

# Shifting Paradigms in Culture



# Shifting Paradigms in Culture:

*A Study of Three Plays*  
*by Jean Genet—*  
The Maids, The Balcony  
*and The Blacks*

By

Payal Nagpal

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



Shifting Paradigms in Culture:  
A Study of Three Plays by Jean Genet—  
*The Maids*, *The Balcony* and *The Blacks*

By Payal Nagpal

This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2015 by Payal Nagpal

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-7698-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7698-8

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter One.....	13
Role-Playing and <i>The Maids</i>	
Chapter Two .....	33
The Panopticon and <i>The Balcony</i>	
Chapter Three .....	55
Decolonisation and <i>The Blacks</i>	
Chapter Four .....	77
Possibilities: An Analysis of the Last Scenes of the Plays	
Conclusion.....	103
Bibliography .....	111
Index .....	117



## PREFACE

This book frees Jean Genet's plays from the overpowering Sartrean perspective and offers an interpretation that would reveal the otherwise hidden spaces of the prison, brothel or the maid's garret ingrained in them. The plays selected for analysis—*The Maids*, *The Balcony* and *The Blacks* indicate that Genet concentrates on areas that escaped attention of the contemporary dramatists. The plays also make a bold statement about links the zones captured in them share with the social rubric. Genet redirects his gaze meaningfully at the existing social network which is achieved through the creation of a stage dynamic different from the one the Theatre of the Absurd adopted.

The introductory chapter examines the perspective of dramaturgy and comments on the methodology of the role. This connects later with use of modifications on stage—an area of interest for the scholar and critic today. The chapters that follow explain paradigms informing the plays and enable the viewer to forge her/his own response. The final chapter studies possibilities of invention and experimentation in an act that belongs to the stage as much as to the world it confronts. The book traverses the challenging issues and spaces—the areas inhabited by the blacks, the ghettoized existence of social discards, and others rotting on the margins. The playwright spoke from his own experiences and those others with whom he empathized. Into these aspects, as has been suggested, he infused his imaginative and creative skills.

This project was part of a thesis approved for a PhD degree done at Jamia Millia Islamia University, Delhi under the guidance of Prof. Shyamala A. Narayan. She helped me acquire the necessary skills to formulate critical argument. Her meticulous approach ever inspired me to remain engaged in the endeavour. My co-supervisor Prof. Asha Kanwar had a distant yet close link with me through the period of study and with her help I was able to win a humanist perspective so necessary for appreciating a literary venture. Both Prof. Shyamala A. Narayan and Prof. Asha Kanwar kept me on the “right” track of enquiry. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to them.

I want to especially thank Dr. Anand Prakash of Delhi University for his unending support and encouragement. In particular, discussions with him on matters of theory proved immensely helpful.

Valuable assistance came in an appreciable way from the Librarian, National School of Drama. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to him and the library staff for the help they provided.

I would like to thank the publisher Cambridge Scholars Publishing, U.K. for their support in publishing this book. They gave me ample time to arrange the matter of the book and prepare the manuscript in its present form.

I want to especially thank my husband Maneesh who stood by me in moments of stress and strain. A medical doctor with a busy schedule, he always shared domestic responsibilities and egged me on to reach the finishing line. My sons Bhaskar and Dinkar would “disturb” me in their peculiar ways only to leave me refreshed. My parents-in-law Tulsi Das Nagpal and Chanderkanta Nagpal and my mother Narinder Khanna were ever close by to shower affection and warmth. I am sure my father would have appreciated this work had he been around. My heart goes out to this familial surrounding at this hour.



## INTRODUCTION

Jean Genet is a writer of contradictions. As a playwright Genet has been classified in varied categories: as a part of the Theatre of the Absurd, as a representative of the rights of the gay community, as a spokesperson of the Palestinian cause and so on. Genet's comments about his life and works only serve to further complicate things. Convicted as a thief he was sent to reform school, arrested for homosexuality and finally received a presidential pardon. Genet never had a home and lived out of a suitcase moving from one hotel to another. He speaks openly about his non-committal approach to politics. But when one takes a close look into his life and his involvement with the contemporary political climate such as the issue of the Palestinians, things appear different. In one of her articles, "Jean Genet and the Position of Sudden Departure" Leila Shahid says about Genet,

The women impressed Genet enormously. For they have a power, a dignity...Besides, nobody has ever spoken of women like Genet—women in general but especially women of the third world, poor women. For he understood them wordlessly; there was a complicity between them. (2)

This draws attention to the deeply committed side of Genet's life, a lot of which is reflected in his works. However, Genet himself would like to distinguish between an artistic revolution and a political revolution. According to Genet,

What is called a poetic or an artistic revolution is not exactly a revolution. I don't think they change the order of the world. Nor do they change your view of the world; they refine the view, complete it, they make it more complex, but they don't radically transform it like a social or political revolution. When we speak of an artistic revolution we need to remember that we are using a cumbersome, worn-out expression. (Interview with Fichte 76)

But beneath this distinction that Genet makes between the artistic revolution and the political revolution, there appears to be this great desire of testing the viability of the written word to rebel against a particular socio-political climate. He says,

One has to be very careful in using the word revolutionary. It must be used deliberately. It's not easy. I wonder if the concept of revolution can be separated from the concept of violence. (Interview 71)

In fact this association between violence and revolution is visible in Genet's plays. A writer of paradoxes Genet would state that his plays have nothing to do with politics even as he would call himself a black. He says,

Perhaps, I'm a black with white or pink skin, but I'm a black. I don't know my family. (Interview 75)

Genet has written various prose works such as *The Thief's Journal*, *Our Lady of the Flowers* and five plays. His plays span the decade of the 1950s. It is difficult to say which is more volatile—Genet's own life or the period to which he belonged. Genet's plays defy norms of any kind and define new areas of thought. This analysis of Genet's plays is an effort at trying to decipher or decode his plays to see if there is any connection between what he had written, the society to which he belonged, and the present day world.

An analysis of Genet's plays entails an understanding of the relationship between theatre, audience and the society. Theatre is usually taken to be a performance on stage that is received in some way by the audience. The mode of transmission and the manner of reception are not usually a matter of concern. This is because there are well-defined parameters that govern the methodologies behind transmission and reception. But how does the audience receive or interpret a particular play? Further, where is the audience positioned with respect to the stage? This is regulated in terms of certain pre-determined norms that govern the way in which we look at the events being performed on stage. In it the audience's gaze is mediated by the social, cultural and political norms of society at a given time period in history. This gaze acquires a specific form and direction and rarely changes. In short it is a gaze that has been conditioned to seeing things in a particular manner. In the conventional mode of looking at stage events the audience becomes a viewer and not an active participant. But Genet's plays try to redirect the gaze of the audience.

## **Audience and Dramaturgy**

Theatre is a tool for social change. One of the ways in which this can be done is by making the audience a participant in the activities on stage. Marco de Marinis' study titled "Dramaturgy of the Spectator" provides an insight into the relationship between the audience and dramaturgy. According

to him the association between the spectator and the dramaturgy is an interesting one. He says,

“Dramaturgy” can now be defined as: the techniques/theory governing the composition of the performance-as-text (*testo spettacolare*); it is: the set of techniques/theories governing the composition of signs/expressive, means/actions which are woven together to create the texture of the performance, the performance text. (219-20)

De Marinis explains the dramaturgy of the spectator as both active and passive. The audience can be passive, conceived of as a “dramaturgical object, a mark or target for the actions/operations of the directors, the performers, and, if there is one, the writer”. The audience can also be the active participant. According to him,

We can also speak of a dramaturgy of the spectator in an active or subjective sense, referring to the various operations/actions that an audience carries out: perception, interpretation, aesthetic appreciation, memorisation, emotive and intellectual response, etc. These operations/actions of the audience's members are to be considered truly dramaturgical (not just metaphorically) since it is only through these actions that the performance text achieves its fullness, becoming realised in all its semantic and communicative potential. (220)

This establishes a relationship between the performance on stage and the audience. The people watching a play are now active participants of the process termed theatre. De Marinis rules out a unidirectional position on theatre and is quick to point out that the dramaturgy of the audience is not metaphorical. This means that the audience is not just an object of representation. Instead the audience is a group that has its own contradictions and is capable of responding to the play in different ways. De Marinis focuses on the concept of ‘performance as text’. In the context of this book this idea can be extended to the performative text. Where De Marinis identifies the performance text as a particular text, this analysis focuses on the performative text that rules out the fixed positions of a performance text.

## **The Performative text**

The performance text assumes that only one particular performance of a play is possible which would function in terms of certain fixed norms that codify both the actors on stage and the audience in front of it. The presentation on stage and the audiences’ response to the same is based on pre-determined ideas. But a performative text is based on the ruling out of

any such fixed notion. A performative text indicates that there are more ways than one of enacting and interpreting a text. In a performance there can be multiple ways of bringing out the nuances of the play. As Judith Butler says,

It is important to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject...When one starts to think carefully about how discourse might be said to produce a subject, it's clear that one's already talking about a certain figure or trope of production. It is at this point that it's useful to turn to the notion of performativity, and performative speech acts in particular – understood as those speech acts that bring into being that which they name. This is the moment in which discourse becomes productive in a fairly specific way. So what I'm trying to do is think about the performativity as that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names...Performativity is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed. (*Gender as Performance*)

In a performative enactment nothing is or can be pre-determined. It allows for a lot of fluidity on stage. This idea has been used in Chapter I to discuss Genet's *The Maids* and the idea of role in a performative enactment. In applying the idea of performativity to understand gender Butler says,

But a critical genealogy needs to be supplemented by a politics of performative gender acts, one which both redescribes existing gender identities and offers a prescriptive view of the kind of gender reality there ought to be. The redescription needs to expose the reifications that tacitly serve as substantial gender core or identities, and to elucidate both the act and the strategy of disavowal, which at once constitute and conceal gender as we live in it. (*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*)

This analysis looks at Jean Genet's plays as a series of performative texts/enactments that use the idea of performativity to reveal not only the way in which the performative act of gender is concealed but also the hidden networking of the state apparatuses in a social system at a specific moment in history.

## Metaphor and Metonymy

In the conventional mode theatre is looked at as a metaphor representing the society and its varied aspects. But the current study looks at theatre not as metaphor but as metonymy. It is therefore important to distinguish between metaphor and metonymy. According to Jakobson,

The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or their contiguity. The metaphorical way would be the more appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively. (Lodge 79)

In explaining the ideas of Jakobson, David Lodge points out the relation between theatre and metaphor, and film and metonymy. Lodge says,

Selection involves the perception of similarity and it implies the possibility of substitution. It is therefore the process by which metaphor is generated. For metaphor is substitution based on a certain kind of similarity...Metaphor, as we have seen, belongs to the selection axis of language; metonymy and synecdoche belong to the combination axis of language...thus, drama is basically metaphoric and film basically metonymic. (75)

According to Lodge, Jakobson's distinction between theatre and film is based on the mainstream outlook towards the two that considers theatre as primarily representative. Lodge is therefore quick to add that

When Jakobson says that drama is essentially 'metaphoric' he is clearly thinking of the dramatic art as it has manifested itself throughout the history of culture...yet arguably any play, however, naturalistic in style, is essentially metaphorical in that it is recognised as a *performance*. i.e. our pleasure in the play depends on our continuous and conscious awareness that we are spectators not of reality but of a conventionalised model of reality, constructed before us by actors who speak words not their own but provided by an invisible dramatist. (81)

As a metaphor of society, theatre is to represent social events directly and faithfully. It is supposed to present and reinforce the moral yardstick of society. But the present work questions the largely accepted role of theatre as metaphor. This is because theatre in its metaphorical aspects would be unable to take into consideration the views of those sections of society that are not in power. Further, it would ignore the social contradictions that necessitate change in the course of history. Lodge's argument assumes that theatre is essentially about a "performance" being watched by the spectator. But this idea of theatre is insufficient when the spectator is equally involved in the events on stage, as is the case with Genet's plays. A metaphorical approach towards theatre would confine the plays being analysed to a static structure. Genet's plays have to be looked at metonymically to question the validity of the truth-values of a society. The present work locates in Genet's plays the contiguities that make

theatre metonymic and not metaphoric. In such a conception of theatre a specific role is looked at in terms of different formations. This need not necessarily conform to the set of beliefs of the dominant social group. Therefore there is no longer any one performance on stage; instead there are different performative acts that link metonymically to produce meaning. This idea has been developed in chapter II on Genet's *The Balcony*.

## Dialectic

This brings the study of Genet's plays to an important theoretical concept that has been used in a discussion of all three plays of Genet. The idea of "dialectic" forms a background to all the chapters in this analysis. The possibilities of performativity in Genet's plays, the playwright's dramaturgy as metonymy can be understood only by the process termed dialectic that brings together all these issues in the plays of Genet. The idea of dialectic has been applied extensively primarily in the context of theatre; the relationship between the theatre and society, stage and audience is dialectical. The two are usually looked at in terms of a fixed structure or construct in which at a given moment only one is active. In it if there is a relation between say theatre and society, then the former is seen as only reflecting the latter. But the purpose of this study is to look at the two in a space that is fluid so that both the entities are active; it is not as if only one acts upon the other. According to Bottomore,

What the component of dialectics asserts is that concrete reality is not a static substance in undifferentiated unity but a unity that is differentiated and specifically contradictory, the conflict of opposites driving reality onwards in a historical process of constant progressive change, both evolutionary and revolutionary, and in its revolutionary or discontinuous changes bringing forth genuine qualitative novelty. It is as such an emergent novelty that the mind is understood by this materialist version of dialectics. At the most basic intellectual level of logic, the contradictory nature of reality is taken to imply that contradictory statements are true of reality and consequently to require special dialectical logic that supersedes formal logic, with its essential principle of non-contradiction. (Bottomore 142-43)

The idea of dialectical logic needs to be extended to the social system. It is important to study how the dialectical materiality of reality is visible in society. The way in which society is structured at a specific time in history can be analysed in the dialectical mode which brings forth contradictions otherwise concealed by a linear perspective towards society. The contradictions in the social constructs when looked at dialectically bring forth the concealed performativities in them. This

means that looked at in terms of the idea of non-contradiction there is a harmony in society. But this apparent harmony conceals the social contradictions, which have to be studied in terms of the dialectical logic so that each aspect is brought forth actively. Similarly the relationship between theatre and society needs to be looked at dialectically so that it is not merely a reflection of social events but is able to act upon the social structure. In a dialectical relation between theatre and society both act upon each other to transform and enhance. In theatre the techniques of dramaturgy and the methodology that acts upon the actor and audience undergo change just as theatre enables change in society by acting upon the social contradictions. This change has to be gradual and evolutionary.

Therefore a dialectical outlook towards theatre is essential for the study of Genet's plays. The audience is an important part of Genet's dramaturgy. In the three plays that are going to be discussed in the course of this analysis a dialectical approach has been used. This is because the underlying purpose of this study is to examine the way in which Genet's plays open themselves to the issue of progressive social change.

One of the ways in which the concept has been applied in this study is by using the idea of *dialectical playlets*. This has been used in a discussion of Genet's *The Blacks*. Dialectical playlets apply the idea of dialectic to the different "microplays" on stage. In Genet's *The Blacks* there are different stage spaces and in each one of them there is a playlet going on. Each playlet connects in different ways with the others in the dialectical mode. No one particular playlet is more important than the other is. Each playlet acts in some way on the others. They all have a role to perform that evolves in various ways in the course of the play. In this, theatre becomes a space that is not merely representative in nature but is able to evolve and transmit meaning in more ways than one.

## Culture

Culture is the sum total of the attitudes and preferences of different social groups. It can reflect a specific social segment or a contest between the different factions. The social groups comprise those who can determine culture and those that are reflected matter-of-factly in it. Culture is the preferential response of society or a social group at a specific moment in history. It is a collective action, yet in a capitalist system it comes to be the favoured response of the upper segment in society. The preferred attitudes of different sections cannot be the same as they are regulated both by class interests as well as its limitations. In this case culture emerges as a concept chiefly determined by the powerful forces in

society. But at the same time it carries within it the latent potential of the other social groups. This means that in a class based society culture starts to function as a weapon that is used to curb the potential of the other social groups that threaten the formation of culture of the dominant group at a precise historical moment. However, culture is an ever-evolving process. It also carries within it the forces of mutation. There can be moments when the emergent forces are able to hold sway in some form in the process of defining culture. This means that at any moment culture is a system in a state of slow transition. Culture therefore needs to be understood in the context of not only what it constitutes but also what it eliminates. What constitutes culture is subordinate to what it chooses to ignore. Culture can therefore be used as a tool to reveal class assumptions so as to question accepted positions within it.

This conception of culture is seminal to an understanding of the plays of Jean Genet. The purpose of this study is to analyse the ways in which Genet's plays question the dominant cultural positions and focus on those areas that have been subsumed within the established convention of culture. The idea is to use the dialectics in the process of dramaturgy to shift the normative positions on culture in which the audiences are placed. These would help evolve a conception of culture that would lead the reader/audience towards radical social change.

## Paradigms in Culture

To understand the way in which Genet's plays suggest the possibility of shifting paradigms in culture it is important to understand the term "paradigm". *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* defines paradigm as,

1. (in grammar) A pattern exemplifying, in a conventionally fixed arrangement, the declension or the conjugation of a word.
2. (in philosophy of science) A pattern of thinking, a set of background assumptions taken for granted. The term came to be frequently used in this sense because of the influence of T.Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 1962 (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. edn 1970): a paradigm consists of the general theoretical assumptions and laws and techniques for their application that the members of a particular scientific community are taught to adopt and set the standard for the normal way in which inquiry is considered.
3. The word is also used vaguely for a set of assumptions and attitudes present in a culture, in a society etc. (Mautner 408)

In all these definitions of paradigm it is clear that whether in the field of scientific inquiry or in the context of society, paradigm refers to a set of



assumptions that are a part of the convention that forms the basis of thinking of a given social set-up. A particular paradigm always refers to the normative in society. Its value system and beliefs are a result of “a set of background assumptions taken for granted”. In the context of culture, paradigms in culture are those sets of beliefs and assumptions that create the dominant conception of culture that regulates the thought processes of the powerful social group. It creates what is understood and perpetuated as social truth. This book studies the ways in which Genet’s plays challenge and question the accepted paradigms in culture while suggesting the possibilities of change by shifting these paradigms.

The first three chapters focus on the three plays of Genet—*The Maids*, *The Balcony*, and *The Blacks*. The fourth chapter draws attention towards the ending of each of the chapters to raise some conceptual questions, which it tries to answer in the process of discussion. Each of the chapters has a specific format. The first section of each chapter propounds a theoretical premise that would help position the reader. The second section discusses the play in detail based on the ideas put forth in the first section. The first chapter, **“Role-Playing and *The Maids*”** raises some important questions with respect to the position of role in the process of dramaturgy. It questions the convention of looking at a role as a fixed entity and stresses the need to deal with it as a fluid and flexible construct. In it the historical and social bearing of a role are seen as more determining factors than any one interpretation of a role. “Role-Playing” highlights the need to extend this idea to the process of dramaturgy that must take into consideration the views of all social groups and not just the dominant one in society. It takes as its base Judith Butler’s idea of performativity. The second section of “Role-Playing” discusses Genet’s *The Maids* in terms of the theories of role-playing and performative enactments.

The second chapter, **“Panopticon and *The Balcony*”** has been divided into three sections that focus on certain current as well as canonical views. The first section discusses Foucault’s idea of the prison based on Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. It extends the panoptic apparatus to the different state apparatuses in society. The second section questions the canonical definition of the “prostitute” and also compares it with the present day methods of rehabilitation used by the non-governmental organizations. (N.G.O.). It raises some pertinent questions about the relationship of the brothel with social structures, the important issues being whether the dominant state forces have a stake in it or not. This section explains the strategies by which the State forces conceal this networking from the social subjects who are shown only a false image of society. It also reveals

the real side to the powerful State categories such as the Bishop and the Judge.

The third chapter, “**Decolonisation and *The Blacks***” has been divided into two sections. The first one discusses Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. It looks at the process of colonisation in terms of its social, cultural and political aspects. It questions the idea of colonisation as merely the acquisition of land. This section then studies the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised and the strategies of appropriation employed by the former to subjugate the latter. The second section discusses the possibilities of decolonisation in *The Blacks* keeping in mind the ideas discussed in the first section. It analyses the coloniser’s gaze and its implications for the members of the colony. At the same time it also studies the way in which resistance is offered by the colony. It deals with an issue that is usually sidelined as a temporary phase of nativism. These are attempts made by the colonised to salvage their culture and to use it so as to counter the onslaught of the coloniser’s culture. This chapter brings out the nuances of the culture of the colonised. It understands the forces of resistance in a colony not as nativism but as the first stage of a concrete revolution that will cast out the coloniser from the colony.

The fourth chapter, “**Possibilities: An Analysis of the Last Scenes of the Plays**” focuses on the endings of each of the three plays. This chapter analyses the endings of the individual plays in terms of the larger perspective evolved in the course of this work. It looks into the possibilities of subversion in the plays of Genet and the ways in which the endings of each of the plays call for social transformation. These issues take into consideration the position of the audience as central to the arguments of each of the chapters. This analysis looks at the way in which Genet’s plays subvert convention and lead the audience towards change that is going to be gradual, evolutionary, and progressive.

This book focuses on three plays by Genet. *Deathwatch* has not been taken up for detailed study as the main themes of this play figure in *The Maids*. The prison in *Deathwatch* is analogous to Bentham’s panopticon, which is discussed in connection with the brothel in *The Balcony*. *The Screens* has a very wide canvas. It is a long play of seventeen scenes that discusses specifically the French occupation of Algeria. But the present volume concentrates on the politics of colonisation and the strategies of decolonisation in *The Blacks* which has greater resonance in terms of the issues of colonisation. The novels have not been taken up for discussion here, as the purpose of this analysis is to draw connections between Genet’s plays, the audience, drama and society. This might get hindered if the genre of fiction is included.

## Works Cited

- Bottomore, Tom, et al. "Dialectical Materialism." *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. Eds. Tom Bottomore et al. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2000.
- Butler, Judith. "Gender as Performance." Interview with Lynne Segal and Peter Osborne, *Radical Philosophy* 67 (1994). 32-39.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution." *Performance*. Ed. Philip Auslander. Vol. 4. London: Routledge, 2003. 97-110.
- De Marinis, Marco. "Dramaturgy of the Spectator." *Performance*. Ed. Philip Auslander. Vol. 3. London: Routledge, 2003. 219-235.
- Genet, Jean. Interview with Hubert Fichte. *Gay Sunshine Interviews*. Ed. Winston Leyland, Vol.1. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1978.
- Lodge, David. Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature." *The Modes of Modern Writing*. London: Edward Arnold, 1977.
- "Paradigm." *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*. Ed. Thomas Mautner. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000.
- Shahid, Leila. "Jean Genet and the Position of Sudden Departure." *Autodafe* 2 (2001). 11Feb 2002 [www.autodaf.org/autodafe/autodafe—02/art—20.htm](http://www.autodaf.org/autodafe/autodafe—02/art—20.htm).



## CHAPTER ONE

### ROLE-PLAYING AND *THE MAIDS*

A Role is a part played or enacted by an actor on stage. It is a well-defined part of a concept, the play. These among others are constituents of the process termed theatre. Role is part of the dramaturgy and functions at two levels, the aesthetic and the social. On the aesthetic level a role provides the audience with a partial essence of the play. A specific role conveys particulate meaning to the spectator, restricted to the ambit of the 'story'. A role is then part of the outline of the play and contributes to its meaning aesthetically. In this way role determines, according to convention, the movement of a play on a single level. One scene will lead to another and the story that has begun will come to an end. There is however, another plane on which a role can function: the social one. In this the role, a part of the specific dramaturgy interacts actively with the relationship between the actor on stage, the audience around and the society outside the physical or tangible range of the auditorium. The role extends the boundaries of theatre to the world. The inverse also holds true as the world is made a vital part of the theatrical process. Therefore the aesthetic nature of a role has to be made part of its larger function in society. The social dimensions of a role make theatre productive.

#### **Role**

In conceptualising a role it is important to grapple with the relation of role to forces in society. In the conventional mode a role is conceived of as a resultant of powerful social structures. But on stage a transformation takes place. The role acquires the potential to resist its formation by those determining structures. Thus role functions within a kind of dialectic. In theatre this formation functions at various levels. Firstly, there is a connection between the role and the actor who plays or rather plays on that role. The actor both gives to and derives meaning from the role in the process of enactment. There is also a dialectical connection between the role, its manner of projection, (that involves the actor) and the gaze of the audience. The role-actor combination compels the spectator to respond in

different ways. This unit functions cohesively and challenges the attitude of the audience. It can also threaten their otherwise cosy positions in the world outside. Such an inter-connected formation questions the events on stage so that they are able to win some important connections with their placement in the social matrix. In this way the audience becomes an integral part of the dialectical process.

The different dialectic formations can be seen as part of the historical process as theatre exists in a meaningful relation with society. Theatre is a source of entertainment and therefore a cultural product. It is part of the social superstructure. In its role is not a fixed concept, but changes with time so that its formation in different periods will be different. As a result, role needs to be looked at in terms of a theatrical process rooted in history. Social determinants limit the role of the protagonist, villain and others decisively. Events and situations in life shape the role distinctly in each case. They restrict roles to an already accepted pattern deeply entrenched in society. The social structure permits the representation of certain roles alone. Visibility becomes the hallmark of those parts. For instance, in the medieval period the role of the protagonist represented grandeur and pomp. The influential sections of society such as the Church defined the central role in a play to suit the larger feudal interests. On stage the audience could see a Christ like figure or a feudal warlord but not the peasant working on the field. Moving further in time, Elizabethan theatre presented genre-based roles. The history plays would entail a figuration different from the comedies. It is interesting to note that a tragicomedy permitted an intermingling of the usually separate kinds of roles. Hence the audience saw varied enactments on stage. Theatre also made use of certain stage techniques to raise important questions about the function of a particular role in society. Elizabethan theatre with its boy actors playing all the roles skirted around the otherwise fixed representations. The boy actor played the young maiden, the old woman, or the little girl. The spectators wondered – could a boy actor display the nuances of the female gender? This question was further problematised as the boy actor in the role of a woman disguised himself as a man. This theatrical device is referred to as cross-dressing. A number of Shakespearean plays make use of this technique. In *As You Like It* the actor playing Rosalind confuses the notion of gender through cross-dressing. The audience is bewildered as Rosalind plays Ganymede and then again disguises as Rosalind. The confusion is heightened as the actor playing the part of Rosalind reveals its natural sex at the end of the play. This generated a number of questions in the minds of the audience, such as—what is the gender of the actor and

can gender be restricted to a specific sex? These ideas carried the play to the level of theatre.

Historically speaking, at a specific moment in time only certain 'types' of roles were made available on stage for performance. There are other moments in history when the role being played becomes an anachronism. For instance, the state of European drama in the mid-nineteenth century denied the presence of social change. The roles such as those in the well-made play were clichés of a bygone era and had no relation with points of friction in society. According to Raymond Williams,

What we have really to understand is that very complicated process in which a particular structure of feeling, finding its effective form in particular dramatic conventions, breaks down in the course of historical development, but for a time—often a long time—survives in its external characteristics...By the time of the intrigue theatre, this relation had gone. It is exactly the movement we now recognise, from historical to costume drama. The plots, and the stock characters, devices and situations within them, no longer express the awareness of a determining external order, with its critical problems of understanding and recognition, nor the general importance of inheritance, in its public bearing on innocence and authority. (Williams 20-21)

The role in intrigue theatre becomes an anachronism as it fails to express its relation with the audience and the society they represent. The idea of role had to be reworked to serve as a marker of urgent social transition. Its construction was to be a derivative of the class antagonisms in society at that moment.

Role is therefore a cultural product rooted in history. A role could figure the powerful in society or it could portray the interests of the marginalised. The role could also capture the ruptures in the social fabric that resulted from the friction between opposing forces. But one must keep in mind that dominant and marginal are not fixed categories. They change with the currents of the historical process. The clashes, disruptions and curvatures in a role are natural and historically motivated. This expands the actor-role-spectator dialectic to a broad and specific frame of reference between theatre and society.

The varied connections in theatre may be fixed or fluid. When an actor performs a specific role the historical and social nuances of its formation are implicit in the representation. The actor in the dimension of the play thinks about the role in terms of one or many projections. This is the reason that in a discussion of theatre, terms such as gaze, look, eye, and projection have a socio-political significance. In a particular enactment the role-actor dialectic may target its audience so as to make them re-think the

usual nuances of that role. It might also make the viewers take another look at the projection on stage. This actor-role formation can also turn inwards to expose the conception of the role and the gaze on it. In this way the dialectic becomes open so that the role, the actor, and the audience watching it are displaced. This dialectic formation in theatre always has the audience at its midst. For instance, if a member of the audience is called on stage the boundaries of the actor-role unit are broken. If the actor speaks as a part of the audience the disruption takes place a second time. This inter-mingling of the otherwise separate stage-audience space involves and also distances the viewers. The ad-mix of actor-role-spectator can make the audience feel either uneasy as in the plays of Genet or quite comfortable as can be seen in the plays of Bertolt Brecht. When the role enacted on stage targets the gaze of the person watching it a collision ensues. This is a case of constructive interference. The different interpretations of the actor and the other of the spectator comment on the structures in the world outside as constituted by its members watching the play. Cultural elitism gets a beating. Theatre interferes with the base as it tries to subvert the pillars of society in a significant way. The spectators grapple with events inside and outside the theatrical space that is always expanding.

The role-actor formation on stage has varied ramifications. What would happen if the actor-role unit shut the audience out after a series of important theatre interactions? It is difficult to say how the audience would then react. But to begin with, one can say that the viewers' gaze would be sharply redirected at the self. There would be a sense of feeling suffocated. In Genet's plays this sense of unease works productively in the physical ambience of a theatre. The audience is made to acknowledge a claustrophobia they have been ignoring so far. This is the atmosphere of the marginalised sections of society. The spectators are pushed into a kind of black hole from which they can only emerge after finding meaningful answers. The issue at stake is not as to which mode of interaction is better at targeting the audience. The questions we have to ask concern the different ways and levels at which a role interferes with the existing system effectively.

The role and the system interact through different stage methodologies. Some of these are cross-dressing and role-playing. These techniques open up possibilities of performances other than the ones visible in society. They make possible a different interpretation of the role. It is these other performances that interfere in an effective manner with the dominant structures of society.



## Role-playing

Role-playing is a theatrical device by which an actor playing one role has the liberty to play another role. The simultaneous playing of a different role involves a play on the earlier act. This mode gives the actor the liberty of moving in and out of different roles. This role 'slippage' is significant in understanding the politics of theatre. It creates the possibility of distancing the actor from the role s/he plays. As the actor moves out of a role and assumes another position s/he has the physical space and a mindset conducive to comment on the earlier performance. The actor can stand outside the earlier position and question the politics of that role. S/he can define the role already played in another way as in concrete terms the actor is no longer playing the earlier role. In fact the actor can take a position radically opposed to the one he has already played. The actor could also become part of the dominant politics of the audience and expose it by commenting on the role in an ironic manner.

In role-playing the positions that are taken up by the actors on stage are ideological in nature. They have a specific purpose—that of questioning the strategies of power control in the existing system. Role-playing lays a 'role' open for discussion. The friction between the different roles, spectator and the actor is therefore ideological in nature. The role is no longer an aesthetic category. It is a part that is rooted in society, in history. The change in the ideological position of the audience needs to be marked. They are brought on stage and along with the actors are made to look at the different enactments of the same role. The spectator is made to confront the possibility that there is another way in which the same role can be performed on stage and in social discourse. The different performances become a critical enquiry into the construction and the enactment of role according to convention. (Convention points towards certain dominant practices that structure the role in only a specific way and does not allow for other options).

The dramaturgy of role-playing has an impact on the generally accepted idea of stage as a tangible construct with margins that can be determined by calculation. This maintains a distance between the actor and the audience – one that is meant to prevent any communication between the two entities. On stage there is a linear sequence of roles—one that has a superficial pattern but lacks social design. This arrangement supports the structures of power in society that make the experience of theatre entertaining in the primary sense. In an interaction between different roles that impart meaning that is socially useful the experience could be slightly more complex as it would go beyond simple entertainment. A conventional idea of stage

assumes a gap between the audience and the performance. Meaning remains restricted to this intermediary zone between spectator and actor. The audience having relieved themselves of social guilt will leave theatre still complacent about their own beliefs. A narrow conception of theatre is used to stabilise the status quo, as there is no pressure on the audience to think about the reflections on stage. But, the stage space can extend to the audience and vice-versa. Role-playing fragments the sequential movement of roles that conventionally defined the limits of stage space. Instead of a straight movement, lots of intersections are made visible on stage. There is no longer any stable relation between audience, role and actor. There are only points of connection that create a series of dialectical mosaics.

This steers the discussion onto another front—the relation between the role an actor plays and the performance in this mosaic pattern. The question that one has to ask is—does the subject position of a role determine the actor's performance? Or does the position come into formation as a consequence of the performance? Subject-position indicates a point of reference that regulates the performance on stage and behaviour in society. In case of an aesthetic interpretation of theatre the stage boundary is clearly outlined. The gaze of the audience falls directly from the auditorium towards the stage. In this kind of ordered construction the performance of a role is clearly defined. The enactment takes place from a position that exists in harmony with a parallel point of reference in society. The projection of the role is a direct reflection of the society. In this case the performance is regulated by a fixed stable position where the action originates. The moment an actor enacting a specific role appears on stage, the performance becomes pre-determined and a resultant of the determining historical forces. Other points of action are effectively suppressed. There is a consonance between the performance on stage and the one in the mind of the spectator. It can now only be repeated on stage, as a play on the role is not possible. The relation between the audience and the actor and role is structured around clichés; the viewers' desire to watch aspects of their life on stage. The images displayed tend to glorify the bourgeois and confirm their beliefs in their illusory selves. The sensibility of the spectator remains intact. They can go back comfortable in their somnolence. In such a performance the social fabric remains impenetrable. The possibility of the different dialectics between the role, actor and the audience are dissolved.

## Performativity

What then is the relation of a role to its performance and to other performances? In a performance of dialectics the role is a performative category. The different enactments on stage are performative acts. To understand this idea let us adapt Judith Butler's idea of performativity of gender to role-playing in theatre. According to Butler,

Consider, gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an "act," as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where "*performative*" suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning...Because there is neither an "essence" that gender expresses or externalises nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts there would be no gender at all. (Butler 139-140)

Butler suggests that performativity is a deliberate construction of meaning. There is no pre-determined matrix from which meaning can be derived; it has to be created. In a performative act the performance of a role is not determined by the subject position. It is the act that defines a position carrying the potential of transformation. There is no permanence attached to it.

Butler uses the idea of performativity with respect to gender. What is gender? The response to this question is varied. The old school of thought considers it as related to sex—male or female. According to later-day theorists the term gender connotes the relation of sex with social conditioning—masculine or feminine. Butler looks at gender as a 'style', an 'act'. The term 'act' implicates the dynamics of theatre. This means that social discourse is not a stagnant entity. The fixity of social structure is a myth perpetuated by the powerful class so that the forces of change are not allowed to infiltrate into it. But society is a dynamic statement always being re-fabricated. In this context stage is a social space where different acts at definitive moments construe meaning. The specific moments are grounded in history where the act is really taking place.

Secondly, the act of gender is constructed deliberately. It is 'intentional' and 'performative'. It does not have any origin or genesis. In the context of gender, social play is not pre-determined. This brings to fore the different forces in society that have been rendered residual. It is these 'other' strains that allow an act to become performative. The acts in theatre and society by their performative potential create different subject positions—ones that might be part of the existing system or of the resisting or residual zones. This becomes liberating for the marginalised

sections of society who find a space from where to speak and experiment with social acts. Therefore gender is always under construction from different ends. It is not regulated by any one frame of reference. Performativity of an act indicates that there can be no essential derivative to it. It cannot be confined to any one point of reference. It always has the potential of quickly changing its position. These acts do not move in any one direction. At the same time this leads into the danger of chaos in society. But performativity is to be used not in an anarchic mode. The acts in question are not meant to support the system. Instead they function in resistant and residual zones. Performativity has to be applied in a way that creates meanings that are ever changing but are socially productive.

In the conventional mode the protagonist is usually one who holds an important position in society such as that of the industry owner or the priest. The villain would come from the bundles of the reject—convicts, prostitutes, and people from the lower rungs of society and so on. The spectators are generally used to thinking of themselves in neatly defined roles that uphold their values. The performance would therefore uphold the important social institutions—religion, patriarchy, and capitalism. In this the play becomes a product that is consumed. The meaning it imparts to the audience is the consumer value of the product—the play. The aesthetic sensibility of the viewer is only a distinguishing aspect of the consumer. We must now adapt these ideas to that of a role in theatre. Performativity signifies the radical potential of a performance. What is important for us is not the final act but the possibility of its being and the process of its construction. This potential is a part of theatre and the world outside.

In the context of a dialectical performance the idea of performativity is a suggestive act. It shows the audience the way in which meaning has been constructed so far and suggests new methods of its formation. These ‘other’ strategies might not be visible in society but are a vital possibility in the historical process. The regulatory and functional structures of power consciously suppress the possibilities of locating meaning in areas other than the ones in which they are placed. But these hidden coordinates cannot be eliminated from the historical grid. Genet’s idea of theatre becomes a way of retrieving these other positions in which the marginalised sections are located.

In the performative mode, meaning is no longer a direct consequence of the role. It is forever changing and forming in multiple ways. In this the spectator is considered an active part of the dialectic and performative theatre methodology. Performativity undermines the certainty of spectators watching a performance as several other interpretations refract their gaze.

The audience is moved around in the same way as the actors on stage. They are thrust into a world where anything is possible. The performative idea of role extends to the audience as they are always in a dialectical relation to one another. So not only that the role and its enactment is performative, even the position of the spectator has been rendered performative in the dialectics of theatre. The spectator would be made to look at the enactments from different perspectives. These are potential points of reference from where they could position their gaze—dominant, marginal or reject. Therefore let us answer the earlier question—whether the performance is a result of the role or vice versa. In a dialectical idea of theatre, the role or the subject of enactment is positioned by the performance. This means that there are no pre-conceived notions that are going to fix the course of the performance. There can be any number of performances and positions on stage. The act cannot be measured in relation to the deterministic sensibility of the spectator but will always be in dialectical relation to it. The performative nature of role makes it both fluid and structured. It is fluid because the part enacted is not necessarily the one in the mind of the spectators. This is because their idea of a role is a resultant of the repetitive performance visible to them in society. The audience considers their idea of role as ‘real’ and the only one possible in society. It is the performative aspect of the role in a dialectic frame that suggests other versions. It reveals the otherwise suppressed zones in which history is breeding.

## Genet and Theatre

Genet’s stage world is a complex web of performative enactments that make sense if one is able to decipher the hidden multiplicity. His plays do away with the conventional idea of a linear plot, as they are based on ideas and not plot lines. These concepts are put forth in the form of different scenes. Each scene (even if there are no rigid scene divisions as in *The Maids*) is connected to the next one in a way that does not follow the rational mind of the audience. The powerful social system has conditioned the audience into looking at events on stage and society through the lens of reason and logic. Therefore there is only one way of understanding each scene—the ways of the privileged groups. Genet’s dramaturgy ruptures this logic. His plays combine the rational understanding of the audience with the irrationality presented in the play. So where the audience might be rooted in their actual social positions, the acts on stage are positioned outside that context. This creates dialectical tension between the stage and spectators making them rethink their positions in society.

In the plays of Genet, the irrational is used as a specific methodology. On stage the irrational or that which defies logic is carefully contrived. Chaos is generated by foregrounding a social space that has so far been shunned and ignored. This is the place occupied by characters that are not important to mainstream society and have been rejected by it on grounds of immorality. Once ejected out of the system, they are no longer a part of social discourse. The only way in which they are of any use is as an example to other people of what they should avoid. Genet problematises the position of this reject populace in drama. People conventionally characterised by negativity are the heroes of these plays.

What happens to the audience in this situation? How do their roles figure in the plays of Genet? The playwright shows us acts of genteel society on stage but they do not take precedence over the other characters. On stage there is a process other than the one the spectator undergoes. So roles from the upper stratum are visible, but only in conjunction with the powerless. In Genet's plays the audience used to looking at the disempowered world from their own safe position is not gazing at all. It is the fragmented images of the reject that gaze back at the audience.

The histories of the reject are part of a sub-culture that is being continuously suppressed. In Genet's theatre this sub-text is a subject for discussion. The playwright penetrates through the skin of the world of the rejects. He empowers the ostracised elements through the technique of role-playing, making them experiment with positions otherwise inaccessible to effectively assess the rubric of society. This is not a case of a voyeuristic sensibility looking at the marginalised playing the game of power. In Genet's plays the technique of role-playing performs a liberating and humanising function by restructuring ideas and gives the disempowered a chance to explore the nuances of their positioning. The marginalised analyse, using available social means, the process of their peripherisation. The audience has to confront the reason behind the positioning of rejects in society and is also made to grapple with the possibility of their complicity with that cause. The plays of Genet become a way of liberating the actors and audience from clichés in which they are trapped.

### ***The Maids***

*Les Bonnes* or *The Maids* is a play that belongs to the earlier phase of Genet's experience with theatre. The play presents the relations between two maids, their mistress and her lover Monsieur, who does not appear on stage. In the first part of the play the maid Claire plays Madame and Solange plays Claire. The ringing of the alarm clock interrupts their play-