

1 Introduction

In *Lady Macbeth Revisited* (2008) and *Are You Home Lady Macbeth?* (2010), only a semblance of Shakespeare's tragedy remains. The Bard has a long history in India, but rarely has his work been subjected to such a radical intervention – more specifically a trenchant feminist intervention on the part of performance maker and activist Maya Krishna Rao.

Reducing the text to mere citations and deploying multimedia effects, Rao plays Lady Macbeth like a witch; going by her appearance and costume, she could be either. Instead of the tragic, Rao mobilizes the grotesque: enlarged images of her face (painstakingly painted) (Figure 1), unruly mass of white hair, or hands and feet are digitally projected, made monstrous, on a screen. This witch/ Lady Macbeth is displaced or dislocated but highly domesticated. Her household chores include ironing, cooking, preparing for the banquet, laying out crockery and cutlery on a long mat in an oriental style of hospitality, and sweeping the floor. And yet this routine domestic labour transforms into ritualistic dances and chants reminiscent of witches; she may sweep the mat laid out for the banquet, but she also splashes it with blood (Figure 2) and plays hopscotch on the blood-spattered pattern. Confined to the house, the witch/ Lady Macbeth plots murders and devises power games, but she also plays cards with the devil and creates toys and voodoo bridal dolls. As Rao says, 'She is caught in a vortex, because she is out of joint with herself. We tread a thin line – is it real or is it play?' (Rao, 2021a).

I open with this snapshot of Rao's radical reinterpretation of *Macbeth* to introduce her dissent from the reverence for and conventional staging of canonical plays and signature style of performance in which the body is core to creating countercultural sites of feminist resistance. Now in her late sixties, Rao has been performing for more than forty years. Her career dates back to the late 1970s, when she was creating agitprop theatre with and for the feminist movement. This involved performing in the streets and in theatre venues, as well as appearing on makeshift stages – in college and school auditoriums and halls, studio spaces, art galleries, or in site-specific contexts. Postcolonial debates on theatre, regarded as an import of colonial cultural practice, often posit a binary between the theatre and the streets, arguing that theatre constitutes what Lara Shalson, quoting Christopher Balme, cites as the 'theatrical public sphere' that is outside the real public sphere and governed by its own conventions, so much so that it 'has become to all intent and purpose a private space' (quoted in Shalson, 2017: 23). Hence, theatre has come to be regarded as exclusive and accessible only to the urban middle classes. Contrastingly, street theatre, particularly in India, is seen as connected to the public sphere; many

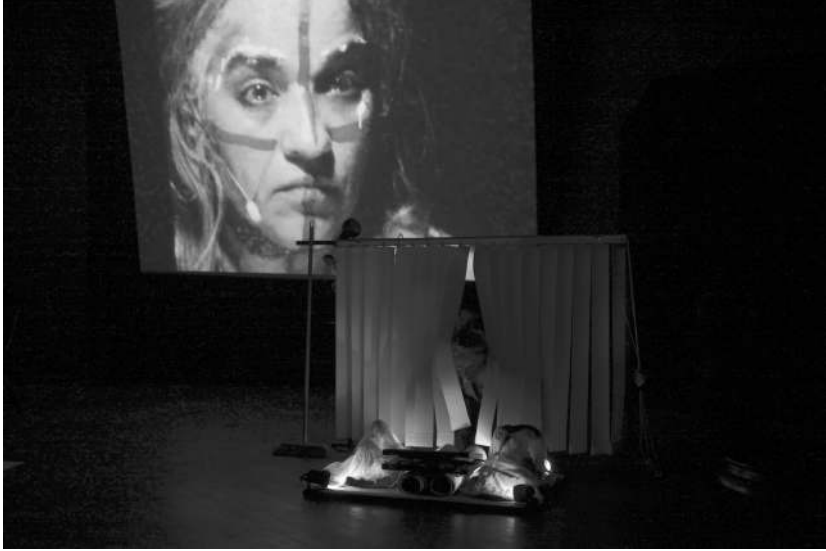


Figure 1 *Lady Macbeth Revisited*: Maya Rao as Lady Macbeth and the witch (Photo by Thyagarajan/National School of Drama archives)



Figure 2 *Lady Macbeth Revisited*: Maya Rao sweeping blood on the mat (Photo by Thyagarajan/National School of Drama archives)

artists view the street as important to making a political statement through their work. That said, Rao's binary crossings between the theatre and the streets have proved vital to achieving a significant dialogue between the two. To public

spaces she brings the radical, experimental, feminist edge of her theatre work; her solo shows, destined for the theatre, incorporate long episodes from her street theatre. Both are explored in this study, as I trace and assess not only the impact of her performance activism, but also her contribution to feminist theatre practices in India.

My analysis is guided by three key questions. Firstly, how are we to historicize and contextualize the role of feminist-theatre activism as part of the broader public strategies and mobilization of women's movements in India? Secondly, with the decline of organized feminist and other social movements, what role can feminist performance activism play, especially in the context of a right-wing state unashamedly propagating patriarchy? And, thirdly, in what ways can the significant body of work generated by women in Indian theatre be identified as a feminist theatre practice? All three questions are prompted by Rao, a feminist theatre maker committed to contesting inequalities and injustices in India. Her creative-political journey has been long and arduous. It has been especially demanding due to the rise of neoliberalism that, in a country like India with high levels of poverty, adversely impacted economically and socially vulnerable communities, and because of the nation's swing to the draconian right in recent years. In brief, the political path Rao navigates as a feminist theatre maker is, like that of her witchlike Lady Macbeth, a bloodied one.

2 Women on the Streets: The Feminist Movement and Agitprop Theatre

An auction is about to begin and the vendor has a double task – to start the play by settling the audience down on the ground and to shout out the qualities of the wares he is exhibiting: grooms ready for marriage. Prospective grooms are carried in on the shoulders of other actors while the vendor tries to raise the price as much as possible in terms of a dowry:¹

Vendor: 'Marriage, marriage – now everyone's daughters and sisters can expect to find suitable grooms – a wide variety of choices – many kinds of grooms – one for everybody – everyone will get one; IAS, bankers, businessman, doctor, engineer, teacher, every-type – every-kind – one for everyone – everybody can now get one. (*Om Swaha*, 1988: 43)

One after the other, the coveted prospective grooms are brought in, but the choice of the buyer – the bride's father or brother – is determined by the price he can afford to pay. Even after the initial transaction has been settled prior to the

¹ Dowry is a widely prevalent practice in India, where marriages are arranged and the bride's family pays, in cash and gifts, a hefty sum to the groom's household. It exacerbates the notion of women as a transaction.

marriage, the financial demand does not cease, reflecting a common reality in dowry cases. When the bride's family cannot or are reluctant to pay more, so begins a period of mental and physical torture for the woman who is now living with the groom's family. In many instances, the new brides are set 'accidentally' on fire.

Om Swaha, a title taken from the first line of the mantra or chant pronounced by the priest for Hindu marriages, opens with the episode I have just described. Rao and feminist director Anuradha Kapur devised the play in 1979 as an agitprop piece in collaboration with women's groups who were mobilizing a public campaign around the issue of dowry deaths, which had reached unprecedented numbers – with very few convictions (Rao, 2021c). According to Rao, this was also the first time 'We made a play' for the larger public, as part of the new women's movement that emerged after the Emergency period in India.² Another play was to follow in 1980: *Dafa 180 (Section 180)*. Also agitprop in style, the latter dealt with custodial rape; it was conceived after a horrific incident in which Mathura, a tribal woman, was raped at a police station. *Dafa 180* became part of the women's movement campaign for law reforms against rape.

Massive public campaigns on urgent issues such as dowry deaths, rape, and violence against women from all social classes were led by the women's movement; feminist theatre emerged from within these campaigns. Focussing on *Om Swaha* and *Dafa 180*, I aim to trace Rao's agitprop work in relation to the women's movement – work that she acknowledges as instrumental in shaping her intellectual and artistic life (Rao, 2021c).

2.1 Women's Movement, Public Campaigns, and Agitprop: *Om Swaha*

By the late 1970s, the 'feminist focus' of the women's movement in India was formed by and through the 'growth of "autonomous" women's groups in towns and cities, without party affiliations or formal hierarchical structures, although individual members often had party connections' (Menon, 2012: 19). The dilemma in the new women's movements was how feminist politics could best be conducted: through the urban middle-class orientations of these autonomous groups or by raising women's issues within mass organizations, particularly within the left-wing parties? Consequently, there was fierce debate over the issue of retaining the independent character of autonomous groups, versus the

² Emergency refers to the period between 1975 and 1977 in India when the government suspended all fundamental rights in the name of internal emergency according to the constitutional provision of Article 352.

affiliations to left-wing parties, where patriarchal structures were deeply rooted. Yet despite these ongoing debates and diverse ways of functioning, a number of feminist campaigns were launched, particularly around the issues of dowry and rape, with different feminists coming together in solidarity to set up women's resources.³

Rao and Kapur had been invited by campaigners Subhadra and Urvashi Butalia (mother and daughter) to meet with feminist groups whose members had different skill sets (Kapur and Rao's being theatre) and political interests but found common cause in the struggle against dowry. As Kapur explains, 'there were many overlaps of skills and personalities. Women rallied around the issues ... these were affiliations and collectivities' (Kapur, 2021a). Apart from being a social problem, dowry deaths were also entangled with many personal experiences. In an initial conversation, Subhadra Butalia pointed towards a house in her neighbourhood at Jangpura where a dowry death had recently occurred (Kapur, 2021a). Further, Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, two feminist scholars and activists involved in the movement, described how the dowry murder of twenty-four-year-old Tavinder Kaur was not, as was generally the case, relegated to a couple of lines in an obscure corner of a daily newspaper but garnered headlines, leading to women's groups organizing processions and demonstrations in front of Kaur's house: 'Tavinder's mother cried but not alone. Many women in Delhi cried out with loud voices' (Kishwar and Vanita, 2008: 42). Placards in the demonstrations read 'Arrest the Killers of Women' or 'We will never give dowry nor let women burn'. 'We need new instruments of consciousness raising if women are to stop seeing themselves as belonging to various families, to various men and begin to see other women as sisters – even though not born of the same biological parents' (Kishwar and Vanita, 2012: 46). It was in this context that *Om Swaha* was created, was staged, and gained immense popularity – it became a byword or mnemonic for the campaign.

The making of *Om Swaha* was a collaborative process. Rao and Kapur listened to the women's extensive deliberations (sometimes for hours). It was challenging to devise a thirty-minute play out of so much debate. Ultimately the play was based on a real-life incident in which two friends died, one after the other, because of dowry. But Rao and Kapur also needed to find a theatrical mode to capture and distil the multifaceted discussions. They devised what they termed formations. The formations, Rao explains, were the pillars or cornerstones which held the play together without any need for a linear, narrative

³ Radha Kumar's *The History of Doing* (2011) and Shamita Sen's 'Towards a Feminist Politics? The Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective' (2003) offer overviews of the women's movement in its early years.

structure. Formations were designed as emblematic moments to exemplify key ideas; they involved the play's protagonists and a chorus and were often underscored by a rhythmic text. In between these formations short episodes were performed in a realist mode (Rao, 2021d). Aided by the chorus, formations and episodes blended into one another, mapping transitions of time and space.

After the opening auction of grooms, the chorus moved around in circles, clapping their hands, declaring that marriages had taken place. This was followed by newspaper vendors announcing the sensational news of a girl, Hardeep, being murdered by her in-laws for not fulfilling further dowry demands. A sceptical reporter is out to gather facts but is met with silent neighbours – the chorus sit in a circle looking out like the three wise monkeys who see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil. Only Hardeep's friend Kanchan is ready to speak, but her voice is stifled. The next few episodes reveal Hardeep's tragedy: her marriage, how she was tortured and beaten up by her new family, and how on the day of her death she was doused with kerosene and set on fire to make it look like an accident. Now bereft of an unlimited source of income from his bride's family, the husband, with the assistance of his father, is already planning a second marriage. The body of Hardeep, shrouded in black, is carried off by the chorus amidst religious chanting.

Thereafter the play focusses on Kanchan; there is a feeling of *déjà vu* as she is married off with a dowry despite her protests. The marriage is played as a comedic critique to exemplify how women are commodified, reduced to an economic transaction. But an emblematic moment is altogether darker: the red veil used to cover the head of the bride becomes a whip as the chorus recites the dowry demands:

Not one lakh, not two lakhs (whiplash)
 Not three lakhs, not five lakhs
 No Fridge, no mixie
 No Iron, no TV (whiplash) . . .
 No earrings, or bangles,
 No footbells, or the nose-ring.
 No father-in-law's shoes, no the brother-in-law's suit
 No Pappu's jersey, no the sister-in-law's saree (whiplash).
 (change in the voice)
 Was she beaten up daily, was she beaten up daily?

(*Om Swaha*, 1988: 46)

Traumatized by the demands of her in-laws, Kanchan tries to run back home. Rao, playing the role of Kanchan, describes the formation that presented the two families standing in dual rows, while Kanchan ran from one to the other, her own family refusing to take her back and the in-laws continuing with their unfair demands (Rao, 2021d). Literally trapped into marriage and a situation

of day-to-day domestic violence, Kanchan figuratively becomes the bull of the bullock cart that carries the burden of her family. A *chunni* (scarf) tied to her chest is held by the rest of her family as she pulls and drags them along. The actress, like Brecht's Mother Courage pulling her wagon, circles the space while almost immobilized by the weight of the actors who start climbing on to her bent back. The chorus changes to the final formation of a *chakki* – a local mechanism where two rounded stone slabs are used for grinding grains; one goes around clockwise and the other anticlockwise (Figure 3). Rao as Kanchan sits in the centre and makes the motion of going around in circles while the chorus goes in the other direction. She appears to be in immense pain and about to collapse, but then she stands up and leaves the *chakki* formation to declare:

You have seen what happened to me;
 My father kept on doling out dowry –
 My brother on the sly kept on demanding dowry – And the rest of you just
 watched silently?
 The Sutradhar (interlocutor): But what could I do? It was your personal affair?
 Kanchan: You actually think this is a personal matter? You think the battle can
 be fought alone?
 The Sutradhar: Do you think it is only an individual's story? Can you fight it
 alone? Please think.
 The chorus as the collective comes back to show a larger front which will take
 the struggle forward.

(*Om Swaha*, 1988: 50)



Figure 3 *Om Swaha*: Maya Rao in the final *chakki* scene (Photo by Sheba Chhachhi)

In sum, animated by an energy, a passion for the social cause, *Om Swaha* was stylized, poetic, and theatrical. Rao recollects it as a *mise en scène* of images, words, sounds, rhythms, and body sculptures (Rao, 2021d). Moreover, crucially all efforts were made to depict Kanchan not as a victim who had no choice other than a dowry marriage, but as a woman who questioned the practice of dowry as a systemic form of violence against women. When she leaves the *chakki* formation and looks directly at the audience to ask, ‘how can I remain silent?’ the implication is ‘how can [we] remain silent?’ In short, this was agitprop theatre deployed to urge audiences to feel, think, and reject dowry marriages – to be moved to fight for legal redress rather than accept that women were victims by default.

2.2 Reception, Mobilization, and the Public Campaign

The first performance of *Om Swaha* took place in October 1979 on the Indraprastha (IP) College lawns in Delhi, where two feminist-activist scholars, Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid, were teaching literature. In this context, Kapur points out, a new feminist and gender consciousness was impacting disciplinary shifts (Kapur, 2021a).⁴ The IP College performance, as recollected by Rao, was charged with energy; *Om Swaha* went on to be performed more than a hundred times, initially as part of women’s marches and demonstrations, and subsequently on college campuses, in parks adjoining places where dowry deaths had occurred, in larger middle-class housing complexes, and at well-known protest sites in Delhi such as the India Gate and the Boat Club.⁵ The play would also be taken to other cities, such as Saharanpur and Bombay, as well as being performed at many women’s conferences, forums, and meetings.⁶ When the piece played in the streets, the performers would create a space amidst the people gathered; the audience would sit in very close proximity to the actors.

⁴ By 1986, four women’s studies centres (in the universities of Kerala, Punjab, and Delhi, and in Benaras Hindu University) were established. By 1997, they numbered twenty-two, and by 2007, there were around sixty-six. Women’s studies cells were also established in a few undergraduate women’s colleges in Delhi (John, 2008: 13). Kapur and Rao both made the transition to full-time theatre work with a commitment to feminist practices. Both went on to study at the University of Leeds.

⁵ The Boat Club and the India Gate, central landmarks of Delhi, face Raisina Hill, the seat of government and the president’s palace. The Boat Club was regarded as the national square of resistance until a ban was imposed in the 1990s. In 2021, the Supreme Court reinstated the right to protest at this site.

⁶ The plays and the movement between 1980 and 1995 have been extensively documented and photographed by the feminist artist Sheba Chhachhi. I have drawn on this documentation to reconstruct the plays (<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/photo-documentation-of-om-swaha-from-the-sheba-chhachhi-archive>).

The divide between the performing space and the audience was porous, and the actors often reached out to their audiences for responses and reactions.

Om Swaha's success or legendary status in the feminist movement, as part of the public campaign amidst protests, demonstrations, and marches, played a particular role: it allowed audiences the space and time to think of the issues and to entertain the idea that social change, an end to dowry deaths, was not only desirable but possible. Audiences were significantly moved to think of these matters when the play was staged where such deaths had occurred. At one show in Model town, the mother of Hardeep Kaur was present in the audience. Rao says she had no prior knowledge but could feel a palpably charged atmosphere that day, and, after the performance, the mother put her head on her lap and thumped her body as if to bring her dead daughter back to life, crying all the while (Rao, 2021d). There were also instances of hostility towards the actors and activists, but, on occasion, as Kapur explains, initial hostilities could be overcome through engagement with the play (Kapur, 2021a).

2.3 Critique of the Women's Movement and Continuing Violence

Om Swaha's reception clearly evidences the play as a success story of the campaign. But on what terms can either the play or the campaign be argued as impactful when the issue of dowry violence and deaths persisted? This kind of question, criticism even, is frequently levelled at the women's movement in tandem with accusations of an upper-middle-class and urban bias. Feminists have tried to counter the latter by proving how the movement encompassed a large number of organizations in many regions of India, including those affiliated with left-wing organizations. The former cannot be answered or countered by the citation of empirical data. The answer lies elsewhere: in the feminist consciousness raising achieved through the play and the campaign that heightened awareness not only of the dowry issue, but crucially also of the patriarchal culture that underpins it.

In defence of *Om Swaha*'s impact, Uma Chakravarti in her essay titled 'Cultures of Resistance: The Women's Movement in Performance' cites how the play's conception and staging acknowledged the cultural production of violence. Further, it is also important to note how *Om Swaha* resonated with agitprop plays from other organizations such as Jana Natya Manch's *Aurat (Woman)* (1979), Sachetana's plays in Bengal with *Meye Dile Sajiye (Giving the Women Away in Marriage)* (1983), *Mulqi Zhali Hai (A Girl Is Born)* (1983), and *Roshni* by Manushi (1980).⁷ Together these could be regarded as a diverse field

⁷ *Nukkad*, volumes 1 and 2, are issues devoted to women-oriented street theatre; they include play texts, interviews, and articles.

of feminist activism in different parts of the country. Raka Ray explains that this is important if we are to see the feminist movement not only as a social movement limited to mobilization or the opening up of political opportunities, but also as what she argues is a relational field fostering a political and protest culture, one that is valuable to feminist consciousness raising (Ray, 2000: 7).

Kumkum Sangari, a feminist scholar and one of the important leaders of the anti-dowry movement, accuses those who criticize feminist engagement with gendered violence as uncritically assuming a culturalist position:

Such culturalism works as a code for tradition and religion, conflates religion and patriarchies with ‘culture’ and turns acts of violence into religion driven Third World pathologies or customary/sacred traditions. This complicates feminist attempts to critique violent practices, especially since culturalist accounts also tend to spectacularize and decontextualize violent acts. (Sangari, 2012: 325)

Thus Sangari articulates the issue of gendered violence as a fundamental and systematic feature of patriarchies, often entangled with the social, cultural, and political economy and regarded as synonymous with belief systems. The feminist concern with dowry practice, she further elucidates, is closely related to material considerations, the uneven distribution of labour and resources, exploitative production relations, control of reproductive bodies, articulation of caste and class, and the logics of capitalism (Sangari, 2012: 326–7). The agitprop mode of *Om Swaha* was an attempt to include all these elements; as Rao claims, it created the opportunity to think, understand, and discuss dowry in the context of larger issues to do with the status of women in the family and society (Rao, 2021d).

Sangari’s argument indicates that what was essential to the women’s movement was the understanding and need to communicate that patriarchy is not merely a matter of men ruling women, but that it is implicated in the deeper social fabric. This is particularly the case in the practice of dowry within the familial unit; the violence related to it is often unleashed with women’s consent or with women as active agents, as reflected in *Om Swaha*’s depiction of the mother-in-law who is complicit in accepting dowry. (The mother who sends Kanchan back to her in-laws is also responsible for upholding tradition.) Sangari argues that the active complicity of women can be attributed to various factors such as the ‘anticipation of violence, or the guarantee of violence in the last instance to ensure obedience, inculcate submission and punish transgression’ (Sangari, 2012: 326). To critique this violence is essential because:

[V]iolence forces us to think that the point of breakdown of love, protection and familial bonds in violent acts is the point at which patriarchal power is