

Volume 2, Issue 2

Research Article

Date of Submission: 20 May, 2026

Date of Acceptance: 09 Jun, 2026

Date of Publication: 26 Jun, 2026

Staging Resistance: Gender, Social Memory, and Women's Representation in Modern Indian Theatre

Udaya Narayana Singh*  and Anwita Maiti 

Amity University Haryana, India

*Corresponding Author: Udaya Narayana Singh, Chair-Professor, Amity University Haryana, India.

Citation: Singh, U. N., Maiti, A. (2026). Staging Resistance: Gender, Social Memory, and Women's Representation in Modern Indian Theatre. *Digit Hum Soc Sci Cult Preserv*, 2(2), 01-13.

Abstract

This article examines modern Indian theatre as a politically engaged cultural space through which gendered violence, patriarchal control, and women's resistance are collectively articulated, remembered, and contested. Moving beyond the understanding of theatre as a medium of entertainment or literary representation, the study positions performance as a form of social archive that preserves embodied histories of oppression while transforming private suffering into public discourse. Through an interdisciplinary interpretive analysis of six significant plays—Aurat, Dafa 180, Putulkhela, Kanyadaan, Madhabi, and Hum Mukhtara—the article investigates how Indian theatre stages the intersections of domestic patriarchy, caste violence, sexual assault, reproductive commodification, and feminist political resistance.

Drawing from performance studies, feminist criticism, and cultural memory studies, the paper argues that theatre serves not merely as a reflective cultural form but as an active site of civic witnessing and social intervention. These performances do not simply depict women's victimization; they reconstruct silenced narratives, mobilize public consciousness, and challenge normalized structures of gendered injustice. By foregrounding women's embodied experiences across private and public spheres, the selected plays demonstrate how theatre becomes a medium of cultural preservation, retaining histories that institutional narratives often marginalize or erase. The article ultimately contends that modern Indian theatre remains a critical arena for preserving gendered social memory and fostering collective resistance against enduring patriarchal structures.

Keywords: Indian Theatre, Feminist Performance, Gendered Violence, Social Memory, Cultural Preservation, Performance Studies, Women's Resistance

Introduction

Theatre in India has historically functioned as far more than an aesthetic or entertainment-oriented cultural practice. As a performative medium rooted in collective spectatorship, immediacy, and embodied expression, theatre has repeatedly served as a site of public pedagogy, dissent, political critique, and social intervention. Unlike representational forms that rely upon distance between text and audience, theatrical performance produces an encounter in which social realities are not merely narrated but enacted before a witnessing public. In contexts marked by structural inequality, this capacity becomes especially significant. Performance creates a civic space where silenced experiences acquire visibility, and private suffering is translated into collective political discourse.

Within the Indian socio-cultural context, women's experiences have often remained mediated through patriarchal institutions that regulate voice, autonomy, sexuality, labor, and mobility. Gendered oppression does not manifest solely in overt acts of violence; it is also embedded within domestic arrangements, legal institutions, caste hierarchies, reproductive expectations, and cultural narratives that normalize women's subordination. Artistic practices that expose these structures therefore perform a crucial social function. Theatre, particularly politically engaged and activist theatre, has emerged as one such powerful medium through which women's lived realities are articulated, interrogated, and preserved. Of course, it is well-known that India has witnessed an unprecedented rise in the production of movies around the theme of rape, especially after the 2012 BBC report of the horrific Gang-Rape of Nirbhaya in Delhi that shook

the entire nation [1].

This essay examines modern Indian theatre as an interdisciplinary cultural archive of gendered experience. Rather than treating dramatic texts merely as literary artifacts, the study approaches theatre as a dynamic repository of social memory—one that preserves embodied histories of violence, resistance, and political consciousness. In this sense, theatre does not simply represent women's oppression; it records, transmits, and publicly reanimates contested social realities. The performative act becomes both documentation and intervention.

The relationship between performance and gendered politics in India has long been shaped by activist theatre traditions. From the politically charged interventions of street theatre collectives to stage productions interrogating caste, domesticity, sexuality, and institutional violence, Indian theatre has consistently engaged urgent social questions. Particularly in feminist and socially conscious performance traditions, theatre has functioned as a mode of collective witnessing. By staging experiences often confined to domestic privacy or social silence, it transforms invisible trauma into public knowledge.

The present study focuses on six plays that exemplify this function: *Aurat*, *Dafa 180*, *Putulkhela*, *Kanyadaan*, *Madhabi*, and *Hum Mukhtara*. These works have been selected not merely for their thematic engagement with women's issues but for the diversity of socio-political frameworks through which they address gendered experience. *Aurat* foregrounds collective feminist resistance within the context of labor and public activism. *Dafa 180* confronts institutional violence and the legal handling of sexual assault. *Putulkhela* interrogates domestic patriarchy and marital power structures. *Kanyadaan* explores the entanglements of caste ideology, domestic abuse, and social liberalism. *Madhabi* examines the historical commodification of the female body through mythic reinterpretation. *Hum Mukhtara* stages trauma, survival, and solidarity through a transnational South Asian feminist lens.

Together, these performances reveal that women's oppression cannot be understood through a singular framework. Rather, gendered injustice emerges through intersecting structures of caste, class, institutional power, domestic control, religious symbolism, and public morality. The selected corpus therefore enables a multidimensional exploration of how theatre mediates social memory and feminist critique.

This essay argues that modern Indian theatre functions simultaneously as cultural archive, political intervention, and social critique by preserving narratives of women's oppression while transforming private suffering into public civic discourse. The selected plays do not merely portray victimhood; they actively produce spaces of resistance, reinterpret historical and contemporary injustices, and invite audiences into acts of ethical witnessing. In doing so, theatre becomes a mechanism of cultural preservation—not in the static sense of archiving texts alone, but through the embodied preservation of contested social histories.

Methodologically, this study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative interpretive approach situated at the intersection of performance studies, feminist criticism, and cultural memory studies [2]. The analysis attends not only to textual content but also to performance logic, thematic construction, and socio-political context. Such an approach is particularly relevant within digital humanities and cultural preservation scholarship, where questions of memory, representation, archival absence, and embodied transmission have gained increasing importance.

By positioning Indian theatre within this broader interdisciplinary conversation, the article seeks to contribute to discussions about performance as a form of cultural preservation and feminist social critique [3]. At a moment when questions of gender justice, historical memory, and cultural documentation remain globally urgent, revisiting politically engaged theatrical traditions offers important insight into how performance continues to preserve, contest, and transform public understanding of women's lived realities. It also attempts to show what happens when one looks at this whole space like a feminist [4].

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from performance studies, feminist theory, postcolonial criticism, and cultural memory studies to understand theatre not merely as artistic representation but as an embodied mode of social knowledge production. Such an approach is necessary because the selected plays operate at multiple levels simultaneously: as dramatic narratives, political interventions, feminist critiques, and cultural repositories of lived experience.

A foundational premise of this study is that performance constitutes an alternative archive of social memory. Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire is particularly useful here. Taylor argues that while archives traditionally privilege durable textual and material records, embodied practices such as performance preserve and transmit knowledge through repetition, enactment, and collective participation. This perspective is especially relevant in contexts where institutional archives have historically marginalized women's experiences, everyday violence, and subaltern narratives. Theatre, in this sense, becomes a living archive that records histories not always preserved in formal documentation [5].

This framework enables the present study to understand Indian theatre as a site where gendered experiences are not merely narrated but embodied, remembered, and socially circulated. Violence against women, domestic oppression, and structural silencing often exist in fragmented or socially suppressed forms. Performance reconstructs these histories through visibility, emotional immediacy, and public witnessing.

Feminist performance theory further strengthens this interpretive framework. Elaine Aston's work on feminist theatre demonstrates how performance can disrupt dominant representations of gender by challenging normative structures of spectatorship, embodiment, and power. Feminist theatre does not simply include women as subjects; it interrogates the social mechanisms through which women are represented, disciplined, and silenced [6]. This perspective is crucial for understanding the selected plays, many of which resist conventional portrayals of female passivity by foregrounding women's anger, endurance, testimony, and collective agency.

Judith Butler's theorization of gender performativity also informs this analysis, particularly in understanding how gendered identities are socially produced through repeated norms rather than naturally given categories [7]. The domestic wife, sacrificial daughter, violated victim, obedient mother, or resistant activist are not neutral identities but socially constructed roles sustained through institutional and cultural repetition. Several plays examined in this article expose precisely these regulatory frameworks by dramatizing the coercive expectations attached to femininity.

Postcolonial feminist thought offers another essential dimension, especially through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reflections on voice, representation, and subalternity. The question of whether marginalized women can be heard within dominant structures remains central to this article. Many of the selected plays stage women whose experiences are otherwise mediated through patriarchal institutions such as family, law, caste hierarchy, or religious authority. Theatre becomes a site where silenced or structurally constrained voices acquire visibility—not as uncomplicated recovery, but as contested acts of representation.

Political theatre theory, particularly understanding of performance as emancipatory practice, is equally relevant. Boal conceptualizes theatre as a participatory space capable of transforming passive spectators into critical observers [8]. Although the selected plays vary in style and historical context, several explicitly seek this form of social activation. Street theatre traditions, especially, reject passive spectatorship and instead cultivate public engagement, political awareness, and collective reflection.

Finally, cultural memory studies provide the broader interdisciplinary bridge necessary for this journal context. Social memory is not merely the preservation of historical fact but the collective negotiation of what societies remember, forget, suppress, or re-stage. Gendered violence frequently occupies unstable positions within this process, particularly when domestic trauma, sexual assault, or everyday patriarchal coercion remain underdocumented or socially normalized. Theatre intervenes by rendering such experiences culturally legible.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives allow this study to conceptualize Indian theatre as an embodied cultural archive and politically engaged interpretive space. The selected plays are therefore read not only as dramatic texts but as performative acts of remembrance, resistance, and feminist knowledge production.

Performing Structural Violence: Law, Sexual Assault, and Public Witness

The representation of gendered violence in theatre often risks collapsing into spectacle, particularly when dealing with sexual assault, bodily trauma, and victimization. Yet politically engaged theatre distinguishes itself precisely in how it negotiates this representational challenge. Rather than aestheticizing women's suffering, socially conscious performance can transform violence into critical discourse by foregrounding institutional complicity, testimonial struggle, and collective witnessing. Within modern Indian theatre, this function becomes especially significant where legal and social structures have historically failed women seeking justice. In such contexts, theatre does not merely depict violence; it interrogates the mechanisms that normalize, obscure, or legitimize it.

Two plays in the present corpus—*Dafa 180* and *Hum Mukhtara*—offer particularly compelling examples of how performance constructs public memory around sexual violence [9]. Though emerging from distinct socio-political contexts, both works move beyond individualized trauma narratives to expose broader systems of structural violence. Their emphasis lies not simply on assault itself, but on the institutional, judicial, and social conditions that determine how women's suffering is received, contested, or erased.

Structural violence, as conceptualized in interdisciplinary social theory, refers not only to direct physical harm but to systemic arrangements that produce unequal vulnerability and normalize suffering through institutional mechanisms. In the case of gendered violence, the harm often extends beyond the act itself into the legal proceedings, public scrutiny, familial responses, and moral judgments imposed upon survivors. Theatre's capacity to stage these intersecting dimensions enables it to produce a more expansive critique than narrowly individualized narratives of victimhood.

Dafa 180: Law as Institutional Violence

Theatre Union's *Dafa 180* occupies a critical place in feminist performance history because it transforms a specific legal

moment into a broader critique of institutional patriarchy. Inspired by the Mathura rape case, the play engages with a judicial culture in which women's testimony is subjected to suspicion, humiliation, and reversal. The legal system, ostensibly structured to deliver justice, is revealed as a site where patriarchal assumptions about female credibility and sexual morality continue to operate.

Importantly, the violence represented in *Dafa 180* is not confined to the assault itself. The play exposes how the juridical process reproduces trauma through interrogation, disbelief, and procedural hostility. This shifts the analytical focus from isolated criminal violence to systemic institutional harm. The woman survivor is compelled not merely to recount violence, but to repeatedly defend her own moral legitimacy within structures that presume her unreliability.

This theatrical strategy is significant because it destabilizes dominant narratives that frame justice as a neutral institutional process. Instead, *Dafa 180* demonstrates that legal frameworks are themselves culturally embedded and ideologically shaped. The courtroom does not emerge as an impartial site of rational adjudication, but as a performative arena in which gendered power relations are enacted and reinforced.

From a feminist theoretical perspective, the play exposes how patriarchal institutions demand a particular kind of victim performance. Survivors are expected to embody innocence, restraint, and moral acceptability in order to be believed. Any deviation from these norms risks disqualification. Thus, the woman's body becomes both evidence and contested terrain.

Equally important is the play's refusal to sensationalize sexual violence through graphic representation. Instead of directly staging assault as spectacle, *Dafa 180* relies upon symbolic and mediated theatrical strategies. This restraint reflects an ethically conscious performance practice: rather than reproducing the voyeuristic consumption of female suffering, the production directs audience attention toward institutional structures and ideological violence.

This distinction matters. Representations of rape in performance frequently risk reinscribing the very power dynamics they seek to critique if violence becomes visually consumable. *Dafa 180* resists this by shifting emphasis from bodily spectacle to systemic analysis. The audience is not invited to witness trauma as dramatic shock, but to confront the broader structures that produce and sustain gendered injustice.

The play also functions as a form of feminist public pedagogy. By dramatizing legal processes, it translates abstract institutional mechanisms into socially intelligible experience. Spectators are not merely informed about judicial failure; they are positioned as witnesses to its emotional and ideological consequences. This pedagogic function aligns with activist theatre traditions in India, where performance has historically served as a medium of public consciousness-building rather than passive entertainment.

Hum Mukhtara: Testimony, Survival, and Feminist Solidarity

Where *Dafa 180* foregrounds institutional critique through legal structures, *Hum Mukhtara* expands the analysis toward testimony, collective solidarity, and the politics of transnational feminist witnessing. Based on the life of Mukhtar Mai, the play dramatizes the aftermath of sexual violence not as private devastation alone, but as a struggle over voice, legitimacy, and survival within patriarchal social systems.

The significance of *Hum Mukhtara* lies in its refusal to construct the assaulted woman exclusively through victimhood. Instead, Mukhtara emerges as a politically transformative subject whose experience becomes a site of resistance. The violence enacted against her remains central, yet the narrative emphasis gradually shifts toward endurance, public speech, and collective female support.

This transformation reflects an important intervention within representations of gendered trauma. Too often, narratives of assault immobilize women within symbolic passivity, allowing suffering to eclipse agency. *Hum Mukhtara* complicates this structure by preserving trauma while refusing narrative closure through victimhood alone.

The collective staging of women in the performance is particularly significant. The presence of other women—figures who surround, support, witness, and participate in the emotional and political journey—reconfigures violence from isolated individual tragedy into shared feminist social consciousness. Their presence suggests that sexual violence is not an exceptional rupture but part of a broader gendered structure collectively recognized by women.

This aligns with feminist understandings of testimony as relational rather than purely individual. Testimony requires witnessing, recognition, and interpretive community. The assaulted woman's voice gains force not simply because she speaks, but because the social conditions of listening are reconfigured. Theatre, through collective embodiment, becomes uniquely capable of producing such a space.

The symbolic use of costuming and choral solidarity further enhances the play's politics of representation. Rather than centering visual trauma, the performance mobilizes symbolic theatrical language to communicate oppression, mourning, resistance, and eventual transformation. Such techniques preserve emotional intensity without collapsing into

realism-driven spectacle.

Importantly, Hum Mukhtara also expands the article's framework beyond national boundaries while remaining rooted in South Asian feminist concerns. The play demonstrates that gendered violence operates through regionally specific socio-cultural structures, yet also resonates across broader patterns of patriarchal control, victim blaming, and institutional vulnerability.

However, the analysis must avoid flattening distinct socio-political contexts into a universalized narrative of women's suffering. The importance of Hum Mukhtara lies not in proving sameness across contexts, but in illustrating how feminist theatre creates spaces for ethical cross-border witnessing without erasing historical specificity.

Theatre as Civic Witness

Taken together, Dafa 180 and Hum Mukhtara demonstrate how theatre functions as a civic technology of witnessing. Both plays resist reducing sexual violence to individualized trauma or sensationalized spectacle. Instead, they reposition violence within broader institutional, ideological, and communal frameworks.

Theatre's power here lies in its embodied immediacy. Unlike textual documentation alone, performance activates spectators as witnesses to unfolding social realities. The audience becomes implicated—not as passive observers of suffering, but as participants in ethical recognition. This is particularly significant in contexts where women's experiences have historically been dismissed, privatized, or institutionally delegitimized.

The notion of civic witnessing also intersects directly with cultural preservation. Gendered violence is often systematically underrecorded, fragmented, or socially suppressed. Theatre intervenes by preserving such experiences through embodied repetition and public narration. In doing so, it creates forms of social memory that exceed formal archival documentation.

Thus, Dafa 180 and Hum Mukhtara should not be understood merely as issue-based feminist plays. They function as performative archives of structural violence—sites where trauma, testimony, and collective witnessing become culturally legible and politically actionable.

Domestic Patriarchy and Marriage as Social Control

While overt acts of sexual violence often generate public outrage, the more normalized structures of domestic patriarchy frequently remain obscured beneath cultural assumptions about family, marriage, and social respectability. Feminist scholarship has long emphasized that gendered violence does not operate solely through exceptional moments of physical harm but also through everyday systems of emotional control, economic dependency, ideological coercion, and institutionalized domestic power. Marriage, in this context, frequently functions not simply as a personal relationship but as a socio-cultural mechanism through which gender hierarchy is reproduced.

Modern Indian theatre has repeatedly interrogated this domestic terrain, exposing the family as a contested political site rather than a neutral private sphere. The separation between public power and private life becomes unstable when domestic arrangements themselves become structures of regulation, discipline, and gendered control. The selected plays Putulkhela and Kanyadaan reveal how marriage operates not merely as social union but as an institution shaped by ownership, coercion, ideology, and symbolic violence.

Though distinct in historical context and thematic construction, both plays dismantle the romanticized cultural ideal of marriage by foregrounding women's constrained agency within patriarchal domestic structures. Yet they do so through different frameworks: Putulkhela examines intimate domestic paternalism and gendered infantilization, while Kanyadaan situates marital violence within the intersecting structures of caste, political ideology, and social experimentation.

Putulkhela: Domestic Paternalism and the Infantilization of Women

The Bengali adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, remains deeply relevant within the Indian theatrical context because of its enduring critique of domestic patriarchy. It was first performed by the 'Bohurupee,' under Sombhu Mitra and Bijon Bhattacharya in 1948. Although the narrative emerges from a transnational literary genealogy, its performance within Indian theatre acquires specific socio-cultural resonance through its interrogation of marriage as a site of emotional control, gendered dependency, and symbolic ownership.

The domestic violence represented in Putulkhela is subtle rather than spectacular. The husband does not initially appear as conventionally brutal or overtly tyrannical. Instead, patriarchal power manifests through paternalistic affection, economic control, emotional condescension, and the systematic denial of adult female autonomy. This form of domination is particularly significant because it reveals how patriarchy often operates not through visible coercion alone but through normalized relational structures that masquerade as care.

The titular metaphor of the woman as doll is especially revealing. The wife is not treated as an autonomous subject but as a curated object within the domestic order—admired, controlled, aesthetically positioned, and emotionally managed

according to masculine expectations. Her value lies not in independent personhood but in her capacity to fulfill assigned relational roles.

From a Butlerian perspective, the domestic space in Putulkhela becomes a site where normative femininity is continuously performed and reinforced. The ideal wife must remain compliant, charming, emotionally contained, and dependent. Gender is not merely represented here; it is enacted through repetitive domestic scripts that discipline behavior and define acceptable femininity.

Economic dependency further intensifies this domestic power structure. Financial control is not presented merely as practical household arrangement but as a mechanism of authority. Access to money becomes intertwined with permission, moral judgment, and relational hierarchy. This reflects a broader feminist insight that material dependency often underwrites symbolic subordination.

What makes Putulkhela particularly significant is the protagonist's gradual recognition of her own objectification. The narrative does not simply expose patriarchal domination; it dramatizes consciousness formation. The woman's awakening becomes politically meaningful because it transforms normalized domestic submission into critical awareness.

This movement from accommodation to recognition is crucial within feminist performance traditions [10]. Patriarchal systems often sustain themselves precisely because domination is internalized as ordinary life. By making this process visible, theatre interrupts normalization and invites spectators to critically re-evaluate seemingly familiar domestic arrangements.

Importantly, the play destabilizes the ideological separation between private suffering and public significance. Domestic dissatisfaction is not framed as personal incompatibility but as structural gender inequality. In this sense, the household emerges not as apolitical refuge but as a microcosm of broader patriarchal power.

Kanyadaan: Marriage, Caste, and Ideological Violence

If Putulkhela exposes intimate domestic patriarchy through paternalistic control, Kanyadaan presents a far more complex and volatile exploration of marriage as ideological and structural violence. The play refuses simplistic moral binaries, instead staging a deeply uncomfortable intersection of caste politics, liberal idealism, domestic abuse, and gendered vulnerability.

At the center of Kanyadaan lies a marriage that becomes a site of escalating violence, but the play's significance lies in its refusal to isolate abuse as merely interpersonal pathology. Instead, marital violence emerges from entangled ideological structures, including caste identity, social reformist aspirations, masculine resentment, and political contradiction [11].

The title itself is critically revealing. The Sanskrit-derived concept of kanyadaan, traditionally understood as the ritual "gift" of a daughter in marriage, carries embedded assumptions about ownership, transfer, and patriarchal custodianship. The daughter is symbolically positioned not as autonomous subject but as an entity passed between male-controlled social structures. This ritual logic is not incidental background but central to the play's critique. Marriage becomes less a union of equals than a culturally sanctioned transfer of gendered vulnerability.

Unlike Putulkhela, where patriarchal control emerges through domestic paternalism, Kanyadaan presents violence in a more overt and destabilizing form. Yet the husband's violence cannot be read solely through individualized moral condemnation. The play situates his brutality within accumulated histories of caste humiliation, social rage, and ideological conflict. This complexity is precisely what makes the play analytically valuable. It resists reductive feminist readings that isolate gender from other structures of power while simultaneously refusing any sociological explanation that normalizes violence against women.

Here, the daughter becomes the site upon which competing ideological projects are enacted. Her marriage is not solely a personal decision but an experiment shaped by her father's liberal social ideals, caste politics, and symbolic aspirations. In this sense, her body and emotional life become politically instrumentalized. This dynamic introduces a particularly troubling dimension of feminist critique: women's subordination may persist even within ostensibly progressive ideological frameworks. Patriarchal control does not disappear simply because actors adopt liberal or reformist discourse. Instead, women may become symbolic terrain through which ideological ambitions are pursued.

The daughter's eventual confrontation with familial idealism marks one of the play's most significant interventions. Her disillusionment exposes the limits of abstract social idealism when lived gendered vulnerability is ignored. Feminist critique here moves beyond overt misogyny toward a deeper interrogation of how women are positioned within ideological narratives constructed by others.

The domestic violence in Kanyadaan therefore exceeds physical abuse. It includes emotional coercion, symbolic instrumentalization, caste-inflected hostility, and the collapse of institutional familial protection. It was directed by Bratya Basu, and was adapted from Vijay Tendulkar's play of the same name which was first performed in 1983.

Marriage as Social Regulation

Taken together, Putulkhela and Kanyadaan demonstrate that marriage in modern Indian theatre frequently operates not as romantic resolution but as a mechanism of social regulation. Both plays expose how domestic arrangements reproduce broader systems of gender hierarchy, though through different modalities.

In Putulkhela, regulation occurs through paternalism, dependency, and emotional infantilization. In Kanyadaan, it emerges through ideological contradiction, caste politics, and overt abuse. Despite these differences, both plays reveal the instability of the supposedly private domestic sphere.

This destabilization is central to feminist theory. The long-standing assertion that “the personal is political” becomes theatrically embodied in these performances. Domestic relationships are shown to be structured by material, ideological, and institutional forces rather than isolated emotional dynamics.

From the perspective of cultural memory, these plays preserve histories of normalized domestic power that formal institutional archives rarely document. Emotional coercion, symbolic ownership, and gendered dependency often remain invisible within official records. Theatre preserves them through embodiment and repetition.

Thus, Putulkhela and Kanyadaan function not merely as domestic dramas but as performative critiques of marriage as social technology. By exposing the family as a politically charged site of gender regulation, they expand feminist understandings of structural violence beyond the visible spectacle of public assault into the quieter but equally consequential architectures of domestic power.

Female Body as Transaction and Archive: Re-reading Madhabi

If sexual violence and domestic coercion expose overt and normalized structures of patriarchal power, the commodification of the female body reveals an even deeper historical logic of gendered control. Feminist scholarship has consistently emphasized that women’s oppression is not reducible to isolated acts of violence; it is also embedded in systems that regulate women’s reproductive capacities, bodily autonomy, sexuality, and social worth. The female body becomes a site upon which economic, symbolic, familial, and ideological transactions are enacted [12].

Theatrical reinterpretations of myth are particularly significant in this regard because they do not merely revisit inherited narratives; they expose how cultural memory itself preserves and normalizes patriarchal structures. Myth often occupies a privileged position within social imagination, functioning as moral inheritance, symbolic history, and cultural pedagogy. When feminist theatre reworks mythic material, it intervenes not only in literary tradition but in the broader cultural mechanisms through which gender hierarchy is legitimized across generations.

Madhabi offers one of the most powerful examples of this intervention. Through its reinterpretation of the Mahabharata narrative, the play foregrounds the commodification of the female body as a historically embedded structure of patriarchal exchange. Rather than treating the female protagonist’s suffering as tragic inevitability, the performance reframes myth as a site of feminist interrogation, exposing the social and symbolic violence embedded within inherited narratives of sacrifice, duty, and womanhood.

It was performed by ‘Nandikar’ – founded in 1960. Based on a three act play written by Bhisham Sahni wrote the play in Hindi in 1982, and not in Marathi, alluding to an ancient tale of the Mahabharata, Swatilekha Sengupta directed the play. Sohini Sengupta played the role of Madhabi, Rudraprasad Sengupta played the role of Yayati and Debshankar Halder played the role of Madhabi’s lover.

Myth as Patriarchal Cultural Memory

The significance of Madhabi lies partly in its engagement with myth not as distant narrative but as living cultural memory. Myths persist not simply because they are retold, but because they continue to shape ethical frameworks, social values, and gendered expectations. Their authority often derives from perceived timelessness, making them especially powerful vehicles for normalizing inequality.

By returning to a mythological narrative centered on the exchange and exploitation of a woman’s reproductive body, Madhabi disrupts the presumed neutrality of cultural inheritance. The play reveals that patriarchal violence is not merely contemporary dysfunction but historically embedded within symbolic systems long treated as culturally authoritative.

This intervention is especially important within cultural preservation discourse. Preservation is not inherently emancipatory; what is preserved may include unequal power structures, exclusionary values, and oppressive social norms. Feminist reinterpretation therefore becomes a critical mode of preservation—not passive retention, but active re-reading.

Madhabi performs precisely this work. It preserves cultural memory while simultaneously interrogating the patriarchal assumptions embedded within it.

The Female Body as Exchange Object

At the center of the play lies the transformation of the female protagonist into an instrument of male obligation, social transaction, and reproductive exchange. Madhabi's body does not belong to her as autonomous subjecthood; rather, it becomes a medium through which male responsibilities, promises, ambitions, and authority are negotiated.

This logic is foundational to feminist critiques of commodification. The commodified body is not valued for personhood, interiority, or agency, but for exchangeable function. In Madhabi's case, reproductive capacity becomes the primary mechanism through which her worth is determined. Her body becomes transactional in multiple overlapping senses:

- familial exchange,
- reproductive utility,
- symbolic duty,
- patriarchal obligation,
- sacrificial social currency.

The violence here is not incidental brutality but structural dispossession. Madhabi is denied ownership over her own sexuality, reproductive choices, and maternal relationships. Her bodily existence becomes subordinated to external patriarchal imperatives.

This form of violence is particularly insidious because it is framed through culturally sanctioned ideals such as duty, sacrifice, and obedience. Patriarchal domination does not always appear as explicit coercion; it often operates through moral language that renders exploitation socially legible as virtue.

From a Butlerian perspective, the play reveals how femininity becomes intelligible through enforced roles of sacrificial compliance. Womanhood is constructed not through autonomous becoming, but through repeated performance of availability, submission, and reproductive obligation.

Reproductive Politics and Maternal Dispossession

Perhaps the most devastating dimension of Madhabi lies in its treatment of reproductive exploitation. Feminist analysis has long distinguished between motherhood as lived relational experience and motherhood as patriarchal social expectation. Madhabi exposes the violent rupture between these two.

The protagonist's reproductive capacity is exploited not for her own emotional or familial fulfillment, but as instrumental value within patriarchal exchange. She is repeatedly positioned as reproductive resource while being denied maternal agency itself.

This distinction is crucial. Patriarchal systems frequently celebrate motherhood symbolically while denying women control over reproductive autonomy. In Madhabi, the contradiction becomes brutally visible: the woman is valued because she can produce children, yet her emotional relationship to those children is denied significance.

The violence here is not merely bodily but existential. To reduce a woman to reproductive function while severing her from maternal subjecthood is to fragment personhood itself.

This resonates strongly with broader feminist concerns about reproductive governance, bodily autonomy, and the instrumentalization of women's labor. Though situated within mythic narrative, the thematic implications remain strikingly contemporary.

Voice, Silence, and Feminist Reclamation

A particularly important dimension of Madhabi lies in the re-centering of female experience within a narrative historically structured around male action. Traditional patriarchal narratives often render women as symbolic catalysts rather than interpretive centers. Their suffering becomes background to masculine duty, conflict, or moral development.

The feminist force of Madhabi lies in reversing this structure.

Rather than treating Madhabi as passive mythic object, the play foregrounds her emotional, ethical, and existential experience. Her suffering is not symbolic collateral; it becomes the interpretive core.

This re-centering aligns with postcolonial feminist concerns about representation and narrative authority. Spivak's question regarding subaltern speech becomes particularly relevant here—not because the play simply "recovers" an authentic silenced voice, but because it stages the politics of whose suffering becomes narratively legible.

Theatrical embodiment is critical to this transformation. Performance gives corporeal immediacy to a figure otherwise flattened by inherited narrative tradition. The audience encounters Madhabi not as abstract symbol, but as embodied subject.

This distinction matters profoundly for cultural memory. What is remembered changes when narrative perspective shifts.

Theatre as Counter-Archive

Madhabi demonstrates particularly clearly how theatre can function as counter-archive. Formal archives frequently preserve institutional, political, and textual histories while excluding embodied emotional experience, especially women's suffering within patriarchal domestic or symbolic systems.

Performance intervenes by preserving what institutional history often marginalizes:

- bodily memory,
- emotional dispossession,
- reproductive exploitation,
- silenced interiority.

The concept of counter-archive is especially relevant here because Madhabi does not merely preserve an inherited story—it reinterprets it against dominant patriarchal readings.

This is crucial for interdisciplinary cultural preservation scholarship. Preservation must not be confused with neutral continuity. Cultural transmission always involves interpretive choice. Feminist theatre demonstrates that preservation can be critically reconstructive rather than conservatively reproductive.

By re-staging Madhabi's story through feminist interpretive frameworks, the play transforms myth from patriarchal inheritance into contested cultural memory.

Historical Continuities of Gendered Control

Though rooted in mythological material, Madhabi resists confinement to historical distance. Its feminist force lies partly in revealing continuities between ancient symbolic structures and modern gender politics.

The commodification of women's bodies remains recognizable in contemporary contexts:

- reproductive control,
- marital exchange expectations,
- symbolic purity norms,
- instrumental valuation of women's bodies,
- familial regulation of female autonomy.

The play does not suggest simplistic equivalence between mythic and modern contexts. Rather, it demonstrates how patriarchal logics persist through cultural transformation.

This temporal layering strengthens the article's central claim regarding theatre as social memory. Performance does not merely recall the past; it activates historical structures within contemporary critical consciousness.

Thus, Madhabi functions not simply as adaptation, but as feminist historiography in performative form.

Reframing Preservation Through Feminist Performance

Within the context of this article, Madhabi serves as a crucial reminder that cultural preservation is not merely about safeguarding tradition but about critically interrogating inherited narratives.

If preservation simply reproduces patriarchal cultural memory without critique, it risks reinforcing the very inequalities it claims to conserve as heritage. Feminist theatre offers an alternative model—one in which preservation becomes dialogic, revisionary, and ethically self-aware.

Madhabi therefore occupies a pivotal position in this study. It bridges myth and modernity, archive and embodiment, inheritance and resistance. Through its re-reading of female dispossession, the play transforms cultural memory into feminist critique.

Rather than preserving a woman's silence, it preserves the history of that silencing—and stages resistance against it.

Collective Feminist Resistance in Public Space: Aurat and the Politics of Performance

If the preceding sections have examined theatre as a medium for documenting structural violence, domestic coercion, and historical bodily commodification, Aurat introduces a crucial shift in emphasis: from representation of oppression to collective political resistance. While many theatrical works expose patriarchal violence through narrative critique, activist performance traditions extend beyond representation by directly intervening in public social consciousness. Theatre, in such contexts, ceases to function merely as interpretive art and becomes a mode of political action [13].

Among the selected plays, Aurat occupies a particularly significant position because it exemplifies feminist performance as public pedagogy. Unlike conventional proscenium theatre, which often operates within bounded aesthetic spaces, Aurat emerges from the politically charged tradition of Indian street theatre, where performance engages audiences in

immediate public environments. This distinction is not merely spatial but ideological. Street theatre disrupts conventional spectatorship by collapsing the separation between performer and public, art and politics, representation and intervention. 'Jana Natya Manch' directed by Safdar Hashmi, was introduced at the first conference of working women under the CITU (Centre of Trade Unions). Aurat opened with the poem "I am a Woman" written by Iranian teacher and revolutionary Marzieh Ahmadi Oskooii who was assassinated by the Shah in May 1973 [14]. The poem was translation by Hashmi.

As a theatrical form historically aligned with labor activism, social critique, and public mobilization, Indian street theatre has served as a powerful vehicle for political education. Within this tradition, Aurat stands as an important feminist intervention, foregrounding women not as isolated victims of private suffering but as structurally positioned subjects within broader systems of social inequality.

The group that performed it was founded in 1973 by the radical leftist theatre artists, who drew inspiration mainly from the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). Being didactic, it aimed at awakening people's consciousness about injustices happening in society and being newfangled, instead of strictly being confined to closed theatre spaces, the group made itself more visible to the mass by performing street theatre and skits in makeshift stages and chaupals (a community building or community space found in North India). This form of theatre is an inspiration for the workers, revolutionaries and social activists.

Feminist Street Theatre as Public Pedagogy

The political significance of Aurat lies partly in its form. Street theatre resists the exclusivity associated with institutional performance spaces and instead locates political discourse within public social life. This accessibility is central to its pedagogic function. Performance becomes not a cultural commodity for select audiences but an intervention addressed to workers, passersby, students, and communities.

This democratization of spectatorship is especially relevant for feminist performance. Questions of gender inequality often remain confined within domestic privacy or abstract policy discourse. Street theatre interrupts this containment by relocating women's experiences into collective public visibility.

Aurat does not merely narrate women's oppression; it stages gender inequality as a shared social condition requiring public recognition. The performance format itself reinforces this politics by refusing private spectatorship and insisting upon civic encounter.

From a Boalian perspective, such theatre actively destabilizes passive spectatorship. Audiences are not invited to consume performance as distant entertainment; they are interpellated as socially implicated observers whose own political consciousness becomes part of the event.

This participatory orientation distinguishes activist feminist theatre from more representational dramatic forms. The objective is not solely interpretation but transformation.

Mapping Everyday Gendered Oppression

Unlike plays centered around singular traumatic events, Aurat constructs a broader social cartography of gendered oppression. Rather than focusing on one narrative protagonist, it presents multiple scenes and social situations through which women encounter inequality across everyday life.

This structural choice is significant because it reframes patriarchy not as isolated misconduct but as systemic social organization. Gendered oppression emerges not from exceptional male cruelty alone but through ordinary institutional arrangements, social expectations, labor inequalities, educational exclusions, and domestic hierarchies.

The episodic form reinforces this argument. Fragmentation here is not narrative weakness but political method. By presenting multiple situations rather than singular melodramatic focus, the play demonstrates the ubiquity of gender regulation.

This approach aligns with feminist understandings of structural oppression, where harm accumulates not solely through dramatic violence but through repeated everyday exclusions and normalized inequalities.

Women in Aurat are shown navigating:

- educational denial,
- workplace discrimination,
- domestic subordination,
- marriage-related expectations,
- economic inequity,
- social invisibility.

The cumulative effect is politically significant. Rather than constructing women's suffering through singular tragic spectacle, the play reveals patriarchy as embedded in routine social life.

Collective Subjectivity and Feminist Agency

One of Aurat's most important interventions lies in its rejection of isolated female subjectivity as the primary narrative framework. Many patriarchal narratives individualize women's suffering, thereby containing structural critique within personal tragedy. Aurat disrupts this pattern by foregrounding collective female experience.

Women do not appear merely as individualized victims but as socially interconnected political subjects. Their experiences resonate across classed, occupational, and institutional contexts, producing feminist solidarity rather than narrative isolation.

This collectivization is crucial within feminist performance studies. Political resistance often becomes possible not simply through individual recognition of injustice but through the emergence of shared interpretive communities.

The move from "my suffering" to "our condition" marks an important political transformation. From the perspective of cultural memory, this collective framing also alters how women's histories are preserved. Singular stories may be remembered as exceptional incidents; collective performance preserves structural patterns.

This distinction is central to the article's argument about theatre as social archive. Aurat preserves not only women's experiences but the social architecture of inequality itself.

Gender, Labor, and Public Visibility

A particularly important dimension of Aurat is its engagement with women's labor. Patriarchal structures frequently obscure women's economic contributions, especially where domestic labor is naturalized and formal labor remains gender-stratified.

By situating women within workplace, educational, and public institutional contexts, Aurat expands feminist critique beyond domesticity into broader socio-economic structures.

This is especially important for interdisciplinary humanities and social science analysis because it situates gender oppression within material relations rather than exclusively symbolic discourse.

Women's subordination is not framed simply as cultural prejudice but as structurally connected to labor, access, compensation, and institutional participation. Theatre here performs important documentary work. By staging ordinary forms of exclusion that may otherwise remain socially normalized, performance creates public recognition of gendered labor inequity.

This documentary dimension strengthens the article's cultural preservation framework. Theatre preserves histories of social experience often absent from official institutional records.

Theatre as Political Mobilization

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Aurat is its activist orientation. The play does not merely seek emotional empathy or interpretive reflection; it aims at social activation.

This marks a significant shift from representational theatre toward interventionist performance.

Political theatre in this tradition treats audiences not as detached cultural consumers but as potential participants in social change. Feminist resistance becomes not solely thematic content but performative objective.

This activist function is particularly significant in contexts where formal institutional mechanisms inadequately address women's concerns. Performance creates alternative spaces for public discourse, consciousness-building, and community recognition.

The pedagogic function of such theatre should not be underestimated. Social transformation often depends upon shifts in interpretive frameworks—changes in how inequality is recognized, named, and publicly discussed. Aurat contributes to precisely this process.

Performance, Memory, and Resistance

Within the broader argument of this article, Aurat occupies a distinct and crucial role because it foregrounds resistance rather than victimhood as the organizing principle of feminist performance.

This does not mean the play ignores oppression. Rather, it reframes oppression through political collectivity. Theatrical performance here becomes a mechanism of memory not merely because it preserves women's suffering, but because

it preserves traditions of feminist resistance itself.

This distinction is critical for cultural preservation scholarship. If archives retain only records of oppression without documenting resistance, historical memory remains incomplete.

Aurat preserves:

- feminist political speech,
- collective consciousness,
- activist performance traditions,
- embodied public dissent.

It therefore functions not only as feminist critique but as preservation of political cultural practice.

Theatre Beyond Representation

Taken together, Aurat demonstrates that modern Indian theatre cannot be understood solely as a representational art form. In activist contexts, performance becomes pedagogy, intervention, documentation, and mobilization simultaneously. This expands the article's central claim significantly.

If Dafa 180 and Hum Mukhtara position theatre as civic witness, Putulkhela and Kanyadaan expose domestic power, and Madhabi reinterprets patriarchal cultural memory, Aurat demonstrates theatre's capacity to generate collective feminist political agency.

Performance does not merely preserve histories of women's suffering; it preserves practices of resistance. In this sense, Aurat represents perhaps the clearest articulation of theatre as living social archive—one in which memory, critique, and activism converge within embodied public performance.

Concluding Remarks

Modern Indian theatre has long exceeded the boundaries of aesthetic entertainment, functioning instead as a dynamic site of political reflection, social intervention, and cultural memory. The six plays examined in this study—Aurat, Dafa 180, Putulkhela, Kanyadaan, Madhabi, and Hum Mukhtara—demonstrate that theatrical performance offers a uniquely powerful medium through which gendered injustice can be publicly articulated, collectively witnessed, and critically reinterpreted. Taken together, these works reveal that theatre does not merely reflect social realities; it actively participates in the production of public consciousness about them.

This article has argued that modern Indian theatre functions simultaneously as cultural archive, feminist critique, and political intervention by preserving narratives of women's oppression while transforming private suffering into civic discourse. Such a claim requires moving beyond conventional understandings of theatre as literary representation alone. The selected performances show that embodied enactment creates forms of social knowledge distinct from textual documentation. Theatre records not simply events, but emotional structures, silenced histories, contested voices, and embodied experiences often excluded from formal institutional archives.

The plays considered here collectively map multiple dimensions of gendered structural violence. Dafa 180 and Hum Mukhtara expose the institutional and juridical mechanisms through which sexual violence is compounded by systems of disbelief, procedural hostility, and public scrutiny. These performances reveal that violence does not end with the assault itself; it continues through legal and social structures that regulate female testimony and moral credibility. Theatre, in these cases, functions as civic witnessing—preserving experiences that formal legal narratives often distort or fragment.

Similarly, Putulkhela and Kanyadaan demonstrate that patriarchal violence cannot be confined to overt physical abuse or public institutional failure. Domestic life itself emerges as a politically charged terrain in which dependency, emotional coercion, symbolic ownership, caste ideology, and ideological contradiction shape women's vulnerability. These plays destabilize the presumed separation between public politics and private life, reinforcing feminist insights that the household remains a critical site of structural power.

Madhabi extends this analysis into historical-cultural memory by exposing how patriarchal control is embedded within inherited symbolic narratives themselves. Its feminist reinterpretation of myth reveals that women's commodification is not merely a contemporary social phenomenon but part of a longer historical logic encoded within cultural traditions. The play demonstrates that preservation without critical interpretation risks reproducing unequal structures rather than challenging them. Theatre's value here lies not in passive conservation, but in revisionary cultural engagement.

Aurat, in turn, foregrounds collective feminist political agency by shifting attention from representation of suffering toward public resistance. Through the activist tradition of street theatre, the play demonstrates that performance can function as pedagogy, mobilization, and democratic intervention. It preserves not only women's experiences of oppression but the embodied practices of feminist dissent itself.

Across these varied contexts, a central pattern emerges: theatre repeatedly transforms invisibilized gendered experiences into socially legible public memory. This function is especially significant within interdisciplinary cultural preservation

scholarship. Conventional archival systems often privilege institutional documentation, textual permanence, and officially sanctioned histories. Yet many forms of women's lived experience—domestic coercion, emotional dispossession, bodily regulation, everyday labor inequality, social silencing—remain underdocumented or structurally marginalized within such frameworks.

Performance offers an alternative archival logic.

As an embodied, collective, and interpretive practice, theatre preserves forms of knowledge that exceed formal documentation. It retains not merely factual narratives, but affective histories, social tensions, and contested public meanings. This perspective aligns with broader digital humanities and cultural preservation conversations regarding archival absence, memory transmission, and alternative modes of knowledge preservation.

At the same time, the article emphasizes that cultural preservation should not be understood as ideologically neutral continuity. What societies preserve—and how they preserve it—remains politically consequential. Feminist theatrical reinterpretation demonstrates that preservation can function critically rather than conservatively. By revisiting myth, domestic narratives, legal histories, and activist performance traditions, modern Indian theatre does not simply retain cultural memory; it interrogates it.

This study also underscores the continuing relevance of politically engaged theatre within contemporary conversations about gender justice. While the selected plays emerge from distinct historical moments and performance contexts, the structural concerns they address remain strikingly resonant. Questions of testimonial legitimacy, bodily autonomy, domestic control, caste-inflected vulnerability, institutional violence, and public feminist resistance continue to shape contemporary social discourse.

Theatre's persistence as a medium of embodied collective encounter remains especially valuable in this regard. In an era increasingly shaped by digital mediation, theatrical performance retains a distinctive capacity for immediacy, communal witnessing, and ethical confrontation. Its ephemeral nature does not diminish its archival significance; rather, it underscores the importance of embodiment as a mode of cultural transmission.

Future research may extend this inquiry by exploring digital preservation of activist theatre traditions, comparative feminist performance practices across South Asia, regional language performance archives, and intersections between live theatre and emerging digital memory practices. Such directions would further enrich interdisciplinary conversations linking performance studies, feminist humanities, and cultural preservation scholarship.

Ultimately, modern Indian theatre emerges not merely as a mirror of gendered social realities, but as an active participant in shaping how those realities are remembered, contested, and transformed. Its enduring significance lies in its ability to preserve not only histories of oppression, but the embodied cultural practices through which resistance becomes imaginable.

References

1. Maiti, Anwita & Singh, Udaya Narayana. (2021) 'The impact of brazenly glorifying sexual abuse in Indian film.' *Journal of Media Ethics*, 36: 137-39.
2. Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Erll, A. (2011). *Memory in culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.
4. Menon, N. (2012). *Seeing like a feminist*. Zubaan.
5. Taylor, D. (2003). *The archive and the repertoire: Performing cultural memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press.
6. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
7. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
8. Boal, A. (2000). *Theatre of the oppressed* (C. A. McBride & M.-O. Leal McBride, Trans.). Pluto Press.
9. Agnes, F. (1992). Protecting women against violence? Review of a decade of legislation, 1980–89. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27(17), WS19–WS33.
10. Aston, E. (1995). *An introduction to feminist theatre*. Routledge.
11. Rege, S. (2006). *Writing caste/writing gender: Narrating Dalit women's testimonies*. Zubaan.
12. Chakravarti, U. (2003). *Gendering caste through a feminist lens*. Stree.
13. Dharwadkar, A. B. (2005). *Theatres of independence: Drama, theory, and urban performance in India since 1947*. University of Iowa Press.
14. Ghosh, A. (2012). *A history of the Jana Natya Manch: Plays for the people*. Sage Publications India.