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Making Women Visible: Gender and Race Cross-Dressing in the Parsi Theatre

Kathryn Hansen

Over the last century the once-spurned female performer has been transformed into a ubiquitous emblem of Indian national culture. The voice of playback singer Lata Mangeshkar fills home, vehicle, and marketplace. The dancer in her Bharata Natyam costume has become a transnational icon of Indianness. Bombay films have so elevated the actress that painter M. F. Husain finds his eternal feminine in superstar Madhuri Dixit. These representations carefully balance glamor with propriety, rendering the publicly displayed woman acceptable and reversing earlier attitudes of disquiet and avoidance. They result from a lengthy process of negotiation, wherein the performer's status and image have been reworked to incorporate the signs of Indian womanhood. Of the many performance sites at which this transformation occurred, the Parsi theatre had the greatest impact on the evolution of modern and regional drama as well as popular cinema in South Asia. It was also the most intriguing for its use of gender and race cross-dressing. Here the female impersonator played a critical role in the construction of new norms of Indian womanhood. S/he was complemented by Anglo-Indian and Jewish actresses who masqueraded as Hindu and Parsi heroines. Hence by the apparent anomaly of Indian males passing as females and foreign women passing as Indian, the Parsi stage established a paradigm for female performance even before Indian women themselves had become visible.

Female impersonators structured the space into which female performers were to insert themselves, effecting the transition from stigmatized older practices to the

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newly consolidated Indian Woman (*bharatiya nari*) of the nationalists. This historical evolution is most transparent in the theatres of western India, where cross-dressing persisted through the colonial period and can be researched from written records such as journals, memoirs, and biographies. This is also the location in which female impersonation is most overtly linked to the fashioning of a widely circulated standard for female appearance and a modified code of feminine conduct. More is at stake, then, than the simple notion that impersonators and outsider actresses served as expedient surrogates when the presence of Indian actresses on stage would have endangered the urban theatre’s reputation. Masquerades of gender and race were productive of new ways of looking upon the female form. Practices of gender and race impersonation enlarged the performative possibilities within which theatre managers, dramatists, and publics could experiment with the unfamiliar procedures of imagining and viewing women.

Central to this process was the redefined position of the spectator within the urban entertainment economy. The prior orientation of spectators towards theatrical transvestism and its characteristic modes of encoding erotic ambiguity to some extent structured the reception of cross-dressed actors on the urban stage. The modes of response to female performance similarly had been shaped within the environment of the court and salon, wherein elite male patrons exercised exclusive control over courtesan singers and dancers. With the rise of the middle-class theatregoing public and the increasing size of the female audience, however, impersonation and other aspects of theatrical practice began to address the spectator as a gendered subject. Not only were male viewers catered to in more complex ways as the longstanding culture of homosociality was contested by notions of companionate marriage. Women were more and more the audience whose presence required accommodation within the theatre house and whose desires and enjoyment influenced the enactment of gender difference.

For both men and women, performances of feminine identity opened up an arena in which gender norms could be articulated and debated. In consequence, theatrical cross-dressing in this period went beyond the reification of existing gender boundaries, or the transgression of those boundaries for the purpose of generating laughter. This was a two-fold process that had far-reaching implications. On the one hand, impersonators and actresses transformed the visual construct of womanhood into an image of bourgeois respectability. The regulation of the external look through emphasis on fashion and feminine accoutrements was a key ingredient in this semiotic makeover. Yet, by subsuming the overt sexuality of the traditional female impersonator or courtesan performer within norms of modesty, cross-dressed performers together with playwrights and directors crafted a new interiority, identifying the ideal woman with inner sensibility and the capacity to suffer.

These representations of womanhood on stage had measurable relationships to the entry of women into the public sphere. During the same period, women were being recast through legal discourses, social reform agendas, and literary representations.

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Such ideological productions of the male elite had important normative consequences, but in themselves could not reverse the long-standing association of female seclusion with security and prestige. To engage more fully with public life, women as social actors required a shield of feminine virtue that would guarantee their safety as they moved out into the world. The appearance of propriety conveyed through specific gestures and features of dress became the passport to mobility. This fortified self-image, ironically based on an attitude of vulnerability, was most convincingly modeled by the female impersonator.

**Bombay’s Performative Ecology**

During the period 1853 to 1931, Bombay developed a lively theatrical culture grounded in the overlapping practices of the Parsi, Gujarati, and Marathi theatres. Although usually classified separately, these theatres had much in common besides their shared orientation toward female impersonation. They participated in a commercial entertainment economy characterized by corporate ownership of theatrical companies, which arose in tandem with the city’s rapid population growth and prosperity. Music, dance, and dramatic performances once restricted in circulation by aristocratic patronage were transformed into commodities of mass consumption with the rise of a bourgeois class and the restructuring of public space and leisure time. The appropriation of European stage technologies and new styles of drama deepened the divide between the older representational arena of court and countryside and the new public of the metropolis. In consequence, impersonations of gender and race, although continuous with earlier practices, entered a new era and assumed meanings specific to the reconstituted audience.

That this audience was not bounded by the geographical perimeters of Bombay adds to the importance of the phenomenon for women throughout South Asia. Beginning in the 1870s, Parsi theatrical companies routinely traveled to Madras and Ceylon, Calcutta and Rangoon, Peshawar and Sindh, and points in between. In each locale, companies sprang up styled after the Parsi companies, often adding the glamorous phrase “of Bombay” to their names. Their popularity within the regions extended the Parsi theatre’s impact far beyond the point of origin. Even within Bombay the Parsi theatre was a broadly based institution whose historical identity was never coterminous with the community for which it was named. Writers, actors,

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2 In 1853, Vishnudas Bhave and his Hindu Dramatic Corps performed before the Bombay public and sparked vernacular-language theatre activity, marking the beginning of the period. In 1931, India’s first full-length feature sound film *Alam Ara* was released, following which the Parsi theatre began to wane.


4 As immigrants to India from Iran in the eighteenth century, Parsis had maintained their distinct faith of Zoroastrianism, while adopting the Gujarati language and other customs of the surrounding society. In the eighteenth century, many migrated from Gujarat to Bombay. Collaboration with European traders and the British East India Company enabled the Parsi mercantile elite to achieve extraordinary financial success. Middle-class Parsis eagerly sought English education in the second half of the nineteenth century, filling a disproportionate number of seats in the recently opened Elphinstone College. It was here that amateur theatricals became fashionable among Parsi students around 1850.
company managers, musicians, and stage hands belonged to a mix of class, caste, and religious backgrounds. Audiences were comprised initially of British officials, the military, and wealthy Parsi merchants, soon joined by the growing class of educated professionals. Textile workers, artisans, and small traders formed a large share by the end of the nineteenth century, accommodated by low ticket prices that ensured a heterogeneous public.

Although much has been made of the derivative, colonial character of the Parsi theatre, largely on account of its fascination for Shakespeare and Victorian stagecraft, the overwhelming majority of the productions were in Gujarati, Urdu, and Hindi. The stage medium was fluid and polyglot; modern literary forms of the languages had not yet stabilized, and the association of community and region with linguistic identity was yet to become fixed. In addition to indigenous poetry and song genres, story material was primarily taken from Indian and Persian literary traditions. Bombay's theatre houses, although owned mostly by Parsis, were available for use to everyone. Most of these were on Grant Road, but the prestigious Gaiety and Novelty theatres near the Victoria railway terminus also attracted large audiences. Gujarati and Marathi theatre companies performed in the same theatres, as did visitors from other parts of India and abroad. This meant a great deal of imitation and rivalry within the entire urban theatre economy, and it is within this larger context that I wish to situate the questions about women performing and being performed.

Men's Bodies, Women's Parts

Female impersonation has been understood in South Asia as a theatrical compulsion resulting from the social taboo against women performing in public. The gendered segregation of public and private spheres forced the seclusion of women within the households of socially prominent families. Singing and dancing were relegated to a stigmatized class of women who sought economic stability through attachment to one or more patrons. To the question why these professional women were not available to the public stage in the nineteenth century, it is claimed that they kept themselves away because of the excessive degree of publicity, or that they were lacking in skills and hence were "unsuitable."

This explanation of female impersonation, although correct in acknowledging the widespread exclusion of women from public life, confuses the agency of company managers and publics with that of performing women. It hypothesizes a social

5 Until the 1870s, the plays were written mainly in Gujarati, the first language of the Bombay Parsis. The plots were initially based on martial legends from the Persian Shahnamah, a staple of evening recitations by bards on the open ground (maidan) where affluent Parsis went to promenade. Also common were adaptations of currently popular English dramas like Sheridan's The School for Scandal and Gujarati versions of Shakespearean plays. After the successful Bombay production of the Indar Sabha of Amanat, a song-and-dance spectacle considered the first Urdu-language play, companies turned increasingly to Urdu dramatists and the Indo-Muslim corpus of legends and fairy tales. In the first decades of the twentieth century, stories from the Hindu epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, became very popular along with contemporary social dramas, and Hindi gradually became the Parsi theatre's language of choice.

6 Nineteenth-century Bombay's intertwined literary and theatrical worlds are described in Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner, eds., Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1995).
absence or avoidance on the part of actresses that contravenes the historical evidence. Contrary to the argument that performing women were unavailable, the record shows that the Parsi theatre employed both female impersonators and actresses for a considerable duration. In a sense, they competed against each other, and companies and publics made choices about whom they wished to represent women on stage—men or women.

A revised understanding of gendered theatrical practices in this period needs to account for the enlarged presence of both female impersonators and actresses and their mutual interaction. Both groups, I would argue, were subject to multiple levels of redefinition. This occurred within several conceptually separable frames, and distinguishing between them may help in sorting out issues of agency. One significant frame or site was the gendered performer’s body, the medium through which the performer addressed the public. By the process of refashioning and reworking its appearance, the body was converted into a usable construct for visual pleasure, gender identification, and social meaning. To a large extent, this process was within the realm of the performer’s choice, guided and limited by audience desire and the performer’s own capabilities. Another frame, by contrast, was the offstage arena of public debate, theatrical discourse, and company policy. Here the image of the performer was constructed by social actors who had a stake in the theatre’s larger claims to cultural authority and prestige. Meanings were mapped onto the performer’s body beyond his or her power to control. The self-generating domains of significance existed in uneasy tension with these exterior codes and often indeed were overwhelmed by them.

In the material under review, the position of the female impersonator in the gendered social order was secured by operations at both these levels. The present section focuses on ways that female impersonators engaged with spectators, analyzing the particular kinds of viewer pleasure they delivered. In the face of changing norms and conditions, impersonators successfully redesigned themselves through modifications to their stage demeanour and affect, diversifying their perennial appeal. Much of the anecdotal evidence has been drawn from the scholarly Hindi monograph of Somnath Gupta (1981), which is heavily based on the theatre notices of one-time actor and photographer Dhanjibhai Patel. Patel’s pieces were published over a number of years in the well-known Gujarati newspaper Kaiser-i Hind and were reissued as an anthology in 1931. Other key sources are the published Hindi doctoral dissertation of Vidyavati Namra (1972), herself the daughter of the Parsi-Hindi playwright Narayan Prasad Betab, and the Hindi memoirs of Fida Husain, the veteran actor of the Parsi stage, edited by Pratibha Agraval (1986). Although their accounts are descriptive and citations are infrequent, these sources are among the most credible available. All draw directly on the experiential knowledge of actors and dramatists from the Parsi theatre, and they have been compiled by reputable scholars.

For the first twenty years of its development, the Parsi theatre was an amateur enterprise supported by enthusiastic young students and an older generation of notables active in public life. Among the pioneer impersonators were men like D. N. Parekh, later a medical doctor and lieutenant colonel in the Indian Medical Service. While at Elphinstone College, he played Portia in The Merchant of Venice and Mrs. Smart in G. O. Trevelyan’s The Dawk Bungalow. These performances were held under the patronage of Sir Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy, a leading Parsi businessman and philanthropist, and Jagannath Shankarsheth, a wealthy Hindu banker, both of whom had been
active in the public campaign to open the Grant Road Theatre. Another amateur, Framji Joshi, played the lead in a Gujarati version of Bulwer-Lytton’s The Lady of Lyons in 1868. His performance was so impressive that the club’s director feared his star performer would be lured away by another company. Indeed, Joshi went on to new female roles with the Alfred Company, before he resigned from the stage to become Superintendent of the Government Central Press.

The high social standing of the actors, the prestige of its wealthy patrons, and the location of amateur dramatics as a supplement to college life all established the early Parsi theatre as a “rational” form of amusement, in contrast to the older nautch performances sponsored by “feudal” aristocrats. By the end of the 1860s, the fondness for “theatricals” was such that Parsi businessmen were drawn to theatre as an investment opportunity. With the establishment of the Victoria Theatrical Company in 1868, the Parsi theatre entered a period of capitalist reorganization and professionalization. Productions became more lavish, and audience size expanded. A premium was now placed on young men of pleasing figure and superlative voice, who would ensure company profits through their virtuosity in women’s roles. The split in the Victoria Theatrical Company in 1873 supplies an example. The former manager, Dadi Patel (1844–1876), took his leading female impersonator with him when he separated to form the Original Victoria Theatrical Company. C. S. Nazir, the new manager of the Victoria, was at a complete loss and immediately organized a group of recruiters to look for new boys. This was particularly urgent as Nazir wanted to make a strong showing before the princes at Lord Lytton’s Imperial Assemblage, the Delhi Darbar of 1877. He could not outdo his rivals and win a sizeable audience without topnotch female impersonators.

The Parsi theatre invested in the recruitment and training of boys because it needed their labor to ensure its economic viability. An acting career normally began in a period of apprenticeship with schooling in female roles such as the saheli or sakhi, companions of the heroine (fig.1). Certain actors became “all-rounders,” performing the hero, heroine, or comedian, as needed. With age and changing physique, others shifted from female to male roles. Khurshed Baliwala (1852–1913), who later managed the Victoria Theatrical Company and became one of the most renowned Parsi theatre personalities, played a female role when he was 18 in Rustam and Sohrab. A year later, he appeared as the hero of Sone ke Mul ki Khursheed, and from then on, he acted primarily in male roles.

9 Ibid., 109–10.
11 Namra, Hindi Rangmanch, 52; Gupta, Parsi Thiyetar, 108.
12 Namra, Hindi Rangmanch, 55.
Figure 1. A chorus line of “girls” in the Marathi drama *Manapman*, performed by the Kirloskar Natak Mandal around 1880. Reproduced with permission of the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai.

Other actors specialized as female impersonators. Success in a role led to the public affixing the name of the character to the actor’s name or nickname. It is only through this assignment of feminine stage names that the identity of many female impersonators can be determined from the record. Two brothers of the influential Madan clan acquired this popular status. Nasharvanji Framji became famous as Naslu “Tahmina” for his performance as Sohrab’s mother in *Rustam and Sohrab*. Naslu’s younger brother, Pestanji Framji, was called Pesu “Avan,” after the heroine in a Gujarati version of Shakespeare’s *Pericles*.13

Female impersonators performed in various types of stage roles. One was the romantic heroine, beloved of the hero and the embodiment of feminine perfection and modesty. A mellifluous voice became a valuable adjunct to such a role as songs gained ascendency in the format of the musical drama. When Jehangir Khambata founded the Empress Victoria Theatrical Company in 1877, he took full advantage of the talents of a popular female impersonator known as Naslu Sarkari. Famed for his sweet, “cuckoo” voice (*kokil kanth*), Naslu played the Emerald Fairy to Kavas Khatau’s Prince Gulfam in the *Indar Sabha*.14 Then there were the female magician roles, like the Jogin (female ascetic) in *Harishchandra*.15 During the Victoria Company’s tour to Delhi in

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14 S/he was Laila with Khatau as Majnun; Bakavali with Khatau as Tajulmulk; and performed a number of other classic themes opposite Khatau, the actor known as India’s Irving. Ibid., 118–19.
15 Or in *Gopichand*. Ibid., 111, 166.
1874, Kavasji Manakji Contractor, a female impersonator affectionately called “Bahuji” (daughter-in-law, bride) created a sensation in the Jogi role, by delivering countless lashes to the tormented dancing figure of Baliwala playing Lotan.\textsuperscript{16}

Female impersonation continued on the Parsi stage well into the twentieth century, retaining its popularity with audiences and with company managers. The long lists of men who played women’s roles in the history of Parsi theatre are remarkable; they seem to form the majority rather than the minority of the class of actors. Unfortunately, these actors have been virtually forgotten. Written documentation of their lives, their habits, even their careers are extremely limited. No biography or autobiography has emerged to illuminate this important institution.\textsuperscript{17} Records are somewhat more complete in the case of two non-Parsi actors, Jayshankar Sundari (1888–1967) from the Gujarati stage and Bal Gandharva (1889–1975) from the Marathi musical theatre. Both excelled in the embodiment of feminine sensibility and decorum, creating prototypes for the ideal Indian woman. Their tremendous success was recognized during their active careers and later in life by the award of Padmabhushan, the Government of India’s prize for achievement on the national cultural stage. Sundari’s Gujarati autobiography, an English biography by B. B. Panchotia, and two English biographies of Bal Gandharva by Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni and Mohan Nadkarni supply a number of incidents that enlarge the picture of female impersonation as it flourished earlier in this century.

Sundari launched his career on the Gujarati stage at the age of twelve, starring in \textit{Saubhagya Sundari}, the role of the auspicious young wife that gave him his stage name. Before that, he had served an apprenticeship for three years in Calcutta with the Parsi theatre company of Dadabhai Thunhti. On a salary of six rupees a month, he performed in the chorus of “girls” every night at the Thanthania Theatre. His first important role was the Emerald Fairy in Amanat’s \textit{Indar Sabha}, and he starred in a number of other Urdu-language plays. During his Calcutta training, Sundari perfected the distinctive feminine gait and stage entry that secured his fame as a modest yet alluring heroine.\textsuperscript{18} Returning to Bombay, he played Rambha, the milkmaid in \textit{Vikram Charitra} (1902).\textsuperscript{19} In his most memorable scene, Sundar entered with a pot on his head and offered milk to the hero, singing \textit{Koi dudh lye dil rangi}. This song, playing on the old Vaishnava conceit of a milkmaid seducing the hero, became so popular that Bombay textile companies printed it on the milled lengths of cloth that were sold for men’s \textit{dhotis} and women’s \textit{saris}.\textsuperscript{20}

Sundari relied on a method of total identification with women, modeling specific roles on female acquaintances whom he closely observed. His autobiography provides a rare self-reflective glimpse of the process of transformation from man to woman. Describing the first time he donned a woman’s blouse, he writes:

\textsuperscript{16} This sadomasochistic gesture was later to become a trademark of the actress Nadia, known as “Hunterwali,” lady with the whip, who appeared in Bombay stunt films in the 1930s and 1940s.

\textsuperscript{17} Jahangir Khambata’s autobiographical memoir, \textit{Mahro Nataki Anubhao} [My Theatre Experiences], may constitute an exception. A copy of the 1914 publication has recently been located in the University of Bombay Library.


\textsuperscript{19} The play ran for three years and was performed every Saturday night, a total of 160 times.

\textsuperscript{20} Panchotia, \textit{Jayashankar}, 42.
I saw a beautiful young girl emerging from myself. Whose shapely, intoxicating limbs oozed youthful exuberance; in whose form is the fragrance of woman’s beauty; in whose eyes feminine feelings keep brimming; in whose gait is expressed the mannerism of a Gujaratin. Who is not a man, but a woman . . .

I saw such a portrait in the mirror . . . Reflecting the difference the mirror was saying, “This is not Jayshankar. It is a shy and proud Gujaratin. That graceful movement, that acting, that enchantment.” A sweet shiver ran through my body’s limbs. Momentarily I thought that I was not a man.\(^\text{21}\)

His most impressive performances were those that depicted feminine pathos or karuna rasa, as it is termed in Indian aesthetics. In Kamalata (1904), an adaptation of the Shakuntala story, he played his part with superb finesse, moving the entire audience to tears.\(^\text{22}\) Like Bal Gandharva, his stage movements, attire, and speech became models for women offstage. The Padmabhushan citation observed that “it was a fashion for ladies in Bombay to imitate him in their daily lives.”\(^\text{23}\)

Bal Gandharva became wildly popular in Maharashtra as a singing actor, particularly among the students at Deccan College, as well as in the courts of several Indian princes. His debut was in the title role of Shakuntala before the prince of Miraj in 1905. Like Sundari, he was known for his tragic portrayals of female misfortune; audiences loved his ability to move them to tears. To an even greater extent than Sundari, Bal Gandharva set fashions for women’s dress and behavior, and his photographic image was used on commodities for female consumption, especially cosmetics. He popularized sari styles, jewelry such as the nose-stud, the wearing of flowers in the hair, and carrying handkerchiefs. Photos of him in his roles as a middle-class housewife adorned the drawing rooms of elite homes, and many firms used his image to advertise products such as calendars, diaries, and stationery (fig. 2).\(^\text{24}\)

In the accounts of Bal Gandharva, the erotic allure of his impersonations is striking. He possessed an attractive appearance and sweet voice, two features considered essential for all female impersonators, but he exploited their seductive potential more overtly. One way he did this was by displaying his long hair, which flowed to the waist. In Manapman he entered the stage with his hair hanging loosely, indicating that the heroine had not yet had her bath, while in another scene he turned his back to the audience to reveal a long braid.\(^\text{25}\) These gestures, rather than being read as crude, were understood as modest and charming representations of the educated young women of the day.\(^\text{26}\) Similarly, his songs were memorable for their emotional expressivity, particularly the projection of the traditional sentiments of romance and pathos (shringara and karuna rasa). His voice production was not falsetto but midway between


\(^{22}\) Panchotia, Jayshankar, 48.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 131.


\(^{26}\) “The manner in which Balgandharva made himself up and the way he moved on the stage fully evoked the persona of the contemporary young woman of the middle or upper middle classes.” Govindrao Tembe, cited in D. Nadkarni, Balgandharva, 34.
today’s male and female registers, as was true of other singer-actors of the time, regardless of gender. His spoken voice is said to have been an idealized version of (presumably upper-caste) women’s speech.  

These accounts point to an established aesthetic of female impersonation that delivered spectatorial pleasure at several levels. First, spectators were fascinated with

27 D. Nadkarni, Balgandharva, 118.
the idea of a man passing as a woman. The desired end of this performance of gender was that the female impersonator appear so “natural,” in the borrowed rhetoric of the day, that he could convince all viewers of his identity as a woman. An anecdote concerning Bal Gandharva’s attendance at a ceremony for married women in the Baroda Palace emphasized that he was able to negotiate the event undetected even by the Maharani. For the audience, whether in the theatre or in everyday life, such an act of passing was lauded as a virtuosic feat. It provoked a sense or awe and wonderment, akin to the aesthetic mode known in Indian dramatic theory as *adbhuta rasa*. The necessity of the female impersonator having an appropriate voice and physical features indicate that hearing and seeing were the senses actively engaged by this spectacle. The training of these senses through the act of theatrical spectatorship, a process that quickened in the late nineteenth century, occurred within the larger frames within which the female impersonator performed, notably the proscenium arch with its elaborate painted backdrops and curtains and the predominance of musical sound through orchestration, singing, and musical interludes.

Second, the meanings of cross-dressing were multiple, being contingent upon the dramatic text, its performative realization, and the spectator’s social location and interpretive apparatus. One type of gender disguise, found in classical and folk tales from the subcontinent, employs the motif as a narrative device to bring the hero into closer proximity with the heroine. Having gotten past a guard, entered a garden, or penetrated a bedroom, the cross-dressed hero reverts to his masculine role and seduces the heroine. Transvestism here only thinly cloaks an aggressive heterosexual masculinity, and the transvestite, rather than being read as a woman or as identifying emotionally with her, is understood as very much a man, and potentially a threat to the woman’s honor and that of her male kin. That such ruses were still employed in everyday life is suggested from reports that during “family shows” in the Parsi theatre, when no unaccompanied men or women were allowed, *rasiks* (men in women’s clothing) would be caught attempting to gain entrance. The ribald, comic mode of cross-dressing associated with folk theatre forms may have featured in the farcical skits that were presented after the main drama in an evening of Parsi theatre. Grotesque caricature of the female body often accompanied this type of representation, engaging a misogynistic gaze which, for some spectators, dominated the viewing of the female impersonator.

In contrast, the kinds of roles mentioned in connection with Sundari and Bal Gandharva suggest a high mimetic mode of female impersonation, particularly in conjunction with scenes of pathos and tragedy as found in the epics and domestic melodramas. Sundari’s acting method based on identification with feminine sensibility implies that actors tried to disguise their male gender characteristics entirely. Photographs of the impersonator bending his head in submission to the hero, or gazing up at him, or with body turned away coquettishly, show the match between the actors’ poses and the postures of the companionate heroine celebrated in nineteenth-century reform discourse and fiction (fig. 3). The reception of these gestures by the female spectatorship marked a new direction in theatre art, for instead of fearing the transvestite, the viewer was instructed to model herself on him. Through the figure of the tragic woman, the wronged wife, the victim (*abala nari*), the female impersonator

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28 Ibid., 64–65.  
was rendered non-threatening, a stimulant of tears rather than titillation. This spectatorial position made possible the notion that the female impersonator portrayed the societal ideal of femininity. Indeed, by virtue of his allegedly superior histrionic talents deployed in the summoning of pathos, the female impersonator was said to surpass any woman in his representation of the beauty of womanly suffering.
Not in opposition to these readings, but more difficult to trace in the historical record, I would suggest an underlying homoerotic valence that linked the gazes of hero and male heroine on stage, and impersonator and male spectator in the theatre hall (fig. 4). Hints of this emerge early in the period in a report of the first performances
of the *Indar Sabha* in Lucknow. Nasir describes “thousands of people [who] became captivated and went mad over these beautiful beardless youths.” Elaborating, he attributes the production of homosexual lust to the popular performance. “Just as having read Mir Hasan’s poetic romance [*masnavi*], thousands of women became debauched, similarly from this romance *Indar Sabha*, thousands of men became sodomites and pederasts.”30 Such comments are echoed by actor Londhe, who playing opposite Bal Gandharva felt a “unique thrill” pass through his veins when he stood close by, or references to the “lusty applause” of the college boys when Bal Gandharva as Shakuntala entered the stage surrounded by her “companions.”31 The physical attraction generated by the cross-dressed performer through the gaze and the voice could travel into various types of roles and dramatic situations, intersecting with other kinds of responses. The male-to-male dynamic must have been a major factor in the passionate idolization of impersonators like Bal Gandharva, whether it was explicitly acknowledged or not.

Finally, through the institution of female impersonation, a publicly visible, respectable image of “woman” was constructed, one that was of use to both men and women. This was a representation that, even attached to the male body, bespoke modernity. As one response to the British colonial discourse on Indian womanhood—the accusations against Indian men on account of their backward, degraded females—the representation helped support men, dovetailing with the emerging counter-discourse of Indian masculinity. Moreover, women derived from these enactments an image of how they should present themselves in public. Female impersonators, by bringing into the public sphere the mannerisms, speech, and distinctive appearance of middle-class women, defined the external equivalents of the new gendered code of conduct for women. That such tastes were crafted by men (albeit men allegedly imitating women) gave them the imprimatur of acceptability. I would argue that it was the possession of the external markers of femininity—the armor of correct sari style, hairdo, and jewelry, together with appropriate gestures—rather than (or at least in addition to) some internalized essence as suggested by Partha Chatterjee, that made it easier for women to begin to move in public.32 Without a visual template that enabled recognition of their “spiritual” essence, Indian women could not actually become visible.

Yet women were kept at a distance from this process of gender formation, in several senses. Insofar as female impersonators usurped the position of actresses within the entertainment world, they not only denied women opportunities for employment but intensified the misogynist discourse that held that women had to remain off stage and out of the public eye. Furthermore, by asserting that female impersonators could “do” gender better than women, the theatre system and its public served to perpetuate longstanding male control over the female body and its representation.33 This process

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33 A similar process was at work as the classical dance traditions of the subcontinent were constructed in the early twentieth century, largely by male practitioners (*gurus*) who defined canons of
correlated with the recasting of the image of women in the programs of male journalists, litterateurs, and social activitists in the period, and it introduces the developments that form the subject of the subsequent section.34

The Anglo-Indian Actress and Racial Passing

Beginning with Mary Fenton, the first Anglo-Indian woman on the Parsi stage, the theatrical figuration of the Indian woman became allied with the female body, but one marked as racially alien from the communities who made up the bulk of the audience. Understood as foreign, the Anglo-Indian actress contributed an additional constellation of desired traits to the construction of the ideal woman, notably fair skin and the promise of “modern” ways. She added the spectacle of racial passing to the play of gender identities already activated by the female impersonator. In so doing, she demonstrated that even her exotic allure could be contained within narratives and performative modes that signalled domestication. She thus proved an acceptable alternative to those Indian actresses whose social position (or lack thereof) prevented their reception as suitable objects of spectatorial pleasure.

A brief look at the debates on and off the Parsi stage suggests that the growing presence of women both as spectators and as actresses created a set of potential conflicts, particularly for theatre proprietors. Eager to capitalize on the appeal of actresses to secure their financial base, companies also wished to enlarge their audiences and increase their respectability by drawing in women as spectators. Middle-class women and their kin could countenance attending family shows if the theatre could boast an absence of prostitutes, sobriety among the male attendees, and a general tenor of civility. Even then, the palpable presence of the actress on stage carried a contagion capable of undermining the theatre as a respectable pursuit. Eventually a solution to the “woman problem” emerged that guaranteed company profits and promoted visual spectacle. Differentiation between the stage and the spectator was preserved by shifting from gendered categories of actors to racialized ones.

These tensions can be glimpsed in the views of K. N. Kabra (1842–1904), a prominent Parsi social reformer.35 A prolific playwright, he authored some fifteen Gujarati plays and took a keen interest in drama as a vehicle for moral progress. In 1868 he converted an exercise club into a dramatic society, becoming the founder of the long-lived Victoria Theatrical Company. He established a second company, the Natak Uttejak Mandal, in 1876, in part to oppose the decision of actor-manager Dadi Patel to allow women to perform in Victoria Company productions. Kabra argued for greater

feminine costume, gesture, and repertoire, and then taught these reconstituted traditions to respectable middle-class women. Some of them, such as the pioneer in the field of Bharata Natyam, E. Krishna Iyer, taught and danced while dressed as women. Bimal Mukherjee and Sunil Kothari, eds., Rasa: The Indian Performing Arts of the Last 25 Years, Vol. 1 (Calcutta: Anamika Kala Sangam, 1995), 286.

34 For examples of this recasting in diverse contexts, see Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

independence for Parsi women, including the freedom to move outside the home and to wear socks, boots, and carry an umbrella.36 His campaign extended to encouraging Parsi women to come to the theatres, preferably accompanied by their husbands or brothers. When he founded Natak Uttejak, he offered women-only performances. Creches were set up outside the hall so that middle-class women could leave their children with servants. During ordinary shows, women in parda (seclusion) would be accommodated within a special seating area. Large numbers of women, including many Hindus, attended the company’s productions of the epic stories of Harishchandra and Nala and Damayanti.37 But Kabra also criticized the lewd behavior that supposedly flourished with the arrival of courtesan performers on the public stage. He resisted their entry into the acting profession, keeping his company free of actresses as if to render baseless the moralistic rejection of the theatre.38

A similar policy banning actresses was followed in the next generation by the New Alfred Theatrical Company. It too was founded as a declaration of opposition to women performing. When it split off from the original Alfred Company in 1891, its owners hired Sohrab Ogra (1858–1933) as company manager. Unlike Kabra, Ograji was from a poor family and had no formal education. He was known for his complete opposition to allowing women to perform, never permitting his wife or children to see a play, let alone perform in one. Because of his stance, the company prohibited actresses for over forty years, until his death in 1933. Not surprisingly, the New Alfred acquired the reputation of being one of the most orthodox and respectable Parsi troupes, and it attracted such national leaders as Madan Mohan Malaviya and Motilal Nehru to its performances.39

These companies distanced the actress from the female spectator by simply removing her from the theatre. Gossip, rumor, and opinion reinforced the unseemly reputation of actresses or exaggerated their exposure to danger. The first reference to a woman appearing on the Parsi stage is the narrative of an abduction. In 1872, the Parsi Natak Mandali presented Indar Sabha with Latifa Begam, an accomplished dancer, in the role of the Emerald Fairy. At the play’s conclusion, just as she entered the wings, she was kidnapped by a Parsi man. Throwing his overcoat over her costumed body, he whisked her into his waiting carriage. Latifa’s disappearance created a sensation, was much discussed in the newspapers, and is said to have delivered a setback to the actresses’ cause.40

Meanwhile Victoria manager Dadi Patel had been invited to bring his troupe to Hyderabad. In 1872, before long-distance rail service was in place, he made the difficult trip with his entourage, and once there met with tremendous success. Dadi

36 While the right to wear shoes and carry an umbrella appears an insignificant step in the history of women's advancement, it was once a highly charged issue. These accoutrements were required only for women who intended to step out of doors; thus their acquisition symbolized that fraught process of moving beyond the threshold of the home into public, heretofore male, space. When Kashibai Kanitkar, Maharashtra’s first female novelist, and Anandibai Joshi, its first woman doctor, ventured out wearing shoes and carrying umbrellas, they were stoned in the streets for “daring to usurp such symbols of male authority.” Radha Kumar, The History of Doing (London: Verso, 1993), 32.
37 An advertisement for these plays specifically targeted the Hindu audience, stating that the two upper classes of seating would be reserved for Hindus only. Rast Gofar, June 8, 1879.
39 Namr, Hindi Rangmanch, 106–9; Gupta, Parsi Thiyatar, 125–28.
40 Gupta, Parsi Thiyatar, 140.
Patel’s performances before the harem of royal women are recounted with particular gusto. When he returned to Bombay he brought several Hyderabadi singers with him. The groundbreaking use of these women in his 1875 production of the *Indar Sabha* turned fairies into females, although the play is said to have been a flop.41

Similarly, around 1880 Baliwala brought women into the Victoria Company, beginning with Miss Gohar, who was followed by Miss Malka, Miss Fatima, Miss Khatun, and others. Lurid tales accompany some of these names. Miss Fatima once entered Baliwala’s room while he was sleeping, and the frightful sight of her when he awoke caused him an attack of paralysis. Miss Khatun’s nose had been cut off by a lover, making visible her great shame. Miss Gulnar ran a *pan* (betel-leaf) shop; the offering of *pan* was a flirtatious gesture.42 Regardless of the truth value of these stories, they confirm that “actress” continued to signify prostitute. The actress was remembered for her off-stage behavior, imagined or real, rather than her abilities as a performer.

Nonetheless, Baliwala and the Victoria Theatrical Company continued to employ actresses, taking them along on their tours to Ceylon, Singapore, and Burma, where they added to the spectacle associated with the new mode of theatre. Still implicit was the impossibility of conceiving of the actress as a Parsi woman. Only one exception has come to light, in which a Parsi woman appeared on stage at the insistence of a female impersonator who had left Baliwala’s troupe to form his own. The incident caused such an uproar in the Parsi community that the actress was forced to leave the company.43 Like the Elizabethan theatre, which welcomed English women in the audience but tolerated no English woman on stage, gazing rather upon the Italian actress, the Parsi theatre demanded that its actresses be Other, and that its own women stay strictly beside their male chaperones in the audience.

It was in this way that the door opened to women like Mary Fenton, an Anglo-Indian, in contrast with Latifa Begam, Moti Jan, or Miss Fatima, whose names suggest positions within Indo-Muslim courtesan culture. Mary Fenton joined Kavas Khatau as his leading lady in the Empress Victoria Theatrical Company around 1878, possibly displacing Naslu Sarkari, Khatau’s cuckoo-voiced female impersonator. The daughter of a retired Irish soldier, she herself was an entertainer, an exhibitor of magic lantern shows.44 She admired Khatau’s acting, was introduced to him, and a romance ensued. Mary, who already spoke Hindi and Urdu, is said to have been trained in singing and acting by Khatau. Eventually she and Khatau were married, and she bore him a son, Jehangir Khatau; later they separated.45

Mary Fenton’s touching singing, accurate pronunciation, and acting talent were widely admired. A newspaper reviewer noted, “In spite of being a foreigner [English word] the artiste speaks the Gujarati language with such ease, clarity, and emotion that even our Parsi brethren are not much to compare.”46 These abilities coupled with her

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43 Ibid., 170.
44 The magic lantern was used to illuminate a set of scenes painted on glass slides and project them onto a large screen or wall.
fair skin, and not least the salacious stories circulating about her relations with Khatau, created a sensation in the theatre. She was followed by a long line of Anglo-Indian performing women, who not only captured the Parsi stage but dominated the screen in the era of the silent cinema. Racial identities were imprecisely assigned, and several actresses classed as Anglo-Indian were in fact members of the Baghdadi Jewish community, which had immigrated to India in the early nineteenth century (e.g., Patience Cooper, Ruby Myers).\(^{47}\) Somewhat later, confusion was manipulated by film actresses who masqueraded under Hindu names: Sulochana (Ruby Myers), Sita Devi (Renee Smith), Indira Devi (Effie Hippolet), Manorama (Winnie Stewart). The primary constructed identity, in each case, was as white or as foreign. In a secondary formation, whereby an Indian name was substituted for the foreign, the white actress was denominated within the indigenous system. The shift from Parsi or Gujarati aliases in the nineteenth century (Mary Fenton was known as "Mehrabai") to Sanskritized aliases in the 1920s ("Sulochana") says a great deal about the ways in which nationalism and gender formation were increasingly being brought into alignment.

The Anglo-Indian actress phenomenon added glamor and excitement to a theatre already synonymous with spectacle. In addition to the transformations effected through imported stage devices, sound effects, and painted scenery, here was a transformation of the colonial gender hierarchy. Through the exercise of the gaze, the male Indian spectator could possess the English beauty and enact a reversal of the power relations that prevailed in British-dominated colonial society. These relations, while grounded in economic and political control, were figured as a gendered domination of the masculine West over the feminine East. Instead, the feminine embodiment of the West, the Anglo-Indian actress, was now domesticated and subordinated to the Indian hero and to the male viewer's gaze. This inversion became such an integral part of domestic comedies and melodramas that playwrights were required to craft their narratives accordingly. As playwright Betab noted in his autobiography, "If the dramas of that time didn't have a fair mistress [gori bibi] and a black master [kale miyan], they were not plays at all."\(^{48}\)

The Anglo-Indian actress succeeded because of her polysemic image. While being viewed as representative of the West, of colonialism, and of an alien and exotic set of gender relations, she could also be read intertextually, within a complex of established Indian understandings of the ideal feminine. Indo-Islamic tropes cast the beloved as a pale fairy or a houri from Paradise. As an icon of beauty, the Anglo-Indian actress came to epitomize this particular type of feminine perfection. Regarding Mary as a "doll carved out of marble, a houri from heaven," viewers situated her within the traditions of ghazal lyric poetry and the heterodox mystical vocabulary of Sufism.\(^{49}\) The actress was seen as an idol (but), to whom the lover/viewer would prostrate, coding sexual mastery in masochistic self-surrender. This stance, while proceeding from an earlier poetic formation, also prefigured the cult of fan-worship that developed during the film era.


\(^{49}\) Gupta, Parsi Thiyetar, 120.
The advertising employed by the Parsi theatre companies overtly appealed to audience desire to gaze upon whiteness. Handbills for Betab’s plays advertised “white misses [gori-gori misen] who will present enchanting songs and dances.” Another poster boasted, “Hours from Iran—Fairies from Bombay—Magician ladies from Calcutta.” Just as the Parsi companies had named themselves after the British monarchy to exploit the foreign and exotic, they used the foreign-sounding actresses’ names to lure the public. One interpretation is that these ads were intended for a gullible public who thought that the Parsi companies were actually composed of English actors, and that spectators would get to see English memsahebs dancing, or even more provocatively, men and women dancing together.

The photographed image of the actress’s face became a critical marketing vehicle and acquired a mobile life of its own. Billboards would be taken around the city advertising a drama and its actors, and when actresses began appearing on stage, their names and pictures were featured on these boards. Actress photos began to adorn the covers of the song books and libretti that were sold at the performance site and followed by auditors during the performance. Match boxes and postcards featuring famous actresses were printed abroad and disseminated within South Asia. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the voices of singing actors and actresses were recorded on wax discs, and these too began to move independently of the staged performances. The circulation of both photographed images and recorded voices was to increase exponentially as the film industry and its star culture subsequently developed.

In spite of the saleable value of the “white” actress’s physical charms, what the audience ultimately demanded was a convincing portrayal of Indian femininity. The roles for which Mary Fenton was cast tended to be innocent and beautiful heroines, usually from the village, who were temporarily overpowered by forces of evil. The titles of the dramas alone point to the type: Gamre ni Gori (The Fair Village Belle), Bholi Gul (Innocent Flower), Bholi Jan (Innocent Dear). Gamre ni Gori, written by K.N. Kabra’s brother Bahman Kabra, was performed “thousands, nay, hundreds of thousands of times,” according to the playwright in the preface to the 1914 edition. It later became a popular silent film starring Sulochana (1927). Fenton, according to a contemporary reviewer, was “the life-blood of the whole play.” The heroine started out wearing simple village attire, which enchanted the critic, but soon changed for the worse. Her adoption of shoes and socks, blouses and bracelets, marked a metamorphosis presumably proceeding from her temptation by city ways.

_Bholi Jan_, written by K.N. Kabra, depicted Dhan, a naive village girl whose marriage to an educated boy had to remain a secret until his mother’s debt to an unscrupulous

51 Lal, _Parsi-Hindi Rangmanch_, 35.
52 Gupta, _Parsi Thiyetar_, 214.
moneylender was absolved. The heroine sacrificed herself to this end, at the same time privately miming the ways of a modern sophisticate so as become a more fitting partner. Following Boucicault’s The Colleen Bawn from which it was adapted, the melodrama climaxed in an attempted drowning of the heroine. Although Fenton’s performance of this role is not definitively documented, the character of Dhan corresponds to the type epitomized by Gul, heroine of Gamre ni Gori. 56 Another Gul played by Fenton was the heroine of Bholi Gul, written by B. N. Kabra. As no text of the play or plot synopsis has come to light, little is known except that this work is an adaptation of Mrs. Henry Wood’s bestselling Victorian novel, East Lynne. Fenton also starred in Alfred productions of Alauddin (1891), Tara Khurshid (1892), and Kalyug (1895).

Mary Fenton’s ability to imitate the signs of the respectable married woman—the use of the sari border draped over the head, the jewelry, the particular cut of the bodice—earned her the highest esteem from the public. Once more, the spectator’s pleasure lay in perceiving and applauding the performer’s seemingly effortless identification with domestic femininity. Knowledge of the actress’s outsider status secured the immunity of the female spectator from the taint of her public visibility. Further, that knowledge juxtaposed with the sight of the actress passing as an insider gave rise to a particular delight. If part of the pleasure arose from the spectacle of inverted gender/race relations, another surely resulted from the cooptation of desired traits of fair skin color, delicate expression, and femininity. The Anglo-Indian actress, like the female impersonator, thus enabled a fluidity of spectatorial positions. In the viewer’s gaze, she shifted readily between the fantasized English memsahib, the material Anglo-Indian actress, and the fictional Indian heroine. She could be Other, as well as one’s own, affording the pleasures of both attraction and control.

In the silent films moreover, the white female image added the pleasures of consumption of the modern. Films such as Telephone Girl (1926) starring Sulochana played upon public fascination with the actress’s real-life occupation in the modern world. The Anglo-Indian actress’s outsider status permitted her a relatively greater degree of freedom of dress and action, and early films openly flaunted the possibilities, even showing the later-banned kiss. At the same time, these films demonstrated the continuing desire of the public to dress up the Anglo-Indian as a good Hindu girl, whether as a mythological heroine, rural damsel, or dutiful city wife. A doubled racial passing animated these images. The Anglo-Indian actress first masqueraded as white, and then assumed her domesticated role within the Indian narrative frame. All of this manipulation was performed while she remained mute. The equivalent of the dumb blonde, the silent gori of the films continued the displacement of agency from the represented figure of the woman, and in this way formed the counterpart and logical successor to the female impersonator.

To sum up, in this period of transition the public image of Indian womanhood was being crafted not only through literary representations and social experiments, but in the highly accessible commercial theatres of western and northern India. Within these overlapping performance practices, the use of female impersonators and Anglo-Indian actresses to represent women was widespread. Although taboos on acting, particu-

56 Gupta asserts that Fenton starred in Bholi Jan, but he mistakenly identifies the heroine as “Gul.” This suggests that he has confused the drama Bholi Jan with Bholi Gul.arsi Thiyetar, 39.
larly women acting, are frequently cited to explain the social necessity of these practices, deeper issues of representation were involved. Indian women were most often performed by Indian males passing as females or as white females passing as Indian, particularly on the Parsi stage. Both images afforded greater spectatorial pleasures than those accommodated within the conjunction of female and Indian. Both perpetuated the patriarchal control of not only the material female body but its visual manifestations. Nonetheless, these practices made women, finally and on a mass level, publicly visible, no longer objects of imagined desire but represented in the flesh, with a cluster of visual signs, habits, and gestures to denote femininity. As a passing phase, so to speak, this period was later forgotten with the emergence of the full-blown Indian Woman (*bharatiya nari*). But in all its ambiguities and complexities, it remains worthy of attention and interrogation.