

Performance of Unwanted Roles:

Making of a New Female Subject

Abstract

This paper tries to understand how the female subject, when isolated from her milieu, is a role whose entry is blocked from a collective. This collective could be called a theatrical play in itself within the scope of everyday existence in the world. The role that is cut out from an enclosed group may create disturbances by creating a new narrative for itself. This narrative then forms a new mode of existence. For the purpose of such a proposition, three women are taken as case studies – Olympe de Gouges from France, Pandita Ramabai from India and Valerie Solanas from the U.S.A. Here, the act of articulating a fresh mode of existence itself leads to the creation of a new subjectivity. This is further elaborated through presuming a sense of theatre for the specific characters to act out their performative gestures.

Keywords: *performativity, role, gender codes, women rights*

‘But things are not that simple. And there are times when the need for whatever already exists has partially exhausted itself, when what must emerge finds no place to express itself.’

— Luce Irigaray, *I Love To You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*

1. Introduction

If the world becomes a stage for theatre to happen, all of its infinite members become characters or roles who appear momentarily in a very long play. Every role must perform its part in the plot of a seemingly endless *becoming* of the world. It is often believed that irrespective of feelings of hostility and indifference towards each other, these roles should not develop hostility towards the plot of the world theatre they are working in. This is to avoid disrupting theatre in the middle. Now any group formation could be taken as a world in itself with its own theatre; it then has members who perform their acts and forward the rhythm of the group's structure that identifies each of them as well as their group. In theatre of the world it is not possible for stopping the arrival of unwanted characters who would be seen by someone else as disturbing the plot's structure. However, because this world is actually made of numerous group formations, entry of unwanted characters is seldom celebrated in any collective. There are consistent efforts for cutting down such possibilities altogether. Such efforts could then include many accounts – large scale murders and expunging of the Romani people from the criterion of citizenship in several nations and regimes, female infanticide for erasing possibility of unnecessary number of females in a community or even cutting down entry of certain castes in a temple commune. Thus, wiping out some roles from one *theatrum mundus*¹ creates historical repercussions where there remain no markers of historical existence of these roles.

However, if any group remains self-enclosed, it will die when all of its parts die. It is also not possible that roles who are kept out will not show themselves. In fact, they always haunt the very life

¹The term derived from Latin denotes the world as theatre and all events just occurrences of this great play that keeps on unfolding either with an end (in the Christian eschatological sense) or incessantly.

of this group either in silence or through loud presence, and even the silence can be heard. Hence, if a role is forced out of the plot of a *theatrum mundus*, it does not exist like other parts working together inside for the play to go on. It can choose to accept its isolation as part of its destiny. It might also happen that in order to join, it accepts whatever conditions the group imposes on it. But in its isolation, it can also choose to become a role that aims at bringing forth a new plot of its own, which may create imbalance, threat and chaos in the other plot from which it is kept out.

The role here is not always a choiceless subject, who can never be prior to the codes which define it. Through a fresh performative gesture, this role tries to reject dominating narratives, establish new system of codes and make them *normal*. The force of this new performative gesture is embodied and lived by this role in its own actions for it to even concretize anywhere. This way the desire to have one's world in sync with oneself may also be striven for. The female subject can be understood as a role cut out, muted or deemed invisible from the *theatrum mundi* of societies whose general structuring of politics, family, space, institutions, education, knowledge, language, movement, body and other domains, has been around maleness as the *ideal-type*. Across societies, regions and time periods there have been intense efforts by women for disturbing, changing or discarding modes of existence which gain power. These powerful modes of existence disregard or damage certain roles into vulnerable situations of being in the world.

Olympe de Gouges, Pandita Ramabai and Valerie Solanas are connected not just as female subjects but as three individuals who were cut off from the mainstream of their respective societies due to their writings and actions. They not only rejected the universal claims of the male worldview and other deep-rooted inequalities, but also brought forth new systems of thinking and creating the world. Hence, what follows now is an attempt to introduce the three protagonists, their disparate

performative gestures which disturbed the smooth functioning of the normative and to create certain generalizations through them to understand these acts beyond the mere technique of negation.

2. Self reliance and reflection

Say a person is aware of what is happening in the world she is living in, what this world does to her and what she is doing in and to it. She can also become aware that whatever she interprets about everything could be her own construction, a creation of her imagination.² If a person gets an understanding that she too can construct the world and herself, then she can refer to herself, her needs and wants to choose how to exist in the world. There is also a consistent effort at making same what she wants to become from inside and what should be there outside. Such a reflection on the world and herself can give a sense of self-reliance to this person, whereby existence is not a plain matter of destiny but of what suits oneself.

2.1. Olympe de Gouges

Olympe de Gouges was an eighteenth century French playwright who spoke for the rights of women, slaves, sex workers, illegitimate children and other rejected subjects of her society. In spite of participating actively in the French Revolution, she also criticized whatever part of the revolution she thought was violating rights of women and leading to unnecessary killing of people. She was able to represent herself in her writings, plays and public appearances. When 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen' was brought

²But what if I look at the world from the absolute vantage point of my reflection? Does it not become my poem? And since I live in it, do I not become poet, actor and spectator all at once? This is the hall of mirrors...' (Balthasar 1988, 184)

out in 1789, she criticized it for extending equal rights only to men. In 1791 she came out with 'Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen,' which was a statement that marked suppression of women by men of the revolution as unjust and highly unreasonable. It also proclaimed rights which both women and men are entitled to for working together in all terrains of nation building. The document also elaborates rights for mothers, children and sex workers.

Where 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen' was prepared collectively by men of the revolution, it was too limited and particular in its actual scope for including other members of the French society. On the other hand, Olympe prepared another declaration on her own and brought into the purview of rights and citizenship, several other members who existed along with her. Her native language was Occitan, one of the languages spoken on the border of France and Catalonia. She was not educated in French. So her difference within the claim of French as a national language came out right there when she dictated all her literature in French instead of writing it herself. Her method was that of reconciling differences (slave-master, female-male) to form a new kind of totality. This was probably because she was able to speak from the position of her existence as a particular part and a universal individual at the same time.

2.2. Pandita Ramabai

Born in an upper caste Marathi Brahmin family of nineteenth century India, Pandita Ramabai was called a suspicious deviant in whichever organization of people she entered. She could read and critique ancient Hindu texts, travelled across India and married Bengali lawyer Bipin Behari Medhavi, who belonged to a Shudra caste. She also travelled outside India as a widow with her daughter and converted to Christianity. Besides, she fought against exploitation of various members of her milieu. Both

high caste Hindu reformers and Christian missionaries tried to impose on her the role or a model of a submissive, educated widowed woman who adheres to the words of god and men. However, she disappointed them by choosing her role within religion and Indian womanhood through her own interpretations of both. She rejected and criticized in public whatever norms she did not agree with.³

At every step, she reverted to herself as a source of guidance in search of religious awakening that coincides with empowerment of oppressed sections of the Hindu society (women and deprived castes) in a way that convinced her in thought and action. She published books such as *The High Caste Hindu Woman* and generated funds from the U.S.A for setting up a home for widows in her home state, Maharashtra. Ramabai probably sustained her engrossment with these issues because the emancipation was not just for others but for herself as well. For every clash with other systems of reform whom she did not agree with on grounds of inequalities ingrained in them (one group being the Bengali Brahmin reformers), she came up with direct and concrete replies. In her biography on the social reformer *Pandita Ramabai: A Life and a Time*, Uma Chakravarti

³I have a conscience and a mind of my own. I must myself think and do everything that God has given me the power of doing... I have with great effort freed myself from the yoke of the Indian priestly tribe so I am not at present willing to place myself under another similar yoke by accepting everything that comes from the priests as authorised command of the Most High. Can you, or your friends prove that giving lessons to boys is wrong? I am not [that] anxious to give lessons to men, but I am anxious to do away with all kinds of prejudices which deprive a woman in India of her proper place in society... I do not think I shall say anything on behalf of my liberty [but] as far as I know from the time I have had a real liberty, I have not acted as a lawless woman. When people decide anything for me without consulting with me about it I do of course call it interfering with my liberty and am not willing to let them do it. Would you feel bound to accept every word or rule which comes from the bishop as an expression of the will of the Most High? Perhaps you would... But I do not, and will not' (Ramabai, quoted in Chakravarti 2007, 18).

mentions that Vivekananda announced Ramabai as someone not to be trusted. When women accused her of causing harm to families by promoting the Age of Consent Bill and allowing imprisonment of their sons-in-law as per the bill, Ramabai replied -'Never mind the son-in-law, his life is not worth more than that of the daughter' (Chakravarti 2007, 23).

2.3. Valerie Solanas

Valerie Jean Solanas was a twentieth century queer feminist writer from the U.S.A., who had been a student of Psychology and had worked with visual artist Andy Warhol for some time. She raised serious allegations against him for stealing her ideas and dehumanizing her in public settings; these differences culminated in her attempt to shoot Warhol and his colleagues in 1968. She was subsequently imprisoned for three years and sent for psychiatric treatment. In 1967, she self-published her SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto where she laid down detailed arguments for why the cause of all repression, wars, hierarchies, race/religion/class/gender conflicts and every other blunder is a male. In this document she systematically lists down how society is entirely male in appearance and mindset, where maleness is described by her as a nervous and emotional deficiency. In her early years she faced sexual abuse from her father and grandfather and throughout her life she was despised and ridiculed in almost all circuits of writers and avant-garde artists. This could have been because she did not mellow down her speech in favour of her surroundings and people around. While being a singular unit writing a manifesto, she urges for a mass mobilization of free willing females and pliant males who will overthrow government, money system, economy, man-made inequalities and remove men as well as the quality of maleness. This is in favour of community formations of individuals who do not breed on authority, insecurity and contempt, but on an ability to 'absorb' into each

other.⁴ This kind of civilization for Solanas is led by females (she seldom uses the term 'women').

She holds an idea of absolute autonomy of individuals (primarily females), which would remove the need to destroy and thereby cultivate a need to create and nurture in togetherness. She was not an active member of any feminist organization for she criticized all of them for their weak method of 'civil disobedience' and lack of courage for going 'criminal' to destroy the system of laws.⁵ Yet she always worked for building a force of women to carry out actions she explained in the manifesto. In fact, she was living the manifesto in her life.

Compared to Olympe and Valerie, Ramabai belonged to a relatively privileged section of her respective society. Nevertheless, for all these three persons, there appears a constant need to measure limits of the orders they were living in: what existences are deemed acceptable, what are rejected and what have never been considered. There also appears an understanding of what extents of these limits are acceptable to their own selves and where the orders of their respective societies clash with them. One may find Judith Butler's explication of *precarity* and the precarious subject in her essay 'Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics' as a window towards understanding the nature of female subject and subjectivity being discussed through the three case studies. While Butler acknowledges reproduction of gender through its performative enactment in accordance to existing power structures, for her, "precarity" designates that politically

⁴Love can't flourish in a society based upon money and meaningless work: it requires complete economic as well as personal freedom, leisure time and the opportunity to engage in intensely absorbing, emotionally satisfying activities which, when shared with those you respect, lead to deep friendship' (Solanas 1968,14).

⁵SCUM is out to destroy the system, not attain certain rights within it' (Solanas1968,24).

induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (Butler 2009, ii). For her, gender norms definitely affect our appearance in public and private sphere, and also define those who will be criminalized by laws of state, police or home. The subjects who do not perform gender in commonly 'intelligible ways' could be sex workers, transgenders or women without cultural and economic capital required to survive in a society. For Butler, such a subject is mostly choiceless to the defining norms preceding the 'I' and these socially produced norms are mostly *a priori* to agency and thought. With a mild delineation from this view, the paper here tries to examine ways in which a subject can attempt to subvert the given-ness of a socially defined role and even try to precede or overcome it. In moments of clash, where any kind of synthesis is almost impossible, this subject acts to negate or reject these orders and establish fresh ones, whose descriptions are somehow in sync with her own self.

3. Clearing space through a new act

Any act or gesture must aim to bring extreme changes for it to even claim newness. Many spaces can exist at the same time but usually one space may dominate and project itself as the only real or possible space. Because space and idea can hold power over each other to force people out by constructing a domain for themselves, entry into this space will also have to happen through a force to wipe out an existing malevolent notion. Or it could be that this space itself is wiped out. So a person *doing* a new gesture will be occupied not just with clearing an existing space and instituting a new subject, she will also already *exist* as the new notion and subject in this act of clearing.

Even though the French Revolution provided a politically active and unstable space, the only stability it had was an abundance of men as the agents of political action. There was an ignorance of

political actions and problems of those who were not French men. Olympe de Gouges did not just argue against validating only male members as citizens who could enjoy rights, she reversed this idea through an even more elaborate declaration of rights, which establishes itself as the ideal-type. In it, the existing principles of sexual oppression become plain mindlessness.⁶ They deserve to be thrown away in favour of fresh principles, which are in rhythm with nature. It is because for her, nature is the place where sexes meet in harmony and bring out political actions together as equal bearers of rights and responsibilities. Hence, while along with the Articles she provides a 'Postscript', in which she urges women to unite against male oppression, she also writes a 'Form of Social Contract between Man and Woman' in the same document. For her, nature, philosophy, politics and reason are true domains of women. She wants sex workers and other women to join hands; she also wants mothers to have the right to proclaim illegitimate children and give them their own names. Therefore, she makes the space of rights and politics open, inclusive and available for herself and other members of her nation. In doing so she brings all these subjects from periphery to the centre. The relationship between the universal and the particular also seems to be suspended in order to bring the two closer.

In the case of Ramabai, her knowledge of Sanskrit and Hindu texts was already unacceptable for any woman to have. So this had to be appropriated in the name of education of women. But there was a limit for upper caste Hindu reformers in appropriating her within their concept of reform. She brought multiple contradictions and setbacks to existing ideas of reform, religion and women empowerment through her acts. When she travelled alone and received marriage proposals from Brahmin

⁶Article IV – Liberty and justice consist of restoring all that belongs to others; thus, the only limits on the exercise of the natural rights of woman are perpetual male tyranny; these limits are to be reformed by the laws of nature and reason' (Gouges 1791, 2).

men, she chose to have an inter-caste marriage with reformer BipinBehari. She resisted practising religion for the sake of institutional affinity and ideational activity. After her conversion, Ramabai followed Christianity for a personal intellectual support and for reaching out to those who have no access to power in any religion.⁷ It could be said that she tried to embody the reform she wanted for other women and for herself. In 'The High Caste Hindu Woman' she elaborates on how child marriage and lifetime dependency of women on men are unnecessary and destructive. In the book, she also asks for an intercultural support of American Christian women to help in making Indian women 'self-reliant' and 'educated'.

In the SCUM Manifesto, by universalizing male actions as reasons for all systems of oppression in all walks of life, Valerie discards this universal plot of a male *theatrum mundus* that for her is incapable of any community formation of individuals based on equality, independence and free will. She describes all domains like philosophy, religion, psychology, government, military, hierarchy of intellectual elite in academics and other areas as male conspiracies to hide the male insecurity of being incomplete and his desire to become female who is a complete being.⁸ Even social codes of aloofness and hardness (common in fatherhood) are established by men for repressing their awareness of being inferior to and fearful of the mother. She comes up with wide range of terminologies to describe a man: he is 'psychically passive', carries a 'pussy envy', is 'emotionally diseased' and is a 'walking abortion' among others.

⁷I had never heard or seen anything of this kind [Christian missionaries uplifting women living in the periphery] done for this class of women by the Hindus in my country... The Hindu shastras do not deal kindly with these women. The law of the Hindu commands that the king shall cause fallen women to be eaten by dogs in the outskirts of the town. They are considered the greatest sinners and not worthy of compassion' (Ramabai, quoted in Chakravarti 2007, 14).

⁸The male claim that females find fulfillment through motherhood and sexuality reflects what males think they'd find fulfilling if they were female' (Solanas 1968, 4).

A common thread that appears to be linking the three figures is their understanding of the mother figure as an independent, self-sufficient, intelligent being. Olympe believed in a woman's free expression of proclaiming a child outside marriage as it is the right of maternity to have a child belong to it in bloodline and lineage.⁹ Ramabai performed all her tasks and went to places along with her daughter. For her, mother in any household should be literary aware, socially active and a complete, independent individual so that her children take the same qualities from her.¹⁰ For Valerie, female is the only complete unit in the society who can build community around herself as she has no insecurity and cowardice within. She reconfigures the Oedipal Complex. According to her, it is the son's desire to imitate his self-sufficient and strong mother that gets prohibited by his father, who gets to complete himself by being closer to her and by imitating her. In a way, all such views reverse the notion of the female as a self-deficient and weak being who always carries a lack.

The three individuals also seem to be striving for a reconfiguration of the idea of a female subject within their respective theatrum mundi. This subjectivity is not yet a self-contained unit but is in a process of (re)creation through the ways they act out in their respective lives. One may argue that the seemingly utopic vision, particularly in the writings of Valerie and to an extent of Olympe, is common to the utopian novel *Herland* (1915) written by American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, where three men from human civilization encounter an isolated region inhabited only by women who reproduce only the female sex through parthenogenesis, live without gender restrictions and war and engage in education of

⁹'The married woman can with impunity give bastards to her husband, and also give them the wealth which does not belong to them' (Gouges 1791, 4).

¹⁰'The mother's spirits being depressed, and mind as well as body weakened by the monotony and inactivity of her life, the unborn child cannot escape the evil consequences of' (Ramabai 1887, 97).

mind and strengthening of body. While the narrative seems to follow the experience of the *uncanny* by men, it also seems to reinstate the racial superiority of the white skin and places much emphasis on the necessary role of women to reproduce. On the other hand, Valerie's document is more militant. While it identifies that scientific development would allow in future auto-reproduction without the need of the male sex, it does not concentrate on racial or ethnic purity of the proposed females; rather, the SCUM manifesto primarily talks of intellectual development without hostility. So reproduction becomes just one mundane task and not the only purpose of life. One could say that Valerie's proposed society of only the female sex moves away from the hetero-normative vision of *Herland* towards a more *homo*-sexual association of women.

4. Making history that is not obsolete

History is not an object of the past. For a person who knows that her world is not given but constructed by someone else, who has an awareness of herself constructing the world, can live the weight of history in every moment. At the same time she can be an active agent for making and changing history, and living this change in that same moment.¹¹ Thus, this person is living and making history at the same time. It is almost like playing a role in the plot of a play and making it, at the same time. So a person or a role is a poet of the plot in her very performance of this plot. In the context of the three case studies, women write the respective plays in which they perform their roles. This kind of play, however, does not seem to have an end. On the contrary, it appears that these women do not offer a conclusion to the history they make.

¹¹The idea of extempore makes characters 'both ends and means; themselves deliberately crafted, their action also contributes to the whole', which requires 'feeling the ongoing influence of all the forces that produce an event...' (Balthasar 1988, 179-80). So history itself is lived in the present.

Where Olympe writes for rights of women, mothers and children, she leaves it open for men as well to frame rights for women who have children without getting married. In the declaration itself, she admits her inability to do so as her shortcoming.¹² In a way, she expects men of her society to also work and do away with wretched laws that crumple ways of living of women as unacceptable. This is because she perceives these laws to have gained strength under the rule of men in almost all spheres and hence, it is also their responsibility to remove inequality. Even though she finds a temporary solution in a better system of marriage with equal rights for women and men, her declaration in its totality is not a closed, sacrosanct document like the one written by only male political activists of the eighteenth century French society.

Ramabai appears to have lived what she aimed at. This means that what is wanted from the future is constantly lived in the present for it to even exist somewhere in future. She converted her religion for a practice that was in congruence with her individual conscience. But her search was not completed – she wanted a religion through which she could express her spiritual needs, her sufferings, her loneliness with other women in a religious commune. Always yearning for that perfect expression of herself with others, her quest did not seem to end. But in certain moments it seemed to find expression.¹³ This is very different from a closed group formation, which may

¹²The woman who is unmarried has only one feeble right; ancient and inhuman laws refuse her for her children the right to the name and the wealth of their father; no new laws have been made in this matter. If it is considered a paradox and an impossibility on my part to try to give my sex an honourable and just consistency, I leave it to men to attain glory for dealing with this matter... (Gouges 1791, 4).

¹³In 1905 MuktiSadan was by a Pentecostal Christian preacher and following the Ramabai community of women experienced an 'awakening'. They 'spoke in tongues', there was much weeping and hysterical laughter as part of the 'Revival'. At least for a while this form of worship, described as 'mass hysteria', may have expressed the feelings of Ramabai and her girls' (Chakravarti 2007, 33).

consider its notions and ways of living as perfect and complete. For Ramabai, reform was a process oriented towards both self and others.

In the SCUM manifesto, the SCUM society is there and yet not there. Valerie describes all qualities that are there in SCUM females, but she also projects their meeting and the actual event of 'cutting' and eradicating men as something that has to happen somewhere in the future. However, this event and the coming together of SCUM females already take place in the very moment Valerie enunciates them in her manifesto. For her, SCUM is a quality and an existence that already stands united in the manifesto. So in the act of writing the plot, she becomes a part and also lets the play be performed.

If the three figures are considered as historians living and writing history at the same time, then they know that history of women is incomplete till the yearning for that perfect event of extreme shift in the male *theatrum mundus* is satisfied. However, they also know that in the process of yearning itself, they have to let the event happen again and again. This way history is in the process of being made by them, and so it does not become obsolete. This creation of history, particularly for Olympe and Ramabai, could be understood from the perspective of Luce Irigaray in her book *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*. Here she presses on the need for installing objective laws, civil rights and duties for women for their development at large rather than relying on rules of subjectivity as proposed by a handful of women representatives. She believes that without an 'objective determination' of defenses, rights and responsibilities of the female gender, 'to demand a right to subjectivity and freedom' makes many women rights arguments circular and further pushes the most vulnerable of women into violent situations of being. Instead of dividing and widening the feud between men and women, Irigaray also proposes a togetherness of the two,

where differences are accepted (not reconciled), dialogue and communication are made possible at all levels and violence is removed. Such a view could be linked to the desire to reframe codes defining the female sex, in case of the three women under study here. Apart from voicing their detailed arguments as seemingly solitary individuals in public settings, they identified the need to write the necessary changes to be expected from the future in the codes of language. While Valerie's account creates the female subject as a militant intellectual, Olympe and Ramabai create a female subject whose rights and duties towards the society as an intellectual being are concretely defined for the benefit of any society as a whole.

5. Conclusion: woman as a loner

In their own times and spaces, these three protagonists were rejected by others surrounding them and they fought almost alone. Whenever they put forth their ideas in public, they were accused of fickleness, insensibility and irrationality – qualities associated with womanhood as an inferior category of being. Their actions were said to have lacked seriousness, which was a way of countering them because they seemed to pose real threats. A woman subject is imagined as an incomplete person in no control of herself and in a need to connect with others – to god, husband, father, son or any male member. She is usually not imagined as a full person who can be alone with full strength. Thus, when a performative gesture of a woman disturbs an exclusive *theatrum mundus*, it is the risk of having a full, solitary woman who can enter into alliance with other such women or with whoever suits her.

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Kritika Tandon

PhD Student

Theatre and Performance Studies

School of Arts and Aesthetics

Jawaharlal Nehru University