a radical counter-archive of Indian theatre—one that resists hegemonic modes of representation and reclaims performance as a generative site for political articulation, epistemic justice, and embodied transformation. The Indian stage, in this sense, becomes not merely a space of artistic expression, but a critical arena for the dramatization of identity, dissent, and collective reimagining.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: ETHICS, EMBODIMENT, AND IDENTITY

The representational dilemmas that permeate contemporary Indian theatre necessitate a sophisticated and critically attuned theoretical inquiry into the ethical, political, and affective dimensions of identity and embodiment. At the heart of this investigation lies the imperative to interrogate how subaltern voices are staged—whether they are authentically articulated, appropriated, or rendered inaudible within dominant dramaturgical structures. This section draws upon a constellation of theoretical paradigms to examine the politics of casting, the ethics of voice, and the asymmetries of representation that govern theatrical practice.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity offers a foundational reconfiguration of identity, positing it not as a pre-discursive essence but as an ongoing citational process constituted through the repetitive enactment of normative codes. In Butler's formulation, the body is not a passive vessel awaiting signification but a site continually materialized through performative iterations of gendered, racialized, and sexualized norms. Within the realm of theatre, Butler's insights dismantle essentialist understandings of identity and foreground the disciplinary matrices that permit certain bodies to perform—and others to be performed. When dominant caste or class actors inhabit the experiences of subaltern subjects, this performative dissonance raises urgent ethical concerns about legitimacy, authority, and the conditions under which visibility is granted or denied.

Complementing Butler's critique, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's canonical interrogation in *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"* deepens the ethical stakes of representation by exposing the epistemic violence inherent in ventriloquizing the Other. Spivak challenges liberal humanist assumptions that equate representation with empowerment, cautioning instead against the ways in which elite agents often reproduce structures of silencing under the guise of inclusion. Applied to the theatre, her critique problematizes performative practices wherein Savarna or heteronormative artists arrogate the right to narrate Dalit, Adivasi, or queer subjectivities without interrogating their own positional entanglements. Spivak's intervention reframes representation as an act loaded with political consequence, necessitating a sustained awareness of structural inequality and historical complicity.

Rustom Bharucha's interventions in the domain of intercultural performance further nuance this debate by critiquing the celebratory discourse of hybridity that often masks power asymmetries. Bharucha foregrounds the need for ethical accountability in cross-cultural and cross-caste performance practices, insisting on historicity, reciprocity, and dialogic engagement as preconditions for legitimate representation. His emphasis on context, authorship, and

relational integrity offers a compelling framework for evaluating theatrical productions that engage with marginalised identities, especially in a postcolonial society fraught with cultural and caste-based stratification.

To this matrix of theoretical perspectives must be added the emancipatory force of Ambedkarite aesthetics, which reimagines representation not as a liberal performance of empathy but as a radical act of voice reclamation and epistemic insurgency. Grounded in the lived realities of caste-based oppression, Ambedkarite cultural praxis foregrounds self-representation as a form of resistance, wherein the act of staging becomes a mode of historical redress and ontological assertion.

Together, these theoretical frameworks compel a critical re-evaluation of key concepts such as authenticity, positionality, embodiment, and aesthetic distance. Authenticity is rendered not as a static or intrinsic attribute, but as a historically situated and relational practice. Positionality implicates artists and creators in networks of privilege and marginality, demanding reflexive accountability. Embodiment highlights the corporeal and affective intensities of performance, while aesthetic distance—long valorised in Eurocentric theatre—emerges as a potentially disembodied mechanism that can obscure material inequalities. These interwoven perspectives thus offer an indispensable critical vocabulary for navigating the ethical terrains of casting and representation in contemporary Indian theatre.

4. CASE STUDIES: CONTEMPORARY INDIAN PRODUCTIONS AND CONTROVERSIES

The ethical imperatives surrounding representation in contemporary Indian theatre come into sharp relief when analysed through specific instances of casting controversies and production practices. These case studies underscore the fraught entanglements between identity politics, embodied experience, and the dramaturgical choices that structure performance. Far from being neutral artistic decisions, casting practices emerge as deeply politicised acts, provoking critical discourses on authenticity, structural inclusion, and the ethics of voice.

A. Caste and Representation

A particularly contested arena within contemporary Indian theatre concerns the portrayal of Dalit resistance and caste-based trauma, especially in works engaging with figures such as Rohith Vemula or historical episodes like the Bhima Koregaon uprising. In several of these productions, upper-caste (Savarna) actors have been cast in Dalit roles—a decision frequently justified by directors through the idiom of artistic competence or the universalising rhetoric of empathetic embodiment. However, this rationale has been sharply critiqued by Dalit theatre practitioners and critical cultural commentators, who view such casting choices as instances of symbolic appropriation that reinscribe caste-based exclusions. These critiques foreground the displacement of lived Dalit experience by dominant-caste narratives, where those most intimately acquainted with the realities of caste oppression are denied representational agency in their own stories. The central ethical question that arises is whether the empathetic embodiment of caste trauma by Savarna performers can meaningfully convey its affective and historical gravity, or whether such performances risk aestheticizing suffering while reproducing the hierarchies they ostensibly seek to dismantle.

B. Gender and Trans Embodiment

The representation of transgender identities constitutes another complex and ethically charged site of theatrical practice. While Indian theatre has increasingly engaged with trans narratives, the casting of cisgender actors in trans roles remains widespread, often legitimised through appeals to professional training and performative range. Yet such practices have come under growing scrutiny for systematically excluding trans performers, even in productions where trans experiences form the thematic core. This exclusion is not merely representational but structural, perpetuating the erasure of trans voices within artistic institutions. In contrast, productions such as *Maya the Musical*—a trans-led initiative—and collectives like the Aravani Art Project model self-representation as a form of cultural and political praxis. These interventions, along with collaborations by feminist theatre groups, insist on centring trans embodiment as a precondition for ethical representation. The critical question posed here is whether the representation of marginalised identities, absent the participation of those who inhabit them, constitutes not artistic homage but a subtle reiteration of exclusion and appropriation.

C. Queer Identities and Theatre Spaces

The post-decriminalisation era has witnessed a proliferation of queer-themed productions on Indian stages. However, a persistent disjuncture remains between thematic inclusion and embodied representation. Many such productions cast cis-heterosexual actors in queer roles, often justified by commercial imperatives or claims of theatrical

craft. Meanwhile, queer performers are relegated to peripheral roles or entirely excluded. This disparity has provoked pointed critiques from queer activist and artistic communities, who argue that such practices, while appearing inclusive, perpetuate representational asymmetries. The central paradox lies in the tension between thematic visibility and corporeal invisibility: can the proliferation of queer narratives be ethically or politically meaningful if the very bodies those narratives seek to centre are denied presence on the stage?

Taken together, these case studies illuminate the extent to which casting practices in Indian theatre are implicated in broader structures of privilege, exclusion, and cultural capital. Representation, far from being an abstract aesthetic concern, emerges as an ethical imperative—demanding critical vigilance, structural accountability, and a reimagining of performance as a space of relational justice.

5. AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND THE POLITICS OF SPECTATORSHIP

The politics of representation in theatre is inextricably bound to the dynamics of spectatorship. While authorial intention and performative execution play significant roles in meaning-making, it is within the realm of audience reception that meanings are actively constructed, contested, and transformed. Spectatorship, therefore, must be understood not as a passive act of observation, but as a constitutive force that mediates the ethical, aesthetic, and political dimensions of theatrical performance. The reception of a play is shaped not solely by what is staged, but also by who is watching, from what positionality, and within which socio-cultural framework.

Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities provides a foundational lens through which to analyse this dynamic. Fish argues that meaning does not reside inherently within the text or performance; rather, it emerges through the interpretive acts of communities that share particular norms, values, and epistemological assumptions. In the context of Indian theatre—where caste, gender, sexuality, class, and region significantly shape cultural sensibilities—Fish's insights reveal how the same production may elicit vastly divergent responses. For example, a performance dramatizing Dalit resistance, when enacted by an upper-caste actor, may be applauded by elite urban audiences for its expressive intensity and liberal gestures, yet be viewed by Dalit spectators as a form of symbolic appropriation and aestheticised marginalisation. Such variance foregrounds the politics of reception as a site where representation is either ratified or rigorously questioned.

Extending this discourse, Rustom Bharucha's concept of the "ethical spectator" situates the viewer as an agent morally implicated in the act of watching. For Bharucha, spectatorship entails a historically conscious and politically attuned engagement with performance, particularly when it involves subaltern bodies and voices. The ethical spectator does not consume representation at a distance but brings to the act of viewing a reflexive awareness of the asymmetries that underlie theatrical production and participation. This model challenges the detachment often associated with elite spectatorship, calling instead for a mode of witnessing that is dialogic, accountable, and critically situated.

Moreover, the politics of reception must be understood as variegated across theatrical circuits. In urban proscenium spaces, audiences are typically drawn from upper-caste, English-educated, and economically privileged classes, and their responses are frequently filtered through frameworks of cultural capital and aesthetic refinement. By contrast, rural and semi-urban audiences—particularly in folk, devotional, or community-based performance traditions—engage more participatorily and collectively, often blurring the lines between performer and spectator. The proliferation of digital and online theatre platforms has introduced further complexities: while such platforms promise accessibility and democratization, they also reproduce new exclusions through algorithmic visibility and screen-based detachment. In university theatres, the intersection of political pedagogy and performance gives rise to hybrid receptions—critical, resistant, and ideologically diverse.

Ultimately, the identity of the spectator—defined by their caste, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic location—is central to the politics of theatrical reception. A queer viewer may interpret an LGBTQ+ narrative as liberatory or reductive; a Dalit spectator may experience a play on caste either as empowering testimony or as a reiteration of exclusionary discourse. In this context, the politics of spectatorship compels us to interrogate not only *what* is represented and *how*, but also *who* is addressed, *who* is empowered to respond, and *who* is left out of the representational frame.

6. THE ETHICS OF CASTING: TOWARDS A PRAXIS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

In the contemporary Indian theatrical landscape, the ethics of casting emerges as a site of profound entanglement between aesthetic deliberation and socio-political responsibility. Casting, far from being a neutral or apolitical decision, operates as a critical act of cultural mediation—one that determines whose voices are legitimised, whose bodies are rendered visible, and whose histories are narrativised or silenced. Consequently, an ethically attuned approach to casting demands a vigilant differentiation between meaningful representation and appropriative misrepresentation: between the substantive inclusion of marginalised communities and the reproduction of hegemonic structures under the guise of artistic freedom.

Ethical dilemmas become particularly acute when dominant-caste, cisgender, or heterosexual performers are habitually cast in roles that embody Dalit, transgender, or queer subjectivities. Such practices frequently efface the historical, affective, and epistemic weight of lived experience, aestheticising marginalisation while excluding those most intimately shaped by it. Authentic representation, therefore, cannot be adjudicated solely on the basis of performative competence or interpretive skill; rather, it necessitates a sustained engagement with the relational ethics of proximity, accountability, and cultural intimacy.

This foregrounds a constitutive tension between the imperatives of artistic autonomy and the demands of social justice. While theatre must remain a domain of imaginative risk and formal experimentation, it cannot absolve itself from the ethical exigencies posed by structural inequality and historical exclusion. Invocations of artistic liberty must not be deployed to legitimise practices that entrench representational hierarchies. Ethical casting, in this light, insists not on the erasure of difference, but on the critical importance of embodied knowledge and positional specificity in narrating historically silenced voices.

Towards such a reorientation, structural transformation must be prioritised. Ethical casting cannot remain dependent upon the discretionary ethics of individual practitioners; it must be embedded within institutional protocols that facilitate equity and access. Inclusive casting calls, transparent and equitable audition processes, and rehearsal environments that centre care, safety, and dignity for marginalised performers are not supplementary gestures—they are essential mechanisms for cultivating a genuinely pluralistic theatre culture. Directors and casting professionals, as gatekeepers of narrative authority, bear particular responsibility in dismantling tokenistic models and reconstituting the conditions of artistic participation.

Moreover, the ethics of casting is inseparable from the broader politics of voice, embodiment, and cultural labour. It raises fundamental questions: Who is authorised to speak? Whose body is deemed performable? Whose labour is foregrounded, and whose remains invisible? The aesthetic contributions of marginalised artists must be valued not merely as artistic capital but as sites of epistemological richness and political resistance.

Ultimately, a praxis of accountable casting demands more than a discursive allegiance to inclusion. It calls for a radical re-imagining of theatrical practice—grounded in critical self-reflexivity, institutional restructuring, and an unwavering commitment to justice, equity, and ethical integrity both within and beyond the stage.

7. DECOLONIZING THE STAGE: REWRITING REPRESENTATION

Engaging with the ethics of representation in contemporary Indian theatre requires a decisive shift from superficial inclusion to a sustained decolonial praxis—one that reconfigures both the aesthetic and political architecture of performance. To decolonize the stage is to challenge and dismantle historically entrenched hierarchies of authorship, embodiment, and spectatorship that have privileged dominant-caste, cisgender, heteronormative, and elite voices. This process calls for a movement beyond tokenistic gestures of diversity toward transformative models of theatrical production that centre the epistemologies, lived experiences, and cultural labour of marginalised communities.

At the core of this decolonial turn lies the imperative to redistribute creative authority. Collaborative dramaturgy—in which marginalised artists serve not merely as subjects of representation but as co-authors of the narrative—constitutes a crucial strategy for resisting extractive storytelling. Similarly, community-led productions displace conventional hierarchies of direction and authorship by rooting creative processes in the socio-cultural life worlds of those whose stories are being told. Such practices reorient theatre as a dialogic, participatory, and collectively authored space, challenging singular perspectives and enabling the co-creation of meaning.

In the Indian context, a number of theatre collectives exemplify these decolonial approaches. Dalit initiatives such as *Adi Theatre* have developed performance vocabularies that foreground caste not only as content but as a structuring principle of dramaturgy, offering performances that resist Brahminical erasure and assert subaltern agency. Feminist ensembles like *Stree Mukti Sanghatana* and *Samahaara* have articulated gender-sensitive aesthetics through embodied critique and collective inquiry. Adivasi performance traditions in states such as Jharkhand and Odisha reclaim indigenous narrative forms—often performed in vernacular languages and inflected with ritual symbolism—thereby resisting linguistic and aesthetic homogenisation. Queer collectives including *Maya the Musical* and *The Patchworks Ensemble* have radically redefined the theatrical stage as a space of affective and epistemic dissent, where queer embodiment becomes a site of both resistance and reclamation.

A truly decolonial theatre must also interrogate institutional pedagogies. Drama schools and cultural institutions continue to be shaped by Eurocentric canons and Savarna aesthetic norms that marginalise non-dominant narratives. Decolonizing pedagogy requires the reconfiguration of curricula, audition procedures, rehearsal methodologies, and evaluative practices in ways that foreground inclusivity, reflexivity, and structural accountability. Such reforms are necessary not only to diversify representation but to democratise access to cultural production.

Central to this project is the ethic of self-representation—not merely as a performative claim to identity, but as an epistemological intervention that asserts narrative sovereignty. This must be accompanied by structural access to resources, platforms, and decision-making spaces. Equally vital is the practice of radical listening: a sustained, attentive, and self-critical engagement with voices that have been historically silenced, appropriated, or aestheticized by dominant frameworks.

Ultimately, decolonizing the stage is not a symbolic act of correction but a generative reimagining of theatrical practice itself. It calls for a dramaturgy rooted in justice, reciprocity, and relational ethics—where performance becomes a mode of epistemic restoration, cultural affirmation, and political solidarity.

8. CONCLUSION: WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO REPRESENT?

This study has interrogated the layered and fraught terrain of representation within contemporary Indian theatre, foregrounding the ways in which identity, embodiment, authorship, and spectatorship converge as ethical and political practices. Through an interdisciplinary synthesis of theoretical paradigms, performance analysis, and case-based inquiry, the research has situated casting and representational strategies not as autonomous aesthetic decisions but as historically situated acts that operate within entrenched matrices of caste, gender, sexuality, and class-based exclusions. The guiding provocation—*who has the right to represent?*—has thus been reframed not as a rhetorical abstraction concerning artistic license, but as a fundamental inquiry into narrative authority, epistemic violence, and the redistributive demands of justice.

Engaging with critical interventions by Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Rustom Bharucha, as well as the embodied aesthetics of Ambedkarite, feminist, queer, and decolonial performance traditions, this research has articulated a necessary reorientation of theatrical ethics. It has exposed the limitations and dangers of dominant-caste, cisgender, and heteronormative appropriations of subaltern lives—especially when these representations are cloaked in liberal-humanist tropes of empathy, universality, or artistic transcendence. In opposition to such extractive modes, the study has traced the insurgent practices of Dalit, Adivasi, feminist, queer, and trans theatre collectives who insist on performance as an act of epistemic self-assertion, relational authorship, and embodied resistance. In doing so, they not only reclaim narrative sovereignty but fundamentally reconfigure the ontological status of performance itself—as a space of radical witnessing, truth-telling, and cultural reclamation.

At the core of this argument lies the imperative for a politics of solidarity that moves beyond symbolic inclusion toward structural transformation. Such a politics must refuse the coloniality of representation that renders marginalised lives as aesthetic subjects for dominant consumption. Instead, it must cultivate conditions under which historically silenced communities can articulate their own realities through practices of self-representation, with access to the institutional, material, and discursive infrastructures necessary to do so. Ethical spectatorship, equitable casting, and participatory dramaturgy are not ancillary practices but essential elements of a theatre grounded in justice and care.

Future directions for research must engage the evolving and increasingly digitised ecology of performance. The rise of algorithmically mediated platforms has altered not only the circuits of visibility but also the politics of curation and reception. The integration of AI-generated dramaturgy and performance introduces new ethical questions concerning

authenticity, embodiment, and authorial agency—particularly in relation to marginalised voices. Moreover, diasporic Indian theatre offers a vital site for exploring how questions of caste, gender, and cultural memory are negotiated across transnational terrains, shaped by both global solidarities and local specificities.

In conclusion, the right to represent must be rearticulated not as a universal entitlement tethered to creative freedom, but as a historically contingent, ethically negotiated responsibility. A decolonial theatre practice demands solidarity over substitution, access over tokenism, and radical listening over aesthetic detachment. It must strive to become not merely a mirror to society but a site of transformation—where performance itself becomes a modality of justice, reparation, and collective reimagination.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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