

The Naqqals of Chandigarh: Transforming Gender On the Musical Stage

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In the Chandigarh area, a group of traditional dramatic performers called *Naqqāls* have been entertaining audiences for decades. Using a theatrical style that breaks all the rules of realism, they present traditional tales in an idiosyncratic way, within a variety show framework that includes music and dance. A distinctive feature of their shows is female impersonators. This article explores what it means for these male entertainers to transform their gender on the stage. The expectations of the audience, set within patriarchal ideas of “feminine” behavior, are contrasted with the practical needs and artistic agency of the performers. The article is based on the author’s decades long experience collaborating with Naqqals, as well as observations of *naqqal* performances and interviews with the performers.¹

The *Naqqāls* are musicians and traveling bards who sing songs, dance, and improvise while telling a story. In their performances, they lampoon a situation in effort to subvert existing attitudes. Along with their repertoire of story-telling techniques, raucous humor, and wild singing, the mainstay of their tradition is dancing which is performed by female impersonators.

This last aspect of the Naqqals’ art, the phenomenon of female impersonation, is the focus of this article. It raises questions about the relationship that sexuality and imitation of sexuality have with performance. The Naqqals challenge the myth that it is necessary to be homosexual in orientation in order for a man to dress up as a woman or to perform his sexuality. My observations are based on over 20 years of experience working in collaboration with the Naqqals whilst directing my Chandigarh-based theatre group, The Company.

Background to the Naqqals of Chandigarh

Naqqāls (from the Persian word, “to imitate”), also known as *Bhand̥s* (“clowns”), are rural itinerant actors in Punjab. Those with whom I have

worked come from the Bazigar caste (see the next article in this volume) and are now based in the Chandigarh area.

In the past these artists were patronized by the local landlords, to whom they ritually apologized before starting their performances. They were led by a member known as *ustād*, who was actor, director, and musician all rolled into one. Members of a Naqqal group were trained in music, singing, and dance, according to the traditional *guru-shishya* fashion. Their performance style, called *naqal*, is a form without any firm or continuous tradition, and as such the Naqqals became master adapters, changing the script, movement, songs, and innuendoes as they went along. They included in their repertoire urban issues, along with stories of gods and goddesses, legendary heroes, and tales of *bhakti* and miracles. These were enacted with an idiomatic speech, in a patois that had its provenance in colloquial discourse. Their performance was rendered with a rhetorical flourish, interspersed with a comic vulgarity that always stopped short of the crass.

Most of the traditional actors belong to one extended family. Members of the Chandigarh group with whom I have worked are all related: brothers, uncles, cousins, brothers-in-law, and so on (only men perform). In the beginning, most of them also married within the clan, but slowly that is changing due to the fact that many of them chose to opt out of this profession. This is due in turn to the uncertainty of the profession or the social stigma of being a performer, especially a female impersonator, in the present day context. Up until recent decades, most of the Naqqals had no permanent address or home and moved from village to village with their cattle and sheep in search of pasture and work. Like all nomads, they were a trifle aloof and suspicious. Their background is mysterious, as all claim separate genealogies even though they belong to the same family. Prem Chand, the self-styled *ustad*, said his family came from Rajasthan to Patiala on the invitation of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh. By contrast, another member of the group, Mundri, claimed no such grand history for himself.

As performers, the Naqqals would sing at village melas and weddings. The female impersonators among them would have no problem posing as hermaphrodites, dancing and singing with gusto at the birth of the village headman's son or at traffic crossings.² It was all a question of survival and no role was big or small, good or bad in their dictionary. Naqqals were also hired occasionally by the 'Song and Drama' division to sell products, pass on social messages, and damage the reputation of a rival political opponent when necessary. It is sometimes weird to see issues of dowry, birth control, and female infanticide being rendered with such a declamatory flamboyance that makes these issues get a dash of the mythological.

The main source of income for these individuals was when they assumed the role of shaman for buffalos and cows during the monsoon season when animals were more prone to disease. During this period they would sit in a cowshed chanting incantations to dispel evil spirits. Before the start of this ritual the ustad would purify all the musical instruments by lighting incense and sprinkling rice over them.

In recent times the Naqqals' considerable popularity has been challenged by cinema and television and they have had to survive by doing "disco" dancing at weddings and other community festivities. Furthermore, the Naqqals of late have lost the impulses that created this art form and the values that supported it due to changing taste patterns and the choices posed by a new globalized economy. The younger generation has not viewed their traditional legacy as offering them a viable profession and has sought alternatives, from selling helmets and fruit or anything that brings a semblance of a livelihood, rather than sing, dance, or play the drums. Most of them have dreamed about getting an office job as a peon or a clerk—if they were lucky or educated. The *naqal* performances I describe thus represent somewhat rare sightings of a fading art.

The Naqal Performance

The *naqal* performance follows a structure that begins with two actors who, through a series of jokes and improvisations, make satirical comments on politics and society.³ This aspect of the performance is constantly interrupted by four to five female impersonators who first enter dancing with their backs towards the audience and who show their faces only after straining the viewers' curiosity and suspense to the limit. This is then followed by a humorous and dramatic encounter between the two male actors and the female impersonators, with most of the dialogues hinging on double meanings that border on being seriously risqué. This constant repartee is usually followed by a great amount of ribaldry and raucous humor that at times can descend into obscenity. Next comes an erotic dance with many a thrust and a wriggle, to the accompaniment of musical instruments that include *ḍhol*, harmonium (reed organ), *chimtā*, *tūmbī*, *gubgubī*⁴ (a small drum, open from one side, with a string that is strummed), and *matkā* (a metal pot idiophone). The style of dance resembles the pirouette movements from the classical *kathak*. After this comes an erotic song sung usually in *rāg* Malkauns or Darbari. This is then followed by the enactment of the story, which is usually taken from popular Punjabi folk tales, e.g. *Hir-Ranjha*, *Sohni-Mahiwal*, or *Puran Bhagat*. The dancing and the narrative are interspersed with comic interludes handled by a comic actor who represents the common man. In this way the performers function as both social critics and popular

psychiatrists through their verbal gymnastics on varying subjects such as dowry, corruption, and people's aspirations that are made visible through the performances.

The text of the narrative that evolves in performance has a freewheeling mix of tragedy and comedy that swings from the esoteric to the banal. The Naqqals would spin any narrative on its head by breaking all the rules of realism. For example, when the protagonist in the play *Keema-Malki* pats his horse while singing a dirge to his beloved, the charger starts singing along with the lover. This contrast helps in breaking the maudlin mood and shifting it to another emotional plane, by breaking the continuity of a single emotion. In another example, in an episode from the famous love legend *Sohni-Mahiwal*, the earthen pot, upon which *Sohni* is crossing the river Chenab, suddenly animates itself and starts to narrate the story to the audience. This is a theatrical device that does not fit with any known grammar of performance, but is nonetheless completely acceptable to the audience. Indeed, the energy of the naqal form comes from the fact that, although it upholds traditional values, it has the capacity to question and subvert these values. The various conventions of chorus, music, and unrelated comic interludes, as well as the mixing of the human and mythological characters, allow for alternative viewpoints to be presented simultaneously.

A description of two village-based performances follows, in order to give a picture of the traditional context and methods of the Naqqal artists. The first of these represents my first encounter with the Naqqals. So it was that in 1985, while driving from Chandigarh to Amritsar, my party stopped at Jandiala Guru (dist. Amritsar), from where I could hear sounds of singing and shrieks of laughter. There seemed to be a show in the village square. Through a narrow mud tract in the dusty golden light I could see a scattering of thatch huts with tin doors. Intrigued by the sound, we walked towards a large gathering of men and children pressed against each other, squatting around a dimly lit stage. A *naqal* performance was in progress.

The stage on which they performed was made of temporary planks of wood laid on a trestle creating a platform stage, and lit by oil lamps, creating giant shadows on a patchy and soiled white sheet strung up haphazardly as a backdrop. An actor entered the improvised stage and blew on an antelope horn arbitrarily. Another sound that seemed suspiciously like a car hooter was going on simultaneously to the beat of an insistent drum. Immediately after that, a decrepit old man appeared, blowing fire from his mouth. A procession of actors followed him, moving with a shambolic monotony. After an exchange of risqué repartee, a group of garishly dressed female impersonators entered, making the villagers sit up in anticipation. There was laughter all around and the actors on the stage were encouraging the audience to dance with

them. The stories that they enacted were pan-Indian myths conjoining local myths, transformed and renewed for local meaning. The gods they evoked rode bicycles, aspired to a Maruti 800, and sweated profusely. The musical rhythms were inspired by the common stock of Hindi film songs and folk tunes.

Another naqal performance I witnessed took place in 1987 at Barooti village near Pinjore (on the outskirts of Chandigarh), a regular venue for their performance. They were performing during the Ram Lila⁵ festival. The performance ground was packed to capacity, the air thick with the smell of liquor and sweaty bodies. With the entry of the female impersonators, Puran Chand, Sohan Chand, and Bahadur Chand, the crowd went wild. Encased in bright yellow, blood red and cobalt blue *lehngas*, the gold dust on their face and hair was dazzling. That night they were gyrating wildly to the Hindi song *jhumkā girā re, rāvaṇ ke darbār meṅ* (“I have lost my earring in the court of the demon, Ravan”), displaying a mock show of coyness. They laced their provocative gestures with a roll of their eyes, while consciously thrusting their fulsome “falsies” at an all male audience.⁶ The audience participated with a roar of appreciation and threw coins and crumpled five rupee notes towards the performers. The female impersonators puckered their red lips that were painted on to the chalky white canvas of their face. “Look at me, I am so beautiful and saucy,” they stated with an insolent insouciance. The unassailable arrogance of the performer mocked the audience without modesty. The dance did not in any way convey the mood of the song, but contradicted its pathos with its unfettered sexiness. The main musician, Mehar Chand, a checked blanket draped over his shoulders, was singing songs about Ram suffering over Sita’s abduction. His grainy hoarse voice, layered with a patina of nicotine, suggested a cracked surface of notes that roamed freely, assuming new rhythms and individual cadence. Group member Mundri,⁷ with his heavily kohled eyes, strummed his tumbi with wild abandon, becoming a *mast qalandar* in the process.

Female Impersonators and Their Transformation

It is a well-known fact that most patriarchal and feudal societies did not allow the entry of women in the performing arts. This situation of course slowly changed, by including prostitutes and dancing girls in the performing arts. Although female impersonation was an established convention in most pre-modern traditions of theatre and dance in South Asia, it entered a new phase in the urban entertainment economy that emerged in mid-19th century Bombay. This was particularly the case in the Parsi theatre,⁸ as also in the closely related Gujarati and Marathi theatres, as well as in the early films, where boys and men played the

female roles. The Naqqal tradition, in which only men perform, constitutes yet another regional example of this patriarchal policy in effect.

Unlike in the classical traditions, where the transformation of gender has almost a mystical hue, the Naqqals' process is quick and devoid of fuss. They swiftly transform themselves from beefy, jowly men into provocative and seductive female impersonators, without ritual or fanfare. It includes the shaving of the arms and the chest, the stuffing of the bra with whatever material was available (e.g. rolled up hankies, cotton wool), the smearing of face powder, the painting of their moustache-lined lips into bleeding red smudges, and lining their eyes with antimony. Their costumes are glitzy with lots of spangles, including golden earrings studded with huge stones, and silken wigs.

The make-up is done in front of a large mirror. The female impersonator's face is covered with a chalky white powder. This is not done to make the complexion unnatural, as say in the clown tradition of the West, but to erase the features and paint on it a face afresh. This practice treats the face like a blank canvas on which the character will be written, etched and decorated. Elongated eyebrows, a vermilion painted mouth, and eyes like deep inkwells create a hyper-femininity. I have noticed that the female impersonators that I worked with did not have the transformative skills of Japanese kabuki's *onnagatha* performer or even of the *kutiyattam* or *kathakali* actor of Kerala. The female impersonator is not supposed to be a verisimilitude of women, but is supposed to *signify* a woman. The actor neither plays a woman nor copies her but only signifies her as an idea, with all the exaggerations that are imagined about an idealized woman.

As the make-up is being applied, the process of internalizing the illusion of being feminine is also set into motion. That is, once the Naqqals get into their female garb, the attributes of being a woman transform them not only physically but also internally. I see them falling into the conventions of representation. A narcissistic and voyeuristic duality of the "doer" and "doing" come into play. If I accidentally enter the room in which they are changing, they immediately react to my "gaze" and hurriedly cover their flat hairy chest with a towel or spread their hands on the chest. At this moment they have dropped their maleness and are slowly transforming themselves as women. The act of covering is not just an affectation, but also a necessary code for arriving at that transformation. At that time they also talk to me as a woman, discussing their health and family problems in a manner that is usually associated with a woman.

It is very interesting to note that most of the training of a traditional Naqqal performer starts from being a female impersonator. The implicit assumption behind this practice is that, besides learning musical skills,

the actor also needs to learn the skill of transformation. The skill required to change your gender is fairly complex and the inner code required is almost given like a secret mantra from the guru to the *chelā* (student). The talent of an actor for transformation and being able to re-constitute his gender is what determines his success as a student. The performer then makes a choice later in life, whether he wishes to be a female impersonator, a singer, or a musician.

Satnam, son of female impersonator Bahadur, was being trained as a female impersonator by his father. One day, while accompanying his father for a dance program at a village fair near Malout, Satnam stepped on the improvised stage. He wore a shining red salwar kameez, with his head covered by a green *chunnī*, lurid make-up, and flowers pinned on a wig; all the tools of seduction were in place. Dancing along with his father, his youth more than made up for his lack of expertise because his young age gave him the ability to look non-male. Yet despite his lack of virtuosity (in comparison with the older female impersonators), he knew exactly how to strategize the performance and had worked out the terms of address between the spectator and the performer.

Satnam's surface femininity made me recognize, as a spectator, the absence of the female rather than its presence. The choreography of the dance was punctuated by a series of slanting looks and teasing gestures. At some point the dancer looks straight at the spectator and smiles, locking his gaze with the spectator in an unflinching manner. The directness had a hypnotic appeal almost as if a bird had pulverized its victim through the "gaze." It seemed to illustrate the way in which the dancer addressed the male spectator. An atmosphere of intense intimacy is created through the locked gaze, almost as if he were "making love in public." The coquettishness of the stance that is assumed is highly provocative, but it is in the sheer power of its *directness* that the viewer is disarmed. Paradoxically it is in this directness that we see the way the dance is being addressed to the male members of the audience.

No one for a moment forgets that the dancer is a male; the suggestion of the feminine is cocooned in the safety of the male body. The purpose is to simulate the "feminine," which is done through costume, hair, and make-up. It is to feed the male gaze through stereotypical aspects of what makes a "sexy" woman. The image of the woman is created by the male imagination only by displacing the conventional woman. It is in the absence of a "real woman" that the illusionary woman comes alive. Furthermore, the female impersonator appears to reinforce the primacy of desire of men for men or boys. The young boy flatters the male spectators' visual and physical prowess, by appealing to his maleness. In short the "fetishized" female image reinforces rather than subverts the structure of the dominant codes that

are ascribed to women within patriarchy, and the behaviors, attitudes, and tasks they have to follow.

Underlining all this is the fact that it is a performance for the male, by the male and about the male. A man playing the role of a woman helps an audience subvert assumptions of cultural propriety. The male audience can take those liberties with the female impersonator that would not be possible if she were a “real” woman. By the same token, the female impersonator can have “hot” talks with the audience, which would not have been possible if she were a real woman. This is to say that the female impersonators are free to act as women, because they are, in reality, *not* women. Traditional conventions are still strong enough to make it improper for a woman, either in real life or on the stage, to act as openly and freely with men as a female impersonator can, initiating contact with them, inviting verbal and gestural exchange, provoking them to get actively involved. I have seen, for example, at a village performance in Solan, female impersonator Bahadur Chand sit on the lap of the patron and twirl his moustache in an attempt to extract money from him.

Naqal shows that are performed in the night by a group of female impersonators, musicians, and singers have a carnivalesque quality as they affirm and mock, celebrate and critique prevailing definitions of what titillates and stimulates a predominantly male audience. The actors flaunt their bodies in exaggerated costumes drawn from and elaborated upon through cultural stereotypes: the seductress, the Goddess, the idealized wife and daughter. Often their names suggest an exaggerated sexuality: Miss Sweetie, Miss Rosy, Miss Hurricane, Miss Bulbulah-Hind, Miss Chasme-Badur. I have also seen during the course of their performance a crowd becoming violent, abusive, and aggressive. In their desire to be titillated the atmosphere becomes extremely sexual and restless, as the crowd is waiting impatiently to be collectively seduced. Nevertheless, the spectators always present a version of masculinity that has the sanction of the dominant culture and as such raucous and coarse behavior is the norm at such performances. Moreover, in the middle of a show the female impersonator can lash out “as a male” to discipline an unruly spectator and without much effort again slip into the female role.

Gender Identity and Sexuality

How does one shift through the boundaries of sexuality, especially in the concept of the female impersonator? Is the man who dresses periodically as a woman, who sees himself as a woman, and who is not entirely a woman, “a man minus a man” or is he “a man plus a woman”? What happens on the stage? The “man” in the man and the “woman” in the man become hybridized.

The error happens when we think that there exist two separate and “opposite” genders, masculine and feminine. Both these genders exist in their own orbit and when they are presented on the stage they come with their own specific baggage. Just as one begins a creative work from a blank canvas, in the same way an actor has to free himself/herself from categorization of representing a gender and carrying notions of how gender should be represented. A female impersonator is also in the business of displaying a woman’s body, but through his masculinity.

The Naqqal female impersonator appears more as an idea of a male beneath a woman’s costume. At times, even obvious male characteristic such as hairy arms and stubble, would not take away from the exaggerated suggestiveness of the “feminine” in a way that is seductive but not unsettling of gender norms. Indeed, the real problem I have with the entire question of female impersonator is that when a man dresses up flamboyantly like a woman, then somewhere his masculinity is even more in evidence. This makes explicit and implicit visible cultural and counter cultural ideas of masculinity and sexuality.

It has been assumed that female impersonators are homosexual. This is again a stereotypical reading of the female impersonator: If it is not a man, and not a woman, then it is either the third sex or he is gay. This sort of linear deduction is only a half-truth. Some of the female impersonators definitely are homosexual but then, so are some of the male actors. Choosing to be a female impersonator in no way seems to suggest a sexual proclivity, but rather depends more on family tradition, artistic training, physical endowment, and artistic choice. As most of the female impersonators I have worked with have families, children and land, the wife feels no embarrassment or social stigma about their husbands’ world as a female impersonator. In fact the female impersonator is aided by his wife before a show, with the wife helping him in arranging his costume and his wig, as well as loaning him her make-up.⁹

The complex issues of gender identity and sexuality are exemplified in my exchanges with Puran Chand (stage name Chasme-Badur, sometimes Pammi or Miss Rosy). He is a star performer at most village fairs; his name sells. Despite his muscles, hairiness, and avoirdupois—as indeed despite his extravagant display of a star-spangled costume complete with a luxuriant wig, oversized breasts, and cleavage that defies nature—encoded within his persona is an ethos and aesthetic that is hyper-feminine. I have noticed, sometimes with panic, that while he is rehearsing for one of the plays that I am directing, he stares at me with a fixed smile and acts as if an invisible mirror is following him. He looks at me coyly, with a smile trembling on his red “bow” lips, almost as if I am the male client that he needs to seduce. This leaves me completely confused: Is the male in him trying to seduce the woman in me, or is it

the “female” in Puran that imagines me to be a male (as being a director is a fairly androgynous role to play!)? It is this ambiguity that creates a magical hold over me as a director and as a spectator.

Dialoguing with Naqqals

It is a cold wintry night in Balachaur, a small town near Ropar, in 2007. The Naqqals are about to give a performance, and the female impersonators are putting on their make-up. In a lurid tent lit up by kerosene lamps, a mirror propped precariously against a chair, I asked them certain question to gain an insight into their craft. Their responses provide some empirical data to ground my readings.

I asked Bahadur Chand, “Does the female impersonator only play the role of the seductress?”

We also play the role of Durga and Kali (Goddess). When we play the role of Durga, Kali, or Surupanakha (the sister of the demon king Ravana), we sing their *shabads* (religious hymns) and our expression comes from the feelings behind the words.

“What kind of woman do you try to imitate? Do you use your mothers, sisters, or wives as reference?” Sohan Lal, a female impersonator with a high-pitched singing voice, answered,

I use the gestures and body language of Hema Malini, Sridevi, Kareena Kapoor or Preity Zinta (all famous Bollywood actresses). I want to look as beautiful as them.

Puran Chand, an attractive female impersonator and a huge star in the villages in which he performs, mentioned that he would like to become a woman:

I like the *adā* (mannerism) of women. When I perform the role of a woman on stage, I should be familiar with her *adā*. I enjoy becoming a woman and performing the complete *adā* of a girl (the coyness, the wiles, the slow gait, the grace, the sacrifice), and during the performance I must forget that I am a man. My *ustādī* used to always tell me: You must become a woman “completely” while performing.

I saw the female impersonators patting a thick coat of powder on their faces and, after the powder had settled into the pores of the skin, outlining their eyebrows, tracing their lips, and exaggerating their eyes with a thick kohl pencil, almost as if they were writing on their faces the character they were going to portray. Very hesitantly I asked them, “Why are you applying so much white make-up on your face? Will this help you to become a woman?” Puran Chand had a quick answer:

When we apply make-up, we remember Mohini (the celestial beauty, who specialized in seducing learned sages in Hindi mythology) and try to become like her, the ultimate seductress. Make-up enhances the quality of attractiveness required to seduce sages and saints. When we play the role of women for the stage, we remember Mohini and try to emulate her through make-up and dress.

“When you become Mohini, what happens? Who is Mohini? What is Mohini for you? What are her special qualities? Is she strong; is she beautiful? What aspects and attributes of her do you try to present?” Bahadur quickly replied,

Shringār (the romantic essence) is what Mohini represents, and it is this particular quality that we try to remember.

“What are her other qualities?” I asked. “Is she fragile? Gentle? Does she have *karuna rasa*? *Bhakti rasa*?” Puran was quick to reply,

She has everything: delicacy, style, coyness, grace...
She has everything.

The question that has always intrigued me is: What do their wives make of their profession? How do their daughters react when they see their father transforming into a woman? Does it confuse them, lead to a sense of blurred identity? Is it an embarrassment in their community? Very tentatively I broached this question. “Does your wife think, ‘I am a woman; my husband is also a woman’?” This question had all of them laughing at its absurdity.

They know this is our tradition. The wives’ domain is clothes and food; what we do is a man’s work and only men do it. Our women don’t do this work. They know this is our profession and we have to do it.

A few months later (December 2007) I went to their village, Majri. Sitting on a rope bed we talked over hot cups of tea with the cows mooing at the back, while the women of the household busied themselves in making cow-dung cakes to be used as fuel. I talked to Prem Chand, the ustad of the Naqqals and a famous impersonator during his times, about the changing taste of audiences and the changing times. Prem Chand, a compulsive talker with a propensity towards exaggeration, claims that he is one hundred years old and still virile. (His passport puts his age as 72.) Tall and fair, with orange henna-dyed hair with gold loops in his ears, he looked more like a buccaneer than a musician.

When I used to dance and sing in village fairs, people liked to watch a Naqqal performance. They also enjoyed listening to ghazals, qawwali, and religious songs. In those days there were no loudspeakers, nor electricity. People had simple tastes and used to concentrate on words, their meaning and the art itself. No speakers, no roads, no buses. We used to walk with our baggage on our heads, even if it was a distance of fifty miles. There was one bus which was bound to break down on the way and we would be left behind. So, we used to walk. We have learnt this art the hard way.

“What is the difference between performing in the city and the villages?” was a question that I posed before them. Puran Chand, the female impersonator, chirps up,

In the village we perform according to the taste and sensibility of the audience. In the villages our performances are more *badmāsh* (salacious), as the prime motive, besides entertaining, is also to extract the maximum money out of the audience. And the only way that can be achieved is through titillation, seduction and by being risqué. If they don't give us money, we tell them to go away and say we won't perform. In this way we embarrass them publicly for their pusillanimity. We employ *nazākat* (wiles) and *nakhrā* (coyness) until we get the money. Sexist behaviour is used, dialogues expressing love and passion are expressed—“I have become yours and you have become mine”—which is greeted by hoots of laughter and the victim immediately opens his purse to save himself from further embarrassment. This can

only be done if I imagine myself as a woman.
Otherwise I cannot perform.

I guess this is one of the main reasons for female impersonation to have survived as a village tradition in Punjab, as it is based on the whole process of seduction—of extracting money.

Conclusion

In their musical theatrical art, the Naqqals often poke fun at the high-minded ideals of the rich and powerful, through their earthy humor and capacity to ad-lib. Indeed, through humor they demystify those symbols that have become sanctified by tradition and hence reduce the tensions and anxieties of that segment of society that supports their art. The Naqqals' ironic commentary on contemporary issues has a similar therapeutic impact. The Naqqal tradition not only represents a people's rebellion against the establishment but also shows the way to adjust to and humanize it.

The Naqqals' act represents a special challenge, to conventional ideas of gender, in the form of female impersonators. The men who transform themselves as women have been trained to be erotic, wanton, and lascivious; the audiences that supported and patronized them were boisterous and male. This relationship between audience and performer is beyond the imagined limits of decency. It is sexist, nocturnal, and misogynist. It happens deep in the night, far away from their homes and wives—removed from the precincts of their everyday life. The intentions are single-mindedly erotic. Indeed, one of the more popular self-projections of female impersonators in the oral tradition of rural North India is the image of a lustful woman. This directly contradicts the dominant and ideal image of the chaste woman and offers an alternative moral perspective on kinship, gender, sexuality, and norms of behavior.

The female impersonator dressed in flattering feminine dress is both fascinating and illusionary. Thus the male members of the audience, knowing that it is not a "real woman," exercise those liberties that would be unthinkable if it was a real woman on the stage. This interaction satiates certain voyeuristic needs in a feudal and male dominated society.

While watching the Naqqals perform I have understood the true meaning of the words "spontaneity" and "openness." To see a large number of people sitting out on a starlit night, responding to the mood of the performance, is an enriching experience. To observe how the audience pumps energy and excitement into the performers is in some way to recognize that something real and precious is being exchanged. The Naqqals have helped me to understand that tradition does not mean

something *back there, lost*, but something constantly “alive,” “living,” and “expanding.”

Notes

¹ The present is an abbreviated version of a chapter from Dr. Chowdhry’s dissertation, “Situating Contemporary Punjabi Theatrical Practice in the Context of the Trends in Modern Indian Drama 1970-2007” (Panjab University, 2009). Those who wish the full theoretical context of the discussion are directed to that work. Thanks go to Dr. Chowdhry for the permission to edit the article according to the needs of JPS. —*Ed.*

² The reference here is to *khusrās*, individuals sharing a group identity inclusive of transsexuals, eunuchs, hermaphrodites, and transvestites, who earn a living by singing songs to mark joyous occasions. The female impersonators among the Naqqals, often referred to in Punjabi as *nachār*, should be distinguished from them. —*Ed.*

³ This portion of the routine is typical of the traditional comedians of Punjab, who are elsewhere known more particularly as *bhand*. —*Ed.*

⁴ The instrument is also known as *bughdū* in Punjab. —*Ed.*

⁵ The annual dramatic enactment of Rama’s story, during the Dussehra festival in September-October, which celebrates the defeat of Ravana (the demon king).

⁶ Whenever a photographer comes to the edge of the stage to take a photograph, the female impersonator becomes very still, composing his expression, to face the camera. After the photograph is clicked he resumes his dancing.

⁷ Mundri Lal is an eccentric character. Wrapped in a huge overcoat, even in mid-summer, with thick military shoes bought from the flea market, his favorite activity is sleeping and a stubborn resistance to bathing.

⁸ A highly influential theatre movement between 1850-1930, an aggregate of European techniques, pageantry, and local forms, which may be seen as India’s first commercial theatre.

⁹ I remember the female impersonator Bahadur Chand once asking me to arrange for a brassier as he had forgotten to borrow it from his wife.