



**TOWARDS THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SELF CONSCIOUS FEMALE GAZE: A STUDY OF THE
EXPLORATION OF THE LESBIAN COMING OUT THEME IN BRITISH FEMINIST THEATRE WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JACKIE KAY'S *TWICE OVER***

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ABSTRACT

Feminist theatre came into being as a by product of the experimental theatre movement of the 1970s' and 1980'. It was an alternate theatre which enabled women to explore their creative talents on stage independently. Feminist theatre served as a means of constructing an exclusive feminist discourse on stage that questioned the patriarchal norms of female subjugation. Its movement was towards the construction of a theatre space where women are no longer mere stage props. They started functioning as the creators of drama rather than being confined to the roles of wife, lover, mother or lunatic. It was a paradigm shift from women being the objects of male gaze to the creation of a self sufficient female gaze, from being objects to being the subject of a discourse. Lesbian theatre, a subgenre of feminist theatre, sought to do the same for the homosexuals. Lesbians experienced double marginalisation in society. They were marginalised as women as well as as sexual deviants. The lesbian feminist theatre aimed at the depiction of lesbians as normal individuals with their own unique sexual orientation. It sought to encourage lesbians who had confined themselves in a world of self hatred and fear to come out and boldly state their identity. This research paper investigates how the theme of lesbian identity is brought into focus in feminist theatre, especially in the British lesbian feminist theatre. The study is based on an analysis of the exploration of the coming out theme in Jackie Kay's play, *Twice Over*. The purpose of this study is to trace the link between feminist theatre and lesbian theatre by comparing their objectives and the tools used by them. It also probes the question of the relevance of feminist theatre in handling the contemporary issues confronted by women and lesbians in particular.

Key Words: Feminist Theatre, Lesbian Theatre, Brechtian Dramaturgy, Coming out, Gaze.

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The construction of a self-conscious female gaze is the prime objective of feminist theatres everywhere. British feminist theatre practice as

elsewhere is an attempt made by women to claim their rightful space in the creative realm of theatre that was deliberately denied to them by patriarchy.

The public gaze on women was always the male gaze, one that always wished to see women as objects. It was an ideological position that patriarchy sanctioned as the normal way of looking at women. Women were always the secondary sexual objects for the gratification of male sexual fantasies. Feminist theatre was a voice raised against this perspective. It was the construction of a counter cultural politics where women pushed themselves towards the subject position. Feminist theatre argues in favour of the potential of theatre to revise representations of gender differences on the stage.

Feminist theatre emerged as a cultural form during the 1980s' following the Experimental Theatre activities of the 1960s' as well as the Women Liberation Movements of the 1960s' and 1970s'. By mid 1990s' it developed into a full fledged movement with a strong theatrical base, as something that is central to the dominant culture especially in the United States and Britain. Feminist theatre criticism and theory began as an attempt to identify, recognize, define and contextualize theatre performance by women. It was mainly historical and informative in nature, aiming at discovering and re-locating women in theatre sphere rather than analysis. According to Lizbeth Goodman, "Most feminist theatre is alternative theatre and is located on the fringe"(24). It is alternative since it is created by women in the context of patriarchal culture as a defence, an attempt similar to the one made by Laura Mulvey in film theory and hence a form of cultural representations. It is political theatre aiming change, generated by women and for women with feminist concerns. It draws upon a range of disciplines.

A Major stage in the development of feminist theatre was the emergence of early feminist agitprop groups such as The Women's Street Theatre Group and Monstrous regiment. All the mainstream theatres represented women as belonging to men. In defence counter cultural feminist theatres tried to re-present women as subjects in their own right through an exploration of intra-feminine relations. Many more groups followed such as Portable Theatre, The Pip Simmons Group, The Warehouse Company, The Brighton Combinations, Welfare State International Incubus

theatre, Clapperclaws, Cunning Stunts, Beryl & The Peryls, Clean Break, Mrs Worthington's Daughters etc.

Feminist theatre logically bases itself on the established concerns of the organized Women's Movement, on the seven demands; equal pay; equal education and job opportunities; free 24 hour nurseries; free contraception and abortion on demand; financial and legal independence; an end to discrimination against lesbians and a women's right to define her own sexuality; freedom from violence and sexual concern. The tendency therefore is not so much towards a re-evaluation of the role of women within society as we know it, but towards the creation of a totally new set of social structures in which the traditional male-female roles will be redefined.

One of the above seven demands, putting an end to discrimination against lesbians and allowing a women's right to define her own sexuality gave birth to a number of theoretical discourses on lesbian subjectivity within the realm of feminist theoretical concerns as well as in the feminist theatre practice. According to Jill Dolan, discussions about the construction of a lesbian subjectivity as part of a female subjectivity were "located in an alternative performance tradition. The post modernist, camp, collectivist performances of Split Britches and the WOW Cafe became the space of debate on the radical implications of lesbian desire's disruption of conventional paradigms of spectatorship." (Case 40). This demand for an alternate performance tradition makes it a subgenre of feminist theatre tradition, both being alternate theatres. In fact, lesbian theatre is a particularly rich source for the analysis of one of the key concepts of feminist theory in media and performance studies, that of the 'gaze'. According to Lizbeth Goodman, "the theory of the gaze is relevant to a study of lesbian theatre as a subgenre of feminist theatre, which is itself a form of cultural representation" (114). The link between the two was further established when thirteen British lesbian theatre groups were identified in the Feminist theatre Survey including The character ladies, Gay Sweatshop, Hard corps, No Boundaries, Outcast,

Shameful practice and siren as ones dealing with the ideology of feminist theatre practice.

Contemporary British Lesbian theatre comprises of the work done by a very small network of women and a few individuals who have founded various lesbian performance groups or management collectives. There are several distinct kinds of lesbian theatres, each of which is directed at a specific audience. For instance there are plays made by lesbians with women as its target audience but not specifically lesbians. Another major form of lesbian theatre is separatist theatre, one which is created by lesbians and created exclusively for lesbian audience. *The Cambridge Paperback Guide to Theatre* defines lesbian theatre as "a term used to describe theatre made by or for lesbians." (212). Lesbians in a theatre context are triply invisible, as a woman, as homosexual and as a woman in a male theatre tradition. According to Sarah Starton, key figures in the British Feminist theatre of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were undoubtedly lesbians. She cites the example of Edith Craig who founded the Pioneer Players Theatre Company (213). The first play containing recognisable lesbian characters were produced by a German playwright Christa Winsole. Her *Children in Uniform* (1932) and Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934) can be considered as the early precursors of the lesbian theatre.

Lesbian theatre in Britain developed as part of the alternative political theatre movement just as the feminist theatre. Initially it was allied to gay men's theatre, Gay Sweatshop founded in 1975. It produced its first lesbian piece *Any Woman Can* by Jill Posner in 1976. It was a 'coming out story'. Gradually lesbian theatre companies came in to existence. *Care and Control* scripted by Michelene Wandor was the Gay sweatshop women's first production. It brought into public notice the problems faced by lesbian mothers in child custody cases, a concern typical of feminist theatre practice. Thus it inaugurated the feminist phase of lesbian theatre. Later lesbian theatre discussed a number of such concerns that affected the lives of lesbian women as well as women in general like male violence, patriarchal control of women's bodies and sexuality and plays celebrating lesbian

continuum plays like *Aid Thy neighbour* by Michelene Wandor, *Neptune* by Sara Daniels, *Curfew* by Siren Theatre, *Basin* by Jaquiline Rudet and *The Fires of Bride* by Jackie Kay are a few major milestones in the development of lesbian theatre practice (213). During the 1970s' and 1980s' a number of lesbian theatre companies came into being like Hormone Imbalance, Siren, Hard Corps and a number of lesbian writers were commissioned by other theatre companies like The Women's Theatre Group, Royal court Theatre and the National Theatre. All these lesbian theatre companies worked by conceiving a heterosexual spectator as the receiver of their protest and aimed at the creation of positive images of lesbians promoting a sense of community among lesbians.

According to Emily S. Sisley

- Lesbian Theatre is about lesbians.
- Lesbian Theatre is by lesbians.
- Lesbian Theatre is played by lesbians.
- Lesbian theatre is feminist theatre- i.e. because of its focus on woman/woman relationship; all feminist theatre is essentially lesbian theatre.
- Lesbian Theatre is distinct from Feminist Theatre- i.e. lesbian plays concentrate on lesbian relationships rather than woman/woman relationships in general.
- Lesbian Theatre is part of, but not the same as, Feminist Theatre-i.e. the shared focus differs from the sharp distinctions between "gay (male) theatre" and "straight (male) theatre". (Martin 52)

A major preoccupation of the lesbian theatre practices is the portrayal of the complex but necessary process of 'coming out'. Coming out of the closet, or simply coming out, is a figure of speech for lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, and asexual people's self-disclosure of their sexual orientation (or lack thereof) and/or gender identity. Coming out became the rallying cry of the lesbian theatre movement, an act of "public avowal", which would help lesbian women to "shed much of the self hatred they had internalised" (D'Emilio and Freedman 322). Coming out was not

simply a single act, but the bold adoption of an identity for lesbians in which the erotic played a central role. It was a political act of rebellion against the heterosexual society's norms regarding female sexuality. According to Lizbeth Goodman it was "a personal act of denouncing the patriarchal assumption of the male right of access to women- of reclaiming and naming self (117).

A fear of the societal beliefs forces a homosexual to keep her sexual preferences a secret. All the social institutions and the cultural mainstream maintain the belief that people are naturally heterosexual. . As a result, homosexual women and men have powerful reasons not to acknowledge their sexual preferences. As the individual gay or lesbian begins to accept his or her identity, however, the coming out process becomes more compelling. In this sense, the metaphor of "coming out" is quite accurate, since coming out is a process of taking what is within (unspoken sexual identity) and bringing it out to the attention of others. Lesbianism as a deviance is a social construct. In 1973 The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official list of diseases.

According to Celia Kitzinger,

"The view which interprets lesbianism as a sickness pervarsity has been largely replaced in modern society by the equally debilitating liberal perspective which labels lesbianism an 'alternative life style. Such a label depoliticizes the act of coming out by conflating it with other choices of lifestyles" (Goodman 118).

Just as heterosexual feminist theatre interpret the act of self assertion on the part of women on stage, lesbian theatre also deals with the reception and interpretation of the act of being self. "Just as feminist theatre focuses on the roles played by women in everyday life as represented (and representable) on stage, so lesbian theatre focuses on the role or act of being lesbian"(Case 230). The representation of the act of coming out as a lesbian, as an active subject in the world and on the stage was a theatrical and political device used by the lesbian feminist theatre to defend the hitherto obscured lesbian imagery in the history of

representation. Despite cultural pressures many British lesbian playwrights of the 1970s and 1980s wrote coming out messages into their plays. *Twice Over* by Jackie Kay, the first by a Black writer to be produced by Gay Sweatshop Theatre Company in 1988 is one such play .

In the view of Graham Saunders, " *Twice Over* eviscerated anxiety about pretended families in a humanistic way by making Cora and Maeve's interracial lesbian romance exactly the family history that allowed a young woman to really understand herself and her world." (132).The play received three standing ovations at its opening night at the Drill Hall. It is a coming out play by Jackie Kay , a black woman, in which three of the six female characters are black and three white. In the play a 17 year old Black girl gets to know her grandmother after she has died. Through photographs and flashbacks she discovers her grandmother's concealed secrets and gets to know herself better. The play deals with a school-age girl's discovery of lesbianism. It also deals with the theme of lesbian continuum by portraying how the grandchild relates herself with her lesbian grandmother.

British writer Jackie Kay has won acclaim for work that questions assumptions about personal and cultural identity. Her poetry, fiction, and plays, which have won numerous awards, examine issues of race and ethnicity, family, gender, and cultural belonging and exclusion. Jackie Kay was born in Edinburgh in 1961 to a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father. She was adopted as a baby by a white Scottish couple, Helen and John Kay. Initially harbouring ambitions to be an actress, she decided to concentrate on writing after Alasdair Gray, a Scottish artist and writer, read her poetry and told her that writing was what she should be doing. Her first book of poetry, the partially autobiographical *The Adoption Papers*, was published in 1991. Kay writes extensively for stage and for children. Kay's fascination with themes of identity can be traced to an upbringing that set her apart, in many ways, from the majority culture in her native Scotland. Born in Edinburgh to a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father, she was adopted by a white family and raised in Glasgow , where she often accompanied her communist parents to antiapartheid demonstrations

and peace rallies. Life wasn't easy for a biracial child in mostly-white Glasgow. Very often Kay had to confront questions related to her identity. She told *Guardian* writer Libby Brooks. "They won't actually hear my voice, because they're too busy seeing my face." The question of how we define ourselves, and why, has intrigued Kay in all her subsequent work. Kay has always acknowledged that she wrote directly from her own experience. The personal roots of her work provided a sense of multiplicity to her identity. She detested being labelled as a lesbian writer and hated being asked how her homosexual status affected her writing. Many of Kay's works confront issues around gender identity. Her award-winning novel *Trumpet*, based on the life of American jazz musician Billy Tipton, is perhaps her most obvious and sustained treatment of the subject to date.

Her play *Twice Over* was initially commissioned by Theatre Centre. But there was a dispute within the company as to whether the play was racist or not and the production was shelved. The play was later taken up and produced in 1988 by Gay Sweatshop. The play tells the story of family relationships using experimental and stylised theatre strategies. It deals with the themes of gender identity and sexual orientation. The play opens with the funeral of Cora, the central character. After the funeral Evaki, Cora's Granddaughter came across a few letters and personal diaries of Cora which revealed Cora's hidden Sexual identity as a lesbian. Cora's ghost haunts the stage talking to all the other characters urging them to discover her lesbianism so that she may be free of the secret. Cora's story is one of a lesbian coming out after death. Cora's lover Maeve, is left to deal with her grief alone, since no one is aware of the nature of her relationship with Cora. The whole drama is an interplay between these two women, Cora and Evaki representing two generations. The link between the two, Cora's daughter and Evaki's mother never appears but is referred to by other characters. The other major characters are Jean, Maeve and Cora's friend and co-worker and Evaki's girl friends at school.

Cora and Evaki are separated from each other by time, space and race. They belong to two

different generations and to two different races. Cora is white and Evaki is black. The separation between Evaki and Maeve are a bit more complex. To add to the temporal and racial separation, Evaki has personal hatred for Maeve on account of Maeve homosexual relationship with Cora. The play is all about these various inter women and intra women relationships and how these ties of blood, friendship and hatred leads to a process of understanding oneself and accepting ones' identity which include both social identities and sexual identities. In the course of the play Evaki learns to accept the reality regarding her grandmother's sexual orientation and the nature of the relationship she had with Maeve. Gradually she befriends Maeve. In doing so she forces Maeve to 'come out' in terms of her lesbianism. In the opinion of Lizbeth Goodman, "Cora's *post mortem* act of coming out (accomplished for her by Evaki) is less theatrical and personally painful than is the coming out of the living lover" (135).

The dissolution of the 'fourth wall', a Brechtian technique is used by the playwright to explore this complex theme of coming out in the play. The technique also provides an element of humour to the play and thus invites audience participation. There are scenes where the ghost of Cora communicates directly to the audience which inspires them to deliberate upon the various implications of sexual identity. For instance there is a scene where Cora urges Evaki to reveal what she discovered to her friends. Evaki is not ready. And the whole scene is conceived in such a way that Evaki can not hear Cora's voice but the audience can. Thus Cora's demand to accept and acknowledge ones sexual orientation becomes one made to the world at large, to the society in general. When Evaki is not ready for this, Cora's anger is turned to the audience. She comments: "I wish I were the kind of ghost that makes an impression, you know, like Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*" (Kay 220). This direct address of the audience, "you know", invites audience sympathy and identification.

The process of coming out for a lesbian is tough and it takes great courage on the part of the person to acknowledge her homosexual identity in a heterosexual society. It has three levels. First,

people come out to themselves, an awakening and a process of identity development that goes through stages and then is over. They do not have to tell anyone else their sexual orientation in order to be out, they just have to know who they are. This type of coming out is about when someone learns something new about their own identity. Second, people have the right to choose to whom they will disclose their sexual orientation. This decision making process continues throughout the lifespan. This type of coming out is about sharing information about one's identity with people that they know. Third, some people choose to publicly declare their sexual orientation to a group of strangers as an act of political activism. This is not done to figure out who they are or who their friends really are but to make the identity less invisible and to educate potential allies. This type of coming out is about advocating for equal rights and cultural sensitivity. *Twice Over* portrays these three levels of accepting one's sexual identity. Evaki's discovery of Cora's lesbianism after her death is a symbolic self identification where Evaki acts as Cora's extended self. In the case of Maeve, she needed somebody to catalyse her process of self identification and Evaki acts as this catalyst. Evaki's initial reluctance to accept her grandmother as a lesbian reflects the attitude of the society. Her initial attempt is to ignore, forget and hide her discovery thereby pushing this revelation to the margins of her conscience. This is exactly how society treats sexual minorities by marginalising them. But finally she is forced to accept the reality and disclose the matter in public by encouraging Maeve to come out. This act on the part of Evaki mirrors the crucial phase in the history of lesbian protests for equal rights and equal place in the society. Just as feminist theatre portrays the coming out of a woman from the cocoon of patriarchal norms toward the identification of the female self in her, lesbian theatre seeks to depict lesbians as the rightful participants in the social and cultural discourse.

Like all feminist theatre, lesbian theatre is also geared towards change. It has clearly defined the images and notions regarding sexuality that it wants to deconstruct and it had a definitely devised theatre strategy of self-representation. The primary

aim of lesbian theatre is the representation of lesbian experience created by lesbians. The stage is the platform where they declare and represent their self as subjects.

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