

NEW RELEASE

The Tragedy of Comedy: Staging Gender in South India

Amanda Weidman

Bryn Mawr College

Susan Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India*. Duke University Press, April 2005.

There is one enigmatic moment in Keith Basso's classic ethnographic essay, *Portraits of the Whiteman: Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols among the Western Apache*. As Basso lucidly explains, Western Apache joking about the Whiteman works by creating the Whiteman as a symbol of all that the Western Apache is not, and thus effecting a humorous temporary inversion of proper social order while allowing Western Apaches to shore up their own social values and community cohesiveness. Joking—in the form of impersonating the overly talkative and inquisitive Whiteman—affords a temporary release by means of which Western Apaches can put a human face on the power that subordinates them and dramatize their encounters with that power. But at the end of eighty lucid pages, Basso suggests that, even armed with all this interpretation, there is something about humor that evades explanation. Lest we get caught up in the endless analysis of these jokes, he writes, we should remember that “the whole thing has been in fun. But, paradoxically, not really. Hello, my friend, how you doing?” (Basso 1979, 82).

No matter how many times I read Basso's book, this ending always haunts me long after I've closed the book. First, because its uncertainty contrasts with the certainty of Basso's preceding interpretations. Basso seems to be saying

that the extent to which something is funny is directly related to the extent to which it is completely serious; that the funniest jokes are those that threaten most to slip out of the joking frame that contains them. This ending counters the neatness of the inversion model, according to which the jokes are merely temporary inversions of the social order, that Basso uses throughout the book.

And second, Basso's ending is striking because it marks the point where interpretation gives way to repetition of the joke itself, to its dramatic form. This is where Basso seems to hint at the inadequacy of his symbolic approach for explaining why it is that these jokes take the form of impersonations, why they are staged as little dramas, what kind of enjoyment Western Apache men get out of playing the Whiteman, and how the characters they play in the jokes relate to their real-life roles. In other words, there is a whole realm of experience and "fun" that Basso's focus on the meaning of these jokes, rather than their dramatic form and context, sidesteps. His ending, it seems to me, points to the difference between treating these jokes as a cultural "text" and treating them as performance.

Both of these issues—the blurring of the joke with "real" life and the importance of dramatic form—are at the heart of Suzan Seizer's ethnographic study of the popular South Indian theatrical form called Special Drama. In *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*, Seizer presents a remarkably nuanced account of the relationships between the onstage actions of Special Drama actors and actresses and the dilemmas and difficulties of their offstage lives. In doing so, she offers insight into the relationship between staging, dramatic form, and meaning.

In Special Drama, staging can position performers and interpellate viewers, depending on their gender, quite differently. For, as we learn quite early in the book, while the artists who perform Special Drama are a community united by the stigma they bear as low-class actors and actresses, this community is cleaved by gender (349). Stigma attaches to performers of Special Drama because they perform bawdy comedy, but this stigma falls most heavily on actresses because of the gender norms of Tamil society. Actresses, in performing publicly, in interacting with unknown men publicly, transgress the norms for "respectable" Tamil women. Their lives confound the boundaries between public and private, between home and world, which anchor gender norms in Tamil Nadu, as well as in much of South Asia. The comedy of Special Drama, as Seizer clearly shows, derives much of its power from the way it constantly threatens to slip out of its joking frame, out of the frame of a staged performance. For Special Drama actresses, the line between onstage and offstage is permeable, and this is why everything they do on stage is always "just in fun"

and not in fun at all. For actresses, a career in Special Drama is an economic and artistic opportunity, but also a path fraught with powerful social stigma.

Modernity and the Performing Arts in South India

The history of how certain performing arts came to be defined as “highbrow” while others were relegated to “lowbrow” status in South India is intimately intertwined with emerging definitions of Indianness under the conditions of colonial modernity. The name “Special Drama,” referring to a kind of theater where actors and actresses are individually booked for each performance, distinguishes it from other theatrical genres in Tamil Nadu: the more highbrow “social dramas” performed primarily for middle-class audiences in Madras, and folk theater genres such as Tamil street theater. As Seizer shows, Special Drama is a hybrid form in many respects. It is a combination of Tamil, British, and Parsi theatrical traditions, with origins in the 1890s. It has a revered playwright and a corpus of plays, as well as an indispensable improvisatory element. It consists of both drama and comedy fitted together in single performance. Mythological plots mix with contemporary subject matter. Although performed in Tamil villages and rural settings, Special Drama uses a proscenium stage, a feature reminiscent of its urban origins, and of traveling Parsi drama troupes that became popular in Tamil Nadu around the turn of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most strikingly hybrid aspect of Special Drama is that its actors and actresses form a community which crosses caste and religious lines. Actors and actresses themselves are thought to be inappropriately “mixed,” confounding the social categories, gender roles, and kinship norms that dominate and order Tamil society. In short, Special Drama is “too mixed to be pure, too popular to be art, too modern to be traditional, and too village to be modern” (11), and this is why it is dismissed by the middle class and, until Seizer’s work, by most historians of Tamil theater.

The definition of such categories—“pure,” “art,” “traditional,” and “modern”—was the ideological work of the middle-class nationalist movement that emerged in India in the late nineteenth century. The Indian National Congress, the body that later became the Congress Party, independent India’s first political party, first met in 1885. It was composed largely of upper-caste Hindu men who envisioned the independence of India as intertwined with, and dependent on, a program of social reform and the revival of India’s “traditional” arts. Social reform was seen as a process of removing the ills of Indian society, lifting it out of the degraded state to which it had fallen

through centuries of “foreign” rule. In this nationalist imaginary, discourse about women occupied a central role. Those social reform projects that centered on the “woman question,” as it came to be known, such as child marriage and the age of consent, widow remarriage, sati, and the devadasi issue, engendered the most debate in the late nineteenth century.

The status of women was seen as an indicator of the India’s modernity and fitness to be a nation, at the same time as women were seen as the rightful keepers of tradition (Mani 1987). As Partha Chatterjee (1993) has suggested, elite Indian nationalism was highly gendered; the rearticulation of Indian womanhood was the foundation upon which the notion of an “inner sphere,” representative of Indianness, was built. The inner sphere of the nation was an ideological creation, a tool which enabled the nationalist bourgeoisie to imagine a realm unsullied by colonialism, economics, politics, and Western influence. While those things in the outer sphere might come into contact with the West, and might change and modernize, those things in the inner sphere—custom, tradition, the arts, and, most importantly, women—were expected to remain constant, pure, and true to their essential Indianness.

The power of this notion of the inner sphere derived, of course, from the fact that it was not merely symbolic or metaphorical, but was represented, enacted, and reinforced in real, tangible ways. Idealized notions of womanhood, central to the idea of the inner sphere, came to be inscribed on the bodies of women by regulating how they should look and dress, how they should speak, sing, and hold themselves, where they should be, and with whom they should interact. The opposition between the inner and outer spheres of the nation enabled a series of other parallel and synechdochically related oppositions: private-public; home-world; women-men; middle class women-lower class women; family women-prostitutes (Banerjee 1990, 1998, Weidman 2003). Especially important here is the way in which the opposition between home and world becomes gendered, not simply as the difference between men and women, but as the difference between *kinds of women*: the respectable middle-class “family woman” and the lower-class “prostitute.”

Nowhere did this dichotomy become clearer than in the social reformist discourse on the devadasis, women who were dedicated to a life of musical and ritual service in Hindu temples. The Hindu practice of dedicating girls to a life of service in temples by symbolically marrying them to the deity of the temple came under attack beginning in the 1830s by Victorian morality and social reformist programs that saw it as a system that actively encouraged prostitution. Devadasis, as unmarried women who were sometimes romanti-

cally involved with their male patrons, posed a threat to the ideal of the respectably married “family” woman and to the notion of a Hindu community organized around marriage (Kannabiran 1995). The artistic accomplishments of devadasi women—their prowess as musicians and dancers—were overshadowed, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by the stigma of prostitution. The devadasi “system,” as it was called, was legally abolished in 1947, long after social stigma had already accomplished the work of removing many devadasis from the public sphere as performers. The decades of debate on the issue cemented a broader association between women who earned their living by performing, and prostitution.

The program of social reform dovetailed with a program of artistic “revival” (Srinivasan 1985). Many of those who actively supported the abolition of the devadasi system were concerned with the fate of the devadasis’ arts—their music and dance—which they saw as having fallen into a degraded state. In order to revive and purify these arts, it was essential to find a class of women who could be trained to practice them, whose own respectability would confer on music and dance the respectability properly due to “classical” arts. Thus, gender, and more specifically, womanhood, became the foundation for one of the most salient distinctions in the world of Indian performing arts: the distinction between the “classical” and the non-classical. As Seizer remarks in her introduction, the “classical” in South Asia is a relational concept, defined against other artistic forms (11). In addition to the entextualization of repertoire and the standardization of rules and practice, one of the defining features of “classical” arts in South India is the respectability, and middle-class-ness, of the women who practice and perform them.

Women, the Stage, and the Public Sphere

Much interesting theorization has taken place on the ways in which Indian women were allowed to enter the public sphere in the first half of the twentieth century by, in effect, creating an impermeable barrier around themselves. Mrinalini Sinha (1996) has discussed the kind of subject position that Indian women assumed in order to be heard in the public sphere in the 1930s. Women had to position themselves as modern but non-Western, as claiming traditional ideals in the service of the modernizing project of nationalism (Sinha 1996, 491). Partha Chatterjee (1993) notes that middle-class Indian women were able to travel out into the world once they had properly internalized a self-image of virtuous domesticity that effectively erased their potential-

ly dangerous sexuality; such women, projecting themselves as loving mothers and loyal wives, were able to carry the home with them into the world. In contemporary Tamil Nadu, for instance, the potentially unruly sexuality of the chief minister Jayalalitha, an unmarried woman and former cinema actress who was the mistress of a former chief minister, is defused by her being hailed as "Amma," meaning "mother," and often associated with the semi-mythical figure of "mother Tamil" (Lakshmi 1990, Anandhi 1997).

Given the rules for respectable womanhood, how, then, does one maintain respectability when doing something inherently disrespectable, like performing in public? This is a dilemma that middle class, upper-caste women performing classical music or dance, and lower-class women performing Special Drama both face. From my own research on the emergence of "respectable" women as singers on the South Indian classical music stage in the 1930s, I found that such respectability is enacted, or performed, through particular conventions of voice, gesture, movement, and dress. In particular, a kind of performance that de-emphasizes the body and minimizes movement and gesture came to signify respectability on the classical music stage (Weidman 2003). In the realm of dance, as several scholars have documented, making the art respectable involved a sanitizing of the content of the dance, removing all allusions to and evocations of romantic love (O'Shea 1998, Meduri 1996, Subramaniam 1999, Reed 2002). For Special Drama, a genre which does not partake of the respectability granted to "classical" genres, being respectable requires acts of creativity and vigilance. What strategies do Special Drama actresses employ in this regard?

Seizer provides an answer to this question through a detailed ethnographic exploration of the onstage and offstage techniques actresses use to minimize the disgrace of their profession. The same "hierarchies of prestige" that distinguish classical from non-classical music, classical dance from the dance of prostitutes, social drama from Special Drama, are replicated within Special Drama itself through a division between drama and comedy. Onstage movement is seen as the embodiment of vulgarity, fit only for the comedy scenes, and not the dramatic scenes, of Special Drama. Performing dramatic roles, in which actors and actresses stand still at the microphone and speak their lines, rather than comedy roles, then, is the most obvious way to maintain respectability. Some actresses have, in order to distance themselves from the stigma of being a woman who acts, taken to cross-dressing and playing only male roles, a switch, that, as Seizer notes, automatically raises their status (165). Since the threat of being labeled a "prostitute" is ever-present, actress-

es “pay fierce attention to when, whether, and how they allow themselves to be touched by a man onstage” (168).

One of the central aspects of Seizer’s account concerns the fact that what actresses do offstage is just as important as what they do onstage. Indeed, the more they play “bad” women onstage, the more they must play the “good” woman offstage by projecting an image of middle-class domesticity. In a fascinating chapter on the “roadwork” of actresses, Seizer describes the different ways in which actresses, even in the midst of public travel and stage appearances, strive to reproduce the physical confines of middle-class womanhood. For instance, instead of directly speaking with the men who book their appearances, actresses hang their calendars in local booking shops for men to peruse while they themselves wait at home. In the “backstage” area during a performance, actresses hang a sari in the corner to create their own private dressing room, and an area where they can relieve themselves. Simply going outside to relieve themselves would put the actresses on a par with local rural women, whereas maintaining a private “inside” space to do so marks them as more middle class. While traveling, actresses find “safe havens” where they can be out of the public eye. Seizer describes her own experience traveling with an actress:

I realized that even on this most public of routes, taking a public bus from a public bus stand two towns away from home, Bakkiya had secured a little private space, which that night she had lent to me so that I could disappear into a respite of invisibility. I sat there feeling safe and tiny, and simultaneously out of the loop and bored. How, I wondered, does Bakkiya feel when she sits there? (320).

Too Close for Comfort: The Dangers of Comedy

Just as unspoken rules are often the most powerful, so areas of cultural production considered to be “transparent” or disavowed as unworthy of investigation are often the most ideologically laden. Within the stigmatized field of Special Drama, the most stigmatized part is the comedy, which is performed at intervals in every Special Drama performance. Seizer focuses on comedy precisely because many of her interlocutors considered it to be so obviously funny as to be utterly unworthy of study.

Comedy scenes are formulaic in their staging and subject matter. Not only do the comedy sections use a different set of (less respected) actors and

actresses, but they also differ in character from the scripted dramatic sections of the performance in being largely improvised around a particular set of comedic conventions. The subject matter of comedy revolves around the opposition between “modern” and “traditional;” as Seizer suggests, it is in the comedy portions of Special Drama that the important ideological work of portraying and commenting on modernity, and its opposites, gets done. The comedy performers, always a male “buffoon” and a female “dancer,”¹ enact a series of scenes that occur at relatively standard times in any drama. It is through their exaggeratedly gendered personae that the dilemmas and contradictions of modernity are played out.

For a Tamil audience, what makes these scenes funny, what gives them their special punch, is that they operate on a “double level...audiences see artists simultaneously as themselves and as roles they play and are constantly making judgments about this fit” (362). This is especially the case for actresses, for whom too close a fit can be dangerous. Actresses are at pains to make sure that what they do on stage does not ruin their reputation. Yet the funniness of the comedy, in the audience’s eyes, depends on the way it always almost spills over the boundaries of staged performance, in the same way as Whiteman jokes derive funniness from their potential to slip out of the joking frame.

Seizer’s analyses of some of these comedy scenes are the centerpiece of her book. In a series of brilliant chapters in which she pays close attention to the use of language, the relationship between the actors and the musicians, the ways in which actors discursively position themselves, the role of the audience, and stage space, Seizer shows how comedy is located in much more than simply the actual jokes that are told. For instance, in the Buffoon’s monologue, the first comedy scene in any Special Drama, the buffoon manages to tell dirty jokes to a mixed audience by maintaining what linguistic anthropologists would call a form of split address: he addresses himself simultaneously to the male musicians, who serve as his sidekicks, and to an audience that includes women. In the monologue Seizer interprets, the buffoon does this by, in effect, having a private, raunchy conversation with his male buddies (the musicians) that the real audience simply overhears. “Through the pretense of an aside, the buffoon is able to *mention* ‘privately’ the publicly unutterable phrase while escaping the charge of actually *using* it in public” (189). Through this opposition between mention and use, the buffoon is able to maintain what Seizer, drawing on Bakhtin, calls “discursive distance” between the unutterable phrases and himself. He thus “explores the humorous potential of gender constraints by making a show of abiding by them”

(179). The spectacle here, as Seizer points out, is not just on the stage, but involves the audience as well, especially the women, who “sit awkwardly and shyly through those scenes, their own hands held in front of their mouths, laughing in spite of themselves” (201).

Comedy also revolves around the way stage space itself is encoded with meaning. Seizer notes that because of the location of the (always male) musicians on the right side of the stage, right and left stage are charged with different valences. The upstage right corner is “a possible refuge, security, and status” for an actress where she may be seen “interacting cordially with important and known men,” often sponsors of the performance who come onto the stage from time to time (220). Downstage right, on the other hand, is a site of humiliation and is where actresses are commonly trapped by an advancing buffoon. Backed up into the musicians’ tables, which prevent her from exiting the stage, the actress is pushed dangerously close to the unknown men in the audience, “as far as possible into the gaze of strangers” (220).

And yet actresses do find ways to escape these traps. Seizer relates one particularly striking incident during a comedy performance in which the Buffoon transgressed the conventions of what is allowed even on the Special Drama stage. The actress fended him off from downstage right once, but when it happened again, she stepped out onto the furthestmost downstage lip of the stage, literally out of the normal playing space of the drama. From this position, with her back turned to the audience, she faced the buffoon directly and threatened him, until he cajoled her apologetically back onto the stage proper. “Her move,” as Seizer notes, “punctured the comic frame of the Buffoon-Dance Duet, revealing the ways in which their actions onstage chart similarly real gender relations under a thin guise” (221).

If downstage right is a female space, where actresses are commonly physically trapped, downstage left, an exclusively male space, by contrast, is open; in fact, it is the corner from which actors are able to (and often do) descend from the stage into the audience. In moving downstage left, the Buffoon “straddles a kind of semi-on/semi-off stage position. Here he embodies the ever-present possibility that exists for Tamil men of moving easily out into the public sphere, a possibility that does not exist for women” (222-223). If actors and actresses, in a sense, also play themselves, then the staging conventions Seizer discusses are also maps, as she suggests, of the sociospatial conventions that govern Tamil society. The “gendered geography” of the Tamil stage is continuous with, and simultaneously a comment on, the gendered nature of the private-public dichotomy itself and with the offstage gender segregation of

public spaces, such as buses and movie theaters, and any place that hosts mixed company in Tamil Nadu. Audiences watch Special Drama because it offers an enactment of the possibilities for what can happen when gender norms are transgressed. The realness of the stage's gendered geography is what makes the comedy work; its jokes are not merely inversions of the social order but "[map]a series of hinges between the staged world and life off-stage"(229). "In establishing such analogic continuities," Seizer writes, "theater creates itself as a space for social commentary" (229).²

The notion of a "hinge" here is particularly useful, first because it stresses the continuity of the Special Drama with real life, moving Seizer's analysis well beyond a symbolic approach. But the image of the hinge also strikes me as appropriate in a more literal sense. The windows of many Indian homes are covered not with glass, but with wooden shutters. The hinge is what allows that which is normally shuttered from view—the private—to become public, enabling things to be turned inside out. Here is a different kind of inversion; the world of Special Drama comedy is not so much upside-down (since, as Seizer notes, the status quo is never really disturbed) as inside-out: a public display of that which should be private, by people whose job it is to live public lives.

Stigma and Sensibility

Where does all this leave the performers themselves? Seizer's portrayal of the place of Special Drama artists in Tamil society—simultaneously the objects of scorn and fascination—is reminiscent of other stigmatized groups who nevertheless perform a necessary function in society. The paradigmatic case of this is that of untouchables in Indian caste society, who occupy the lowest rung of a hierarchical system of caste differentiations.³ Untouchables traditionally performed the most "unclean" tasks, those associated with the removal of dirt and bodily substances. As sociologists and anthropologists of Hindu India have argued, they thus were indispensable to society; in the logic of Hindu caste, where everybody has their place and everybody's place is secured in relation to others, without untouchables, there could be no other upper castes. One might say that Special Drama artists, similarly, act the part of "low-class" people and transgress social norms so that their audiences don't have to. Or more specifically, Special Drama artists, something like griots in some West African societies, perform transgressive acts and express emotion *on behalf of* their audiences (cf. Irvine 1990). From a simultaneously privileged

and degraded position, Special Drama performers articulate the conventions and contradictions of Tamil society.

An essential quality of social stigma is that those who are stigmatized know it; they share the dominant values of the society that stigmatizes them. As Seizer poignantly observes, “we are all experts at stigma, from whichever side of its cutting edge we encounter it at any given moment” (32). Drawing on Erving Goffman’s sociological work, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), she shows how stigma, the shame of not belonging, becomes part of the sensibility and identity of Special Drama actors and actresses. One’s approach to stigma, or the way one attempts to “manage” the stigma, becomes constitutive of one’s bearing, conduct, or habitus. For instance, seeking fame and a “big name,” or seeking respectability and a “good name” are two different strategies of “stigma management” in the Special Drama community. Seizer suggests that the opposition between these poles, embodied, respectively, in the figure of the prostitute and the respectable woman, “fuels the genre [of Special Drama] itself: actors live their lives ashamed of their shameful reputation and also dependent on its remaining a constant against which to measure their own actions” (152).

Stigma also shapes the desires of those who bear it. As we have seen, a crucial function of Special Drama is to present images of the “modern” for its audiences. In Tamil Nadu, one of the quintessential ways in which “modern” and “traditional,” or “Westernized” and “Tamil” are distinguished is through the distinction between love marriage and arranged marriage. Love marriage is a potent symbol of modernity, but, as Seizer’s work shows, class, caste, and occupation position people differently toward it, in that they influence who desires it (and who has enough social capital to be able to afford to desire it). Among the South Indian middle-class, upper-caste, classical musicians I worked with, love marriage, especially between those united in their love of music, is increasingly popular, and has become linked to an image of professional musicianship. For female musicians from non-Brahmin, non-middle-class backgrounds, for whom the stigma of connection to devadasis is still present, however, love marriage is not a prestigious option. Likewise for Special Drama actresses. Seizer relates the predicament of a young actress who makes her living playing a fantasy of modern love onstage, but desires for all the world in her real life a traditional, arranged marriage: “It was as though that which was unavailable to her had become the stuff of her own fantasies, the very opposite of the fantasy she plays out for the audience” (353).

Making Their Home in the World

Stigmas of the Tamil Stage is not only a sensitive ethnography of Special Drama and its artists. It is also a fascinating rumination on the nature of stigma and the complex mix of resistance, compliance, and agency that attend it. Seizer makes a significant contribution to an ongoing anthropological discussion that has sought to problematize the notion of resistance, and to show how resistance and compliance are often intertwined (Ortner 1995, Scott 1990, Butler 1993).

One of the great strengths of this book is that the author does not romanticize the Special Drama world as a resistant subculture; nor does she present Special Drama artists as unequivocally oppressed. Rather, she describes the different facets of stigma and carefully locates spaces which allow, if not for agency in a classic sense, then for maneuvering within and stretching societal norms. Seizer suggests that

when actresses manage to make their behavior indistinguishable from that of good women—in other words, when they appear to comply with dominant norms—they effectively stretch those norms, even alter them somewhat in the process (304).

The stretching of norms by seeming to inhabit them—whether by applying terms of kinship to the unconventional relationships they are often engaged in, or by acting the part of middle-class womanhood—constitutes, for Seizer, a kind of quiet action. Seizer explores practices that allow a different kind of subject to inhabit a familiar role, thereby expanding, however slightly or subtly, the boundaries of that role: “Through their embodied practices, actresses comply with the powers that stigmatize them only in such a way that their perceived compliance manages to expand their possibilities for making their home in the world” (327). By inhabiting roles offstage that are forbidden to them, these women engage in a practice of resignification: taking the form of something but altering its content.⁴ Or, as Judith Butler puts it, their practices are “repetitions of hegemonic forms of power which fail to repeat loyally, and, in that failure, open possibilities for resignifying the terms of violation” (1993, 124). But, cautioning against a celebratory narrative, Seizer warns that such repetition is a double-edged practice: it can just as easily reinscribe the hegemonic forms of power that it would subvert or challenge.

Behind—that is, both framing and enabling—every really funny joke—that is, framing and enabling it—there is a tragedy; that is the lesson of Basso's *Portraits of the Whiteman*. It is also the lesson of this book, which suggests that the comic “portraits” of gender-norm transgression enacted on the Special Drama stage are framed by the tragedy of a status quo that does not change. The tragedy of stigma simultaneously enables, shapes, and confines the creativity of the performers.

Like all excellent works of performance studies, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage* moves performance beyond aesthetics and situates it at the center of lived social experience. The book makes an important contribution to culturally and historically grounded studies of performance, as well as to the field of linguistic anthropology. It is a vividly ethnographic exploration of one of the central topics of South Asian studies: the centrality of gender to definitions of tradition, modernity, class, and nationhood (cf Hancock 1999, Mankekar 1999). At the same time, in its careful meditation on the linked issues of stigma, compliance, and resistance, it makes an important contribution to social theory more generally.

ENDNOTES

¹The naming of the female character as “dancer” recalls the figure of the devadasi.

²Kathryn Hansen makes a similar point in her article on female impersonation in Parsi drama. The stage, she writes, “created a public space in which societal attitudes toward women could be debated” (1998, 2291).

³One might also draw a comparison here to the hijras, described variously in the anthropological literature as transvestites, eunuchs, hermaphrodites, or a third gender. Communities of hijras across South Asia have an institutionalized role; they are expected to sing at births, weddings, and other occasions.

⁴For an exploration of resignification in the context of South Indian popular cinema, see Dhareshwar and Niranjana 1997.

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