

## MODERN GUJARATI DRAMA- THEMATIC AND FORMAL EXPLORATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHANGING IMAGE OF FEMALE PROTAGONIST

ABHIMANYU ACHARYA

**Abstract:** In this paper, I begin with placing the Gujarati Play 'Koi pan ek phool nu naam bolo to' (Tell me the name of a flower) (1968) by Madhu Rye in the pan-Indian context so as to bring out its remarkability and significance in post-independence Indian Drama. I also trace its lineage and place in the tradition of Gujarati plays in brief. After this brief introduction, I move into the closer reading of the play for two-fold purposes: To analyze the interplay of power and deception, as well as to highlight the thematic, formal and technical aspects of the play which validates its claim to modernism. It not only experiments heavily with the form by using the device of play-within-a-play, but also breaks the rigid binary of genres by handling a psychological thriller (which is usually attributed to commercial theatre) in the space of, what is loosely known as 'experimental theatre'. Most importantly, it provides a new image of its female protagonist. One can see a break from the chaste, good-wife trope of the female protagonist of the pre-independence Drama to a manipulative, clever, rebellious and promiscuous female protagonist in the plays written after independence. It is an important shift as it shows the new ways in which modern women resist and subvert patriarchy. This play too demonstrates this shift, and becomes a register for the change in the portrayal of women in the modern Indian drama. The paper concludes with giving a direction in which further research can be undertaken. This paper is a humble attempt to fill the gap in the scholarship of modern Indian Drama and its relationship with gender, particularly in the context of dramas in the vernacular languages (in this case-Gujarati).

**Keywords:** Modern Drama, Gujarati Theatre, Women, Patriarchy.

**Introduction:** Modern Indian Theatre is a complex entity as it draws its lineage from multiple and very different sources like Folk Theatre, Sanskrit epic drama, and western drama. Moreover, each vernacular Indian language has its own history of theatre and its own form of folk theatre (Yakshagana in Kannada, Tamasha in Marathi, Bhavai in Gujarati). One can trace the influence of these varied sources in Indian plays produced after independence. Aparna Dharwadker has studied this event in great detail, tracing influences on modern Indian plays, as she seamlessly moves in her analysis of plays derived from history, myth, social didactic realism, as well as domestic urban plays. Although she attempts to trace the larger history of modern Indian theatre, and acknowledges many important intra-national translated texts, she majorly draws from four languages- Marathi, Hindi, Kannada and Bengali (Dharwadker 2006). Similarly, Vasudha Dalmia probes the underlying politics of modern Indian Theatre, relying largely on Hindi, and focusing on playwrights like Bharatendu Harishchandra and Mohan Rakesh (Dalmia 2006). Both these books, although focused or relied on specific languages, provide us with an insight into to look at modernism in vernacular theatre histories. They offer important frameworks and trace certain patterns that emerge within the plays written post-independence. Drawing from insights derived from them, this paper looks at the phenomenon of modernism in Gujarati Theatre. This is also a small step towards filling the gap in scholarship of analyzing the vast fertile terrains of

vernacular Theatre histories. Sitanshu Yashashchandra's preface to '*Rang che: An anthology of post-independence Gujarati plays*' (2007), and Has Mukh Baradi's '*A history of Gujarati Theatre*' (1998) do not give a scholarly textual analysis, but instead gives a broad historical and factual account of Gujarati Theatre. Modern Gujarati Theatre is said to have begun with the production of '*Ek undar ane jadunath*' by Labhshankar Thaker and Subhash Shah in the early sixties. The 'Zre movement' and its imitations of the absurd plays by the likes of Beckett and Pinter were a clear break from the older tradition of plays, both in terms of themes and form. But these were mere imitations and were even dismissed later by some of the playwrights themselves. Later, the formation of the group called 'Aakanth Sabarmati' led by Madhu Rye helped the Gujarati Theatre in finding its own idiom, thereby rescuing it from earlier mimetic practices. Gujarati playwrights wrote plays that resonated with the patterns emerging in the pan-national modern theatre, including plays derived from history, myth, folklore, absurdity, and social realistic plays explicating the existential angst and meaningless of life set in urban milieu (Yashashchandra 2007; Baradi 1998).

The reason for giving this brief national as well as vernacular historical note is to highlight the remarkability of the play analyzed in this paper. Madhu Rye enters the Gujarati Theatre scene with his full-length play '*Koi pan ek phool nu naam bolo to*' (Tell me the name of a flower) in 1968. This play, when placed in both regional and national context,

stands out because of its content as well as form. I offer a close reading of this play here. The purpose of this paper is twofold: One, to analyze the intersection of the ideas of power and deception in the play. The notions of desire and escape undercuts these ideas. Second, to elucidate the range of thematic and formal aspects of the play, thereby qualifying its claim to modernism.

**Power play and Deception:** ‘Tell me the name of a flower’ is a psychological murder mystery, with incidents weaved in within the premises of a theatre company. The mystery genre itself bears the marks of popular or commercial theatre, and yet, Rye manages to paint it with his own colours. The entire play is run by the twin ideas of deception and power. This works at two levels: first- at the level of characters; second- at the level of author and audience. In other words, deception and power works both *within* and *without* the text. Deception, in the play, is deployed as the tool to acquire power and is used primarily by two main characters of the play- Keshav Thaker and Kamini Desai.

Before going into closer analysis of these ideas, it would be helpful, due to the complex structure of the play, to summarize it very briefly. The first act is a farce, and demonstrates a hilarious event that involves adultery, infidelity, and a crisscrossing of lies, resulting into an actor breaking the fourth wall, entering the audience and murdering an audience member. It is revealed in the second act that the first act was a play being performed by a theatre troupe, and in the midst of the play, an actor breaks the frame and ends up murdering a person for real. The second act takes place in a courtroom, the third act in a public telephone booth, and the fourth act again in a courtroom but with a more intimate setting with scenes interspersing from the past, as the play moves ahead in its quest of seeking the answer to the question ‘Why dunnit? (Not who-dunnit)’. The leading actress of the troupe, Kamini, who is also the murderer, is a victim of exploitation both at the hands of her lover Jagannath Pathak and her brother Sundar Desai. The other two members of the troupe are Pritam Soni and Swati Soni, and they are all involved in performing a play written (the first act involving the farce) by the timid and meek looking Keshav Thaker. Shekhar Khosla is the person who is murdered, who turns out to be Keshav’s old friend, and it is only for the first time that Kamini is seeing Shekhar Khosla. Why would someone kill a person whom she is seeing only for the first time in her life? This question leads to the courtroom trial and endless interrogation of all the characters except Kamini, who only features in the last scene.

Now, let us move to the analysis of Power and deception within the text first.

The narrative is not anchored in any single character’s perspective, but offers a polyphony of perspectives, each giving his/her own account of Kamini. Her subjectivity, like a jigsaw puzzle, is formed slowly by joining together the pieces of perspectives that other characters offers on her. Also, the way these accounts are sequenced (Jagannath Pathak, Sundar Desai, Swati Soni, Pritam Soni, Keshav Thaker) keeps the audience on edge as each of their accounts of Kamini is different; every next account undoing the one that preceded it, showing Kamini in different roles- of a lover, a sister, a companion and a muse respectively. One constantly keeps speculating about the true motives of Kamini, which is not revealed until the last page. This clever arrangement of different perspectives itself reveal the inherent deception employed by Kamini in her encounters with each of these characters. She slowly emerges as a manipulative, elusive, deceptive figure. But this deception certainly has its roots in the power-politics between the characters. Jagannath Pathak, Kamini’s lover, and Sundar Desai, her brother, are the embodiments of patriarchal masculine figures, exercising power on Kamini. She seeks to subvert this power, and does it only by invoking another male figure of Shekhar Khosla. Both Jagannath and Sundar’s power over Kamini is fractured because of this supposedly worthy competitor. Kamini deceives them to believe that he too has equal power over her, as he used to be her lover, and now blackmails her. Deception becomes the only way to gain agency for Kamini, but the play’s complexity lies in the fact that deception is not only directed towards the other, but also towards the self. One can see Kamini constantly striving to prove her created myth of Shekhar Khosla to be real, and her final gesture of murder can be read as an act of translation of that myth into reality. Kamini’s leaving the frame of the fictive play and entering the real space of the audience is also, I suggest, her own liberation from performance- not just of that play, but the everyday performance she put up in order to deceive. She seeks liberation from all the power that was exercised on her. On top of that, she starts believing in her own myth, and falls in love with the idea of Shekhar Khosla that she herself had created in her head. Her final monologue in the confines of prison is telling:

*“Shekhar Khosla...tell the truth...do you know the accused Kamini Desai? Yes or No? You don’t? Now, don’t you? You rescued her from the prison of a ruthless lover, a coward brother and a selfish mother! You don’t know her? But I do know you! I have spent cold nights dreaming about you to warm myself, I have nested in your sharp, burning eyes...”* (pp. 251).

For Kamini, getting behind the closed bar of prison is, ironically, a liberation of larger prison formed by her

lover and her family. Prison becomes a space of both confinement and liberation, of reality and imagination. Insofar as Keshav is concerned, his deception is of a different nature. While Kamini's deception lied in her words, Keshav's deception lies in his entire persona- his behavior, body language, his meek, hesitant manner. All of these readily makes him the figure of mockery for the entire troupe. We only realize it later that it is an act that Keshav puts up to deceive people.

*"I have the gift of offering sympathetic attention. I have noticed it always has the effect of making the person wax rhetorical...And I have adopted the habit of always acting a shade inferior. It gives an extra sense of confidence to the person, and he or she loses all sense of property and caution and talk"* (ibid. 204).

Keshav's trickery is to adapt an effeminate, vulnerable persona only to evoke confidence in the other people in his presence, and that feeling of superiority leads them to reveal their true natures and desires that they usually hide. This shedding of his more confident and powerful self, paradoxically, gives him power over other people, since he becomes the only person to know their deep dark secrets. Kamini too, falls in his trap, and starts opening up. Both Keshav and Kamini's deception is mutually dependent and complimented by each other, as each of them delved into deception to meet their own motives. For Keshav, Shekhar Khosla is a bitter past. He is someone who was his friend, who mesmerized and intimidated him, someone who he secretly desired to be like. His obsession with Shekhar gets unbearable for him.

*"Shekhar Khosla's personality was in a way the light of my life. But it was also blinding. I suffered the awe, almost willingly, but I knew I had to rid myself of the disease, may be transfer it to somebody else."* (ibid. 242).

There are clear homosocial undertones here, as in every other instance where Keshav describes Shekhar. Shekhar is not just someone he desired to be like, but also someone he desired. By the sheer taboo nature of his obsession with Shekhar, which he describes as a 'disease', he is forced to transfer that obsession to someone else. Keshav's manipulation of Kamini is nothing but an act of getting liberated from the power that Shekhar still, even in his absence, had over him. It is an act of saving his own identity, which he felt was subsuming under the influence of Shekhar. Keshav, who acts as the weakest and the most gullible, ends up manipulating every character via Kamini, thereby demonstrating his power over them.

The structure of the play draws our attention to a different kind of powerplay here- the one between the author and the audience that resides outside the text. It is the authorial intent to constantly deceive

the audience. Madhu Rye's own confession about the writing process of the play is suggestive of that- "My first act ended with murder in plain sight, hence 'who-dunit' was not an issue [...] I did not know what the next line was going to be until it got written. If it could surprise me, it would surprise the audience was the theory" (Rye 2000: 7).

The deception of the author lies in constantly overturning the expectations of the audience. The first act is a farce, but all the expectations of watching a farcical comedy is overthrown when the murder happens. Play soon turns into a courtroom drama. Unlike a murder mystery, one is not left guessing who the murderer is. Instead, one keeps guessing the true motive behind the murder. It slowly throws light on other characters, and each of them feels that they are responsible for Kamini's act of murder, and each of them have very strong reasons. It seems like they are all manipulating Kamini. But the third act shows how Kamini created the myth of Shekhar Khosla to manipulate them. The audience's sympathy keeps shifting from one character to the other. The final act reveals that it was in fact the meek-looking Keshav Thaker who manipulates Kamini, and every other character through her. Keshav Thaker is the playwright of the troupe. It is not for nothing that the last laugh lies with him. At the meta-level, it is Madhu Rye who gets the last laugh. The power is very consciously shifted towards the writer's domain, as he is considered the one that not only handles the characters, but deceives the audience as well. Another significant detail to note here is the resemblance of the play with real life. Madhu Rye is actually a pen-name of Madhusudan Thaker. Madhusudan and Keshav are both names of lord Krishna.

That said, now let us move towards discussing the thematic and formal aspects of the play that makes it 'modern'.

**'Modern' aspects:** Probing the psyche of the characters is itself a modern phenomenon. One can see a remarkable shift from describing the exterior nature of events to the exploration of the interior landscape of the characters. The events do not take place by the simple cause and effect, but they are driven more by the hidden desires and motivations in the characters' mind. All the characters reveal almost fractured existence, and their repressed desires are expressed in the form of hostility towards each other. One can also trace a difficult and complex exploration of the theme of masculinity, as we see Jagannath Pathak and Sundar Desai's masculine powers being unsettled just by the idea of an equally masculine figure of Shekhar Khosla, and Keshav's emasculated personality itself becomes a source of power for him. The play is radical in its exposition of the illicit sexual desire, and one of the earliest in

modern Indian plays to explore this thematic (others being Vijay Tendulkar's *Shantata! Court chalu aahe* and Mohan Rakesh's *Aadhe-adhure*). What all these three plays have in common is the woman character placed at the centre of the play, and their common trait of being seductresses. For the first time, almost within the gaps of few years, these plays were portraying women characters who were not only breaking away from the conventional image of the domestic, chaste, submissive women, but creating new image of women demanding and asserting their rights, both sexual and otherwise. Conventional morality, which is nothing but a tool to control women's sexuality, is subverted, but the subversion comes at a cost. Kamini's dissent leads her to the sacrifice of her ambition of being a famous actress, and leading her life in prison. Her psychological liberation, tragically, happens only with her physical confinement.

The play provides us with two female characters- Kamini and Swati- both challenging and transgressing moral standards of the society by desiring men that, according to the set standards, they are not supposed to. While Kamini uses her desire as a deceptive tool, Swati is actually involved in an extra-marital affair with Sundar. One can see how Kamini has more agency than Swati, who is enmeshed in her marital life, and can do nothing more than an affair. Marriage becomes an act of confinement, and it is important to note that Kamini commits murder right before the day that she and Jagannath had decided to get married, prioritizing prison over marriage. Women's overturning of morality and asserting their sexuality, and men's fragmented and fragile masculinity becomes two of the most important modern thematic explored in the play. Other being the fragility of human relations (like in *aadhe adhure*) and the nature of 'performance'. All the characters are, by profession, actors, but their performance is not only limited to the stage but also extends everywhere. The mask is never taken off, but constantly changed. Their identity is uncovered, layer after layer, as one uncovers the onion peels, only to reveal a hollow void. This kind of 'performativity' is rightly registered by Sitanshu Yashashchandra:

"Performance within the performance within the performance- Madhu Rye's characters demonstrate the multi layers, the multi-stages of performance, and it would not be surprising if it reminds [...] someone of Suresh Joshi defining 'nothingness' as reflections in the various mirrors placed against each other" (Yashashchandra 2007: xxix).

The hollow void within the identity of the actors, which becomes the metonym for all the human beings at large, signifies this 'nothingness'. Performativity itself becomes a shedding of one's

identity, and adapting a new one, but the performance happens so often that it becomes impossible to discern the 'real' self. Which Kamini is real- the one that is vulnerable when she talks of love for Jagannath, or the one that also deceives him, or the one that deceives herself? Which Keshav is real- the meek, timid looking one or the one that manipulates everyone else? The one that claims to be in love with Kamini, or the one who only uses her as a tool to rid himself of Shekhar's obsession?

This might seem self-contradictory on my part, as I have earlier claimed about the 'deceiving' self of Keshav and Kamini to be their real self. However, those aspects of their persona seems more real only because they are revealed later to us, undoing their previous aspects. The sheer arrangement of the events lead us to believe the latest. But one may question here- what if the arrangement was different? Assuming that it was, can we still believe their 'deceiving' selves to be their 'real' selves? Perhaps Kamini never revealed her true self in any of the instances mentioned above. Perhaps she revealed her true self, bit by bit, in all of those instances.

The complex thematic facets are accompanied by equally complex formal aspects, validating the famous claim of 'modernism' of content and form merging into each other, and neither of them capable of standing alone without the other's support. The most prominent feature of this play is its structure. The structure of play-within-the-play is clearly indebted to Pirandello. It is mentioned in the play itself in the form of a dialogue. In an interview with Naushil Mehta, Rye mentions- "I like Pirandello's ambiguity, his magic with the real and the fantastic" (Rye, mumbaiheatreguide 2005). Play within the play marks the shift of the narrative structure from the traditional linear single play to a more layered and complex one. The genre question is also important here. The structure of the play also allows for two different kinds of genres- the farce, and the thriller- to intertwine and coalesce in a single play. This kind of mixture was the first of its kind in Indian theatre history. The play was produced commercially in 1969 by Darpana in Ahmedabad, and was marketed as a 'murder mystery'. Rye took up a very commercial genre to work with, but he experimented with it and moulded it to the extent that it is now considered to be a classic in the history of Gujarati Theatre.

The play is remarkable in the way it deals with time. There is a conscious breaking of linear time. The way events actually took place was something like this- the rehearsals, the show, the murder and the courtroom trial. Instead of showing it as it occurred, the play shows the show and the murder first, followed by the courtroom trial, and the events of the rehearsals are shown in flashback, as we move back and forth in time. Due to the constant merging of the

past and the present, certain scenes even gets repeated. One of the stage direction goes thus: "Flashback resumes. The stage is set as in Act 1" (Rye 2007: 249).

Both time and narrative are constantly disrupted, making it a disorienting experience for the audience. The farce of the first act plays a very important function. It not only contrasts the rest of the play in its mood, but gives an important window to understand the events that happened in the past and those that will happen in the future. As the play progresses, we realize that the farce was in fact based on their lives, and all the crisscrossing of infidelity and illicit desires have actually happened between them. For them, far from being funny, it is very hard and tragic. This realization on the part of the audience adds an entirely new layer to the farce, which, retrospectively, does not remain a farce but turns into an extremely dark comedy- too dark to laugh.

One of the important trope of modern theatre is the breaking of the fourth wall and the active participation of the audience. Here too, that trope is present. At the end of the first act, Kamini murders a person sitting in the front row in the audience. That point onwards, it is clear that audience is not going to be passive in this play. From the second act, the trial of the murder begins, and instead of a judge or a law court, Madhu Rye only uses a 'voice' for the interrogation in the trial. That voice is coming from the audience's side, as mentioned in the stage direction. In a symbolic sense, audience here is the judge. The final call lies with each member of the audience, and after going through the entire play, it depends upon the audience if it wishes to pass any judgement. Making audience the judge also gives an objective sense to the play itself, because it gives author the scope to explore the dark hidden corners of human mind without being judgmental, as the responsibility of judgement is already passed to the audience.

Jashvant Shekhdiwala, a noted Gujarati theatre critic, has noted about the craftsmanship of the play:

"The playwright has employed theatrical craftsmanship of enveloping a play within a play, setting up two stages- inner and outer, installing a telephone booth, showing a court recording the testimony of the characters, employing the theatre devices of arraying the audience as the judge and the use of chair 'of truth' [a chair in the corner of the stage that made the occupant speak the truth] etc in the manner that mystery, suspense and flow are sustained till the end" (Shekhdiwala 1981).

The usage of all the devices play a part in the play. The play-within the play reveal both interiority and exteriority, metaphorically describing both the naturalistic events that take place outside and the

psychological events that take place within the characters. The confessions in the second, third and fourth scene happen in different spaces- the first happen in the witness box of the court, the second in a public telephone booth, and the third in a chair. The second act shows the lies that everyone tells in the court, but the third act and the fourth act slowly unravels the mystery because of the devices. It is never revealed in the play who the characters are talking to on the phone, or who they are addressing while they are sitting in the 'chair of truth', but one can see the change of space affecting the testimonies of the characters: the public courtroom makes everyone conscious and leads them to lie, the public telephone booth is comparatively less severe but still is not intimate enough to reveal the whole truth, while the 'chair' denotes a more intimate space, perhaps a face-to-face account, thereby leading to the 'truth'.

Another aspect is the way the set unfolds in every act. One can read it as a metaphor for the structure of the play itself, since it too gradually reveals what is going on in each act, slowly. For instance, Act 1 describes the stage settings as follows: 'A flat stage' (Rye 2007: 171). The second act describes it like this: 'The stage is deeper, but barren' (ibid. 193), while the third act describes it as: 'The stage has acquired greater depth' (ibid. 215). This transition from flat stage to a deep and barren to a stage with greater depth visually represents the psychological unravelling of the mystery in the play, as the audience realizes the movement of the play from a flat farce to a complex psychological thriller.

The lights function as a way of blurring the imaginary from the real. Every act, except the first, starts with 'Intense blinding light on stage' (ibid. 193, 215, 235). The beginning of acts with such lighting creates an almost dreamlike effect, making us suspect of the reality of the events that follow. The final scene shows Kamini in a prison. However, the bars of the prison are not made of steel, but light is used to make those bars. It is symbolic of how in the process of deceiving others, she is trapped in the web of her own imagination. But again, usage of lights instead of real bars might also be an indication of this entire thing being played out in the imagination. The play never answers these questions, but only lead us to question more, and unravel more and more meanings each time we read (or watch) it.

**Conclusion:** This paper began by providing a historical note of national as well as Gujarati theatre, so as to give the context of the times during which 'Koi pan...' was written and produced. Then it moved on to analyze the notions of power and deception intersecting both within the play, and at the meta level, i.e. outside the play. Following that, the paper scrutinized the thematic and the formal aspects of

the play that made it 'modern'. Now that we have closely analyzed the play, let us try to pin it in both regional and national context to clarify its place in the history of Indian theatre.

The play was first of its kind in Gujarati, and a fresh break from the absurd plays that were merely imitative of western absurdist tradition. It opened a line for self-reflective plays, that is, plays about the theatre or theatre actors. Rye becomes the true Indian inheritor of Pirandello. Labhshanker Thaker's 'Pilu Gulab ane hu' took this tradition further. In terms of form and technique, Rye's play broke new grounds and set standards for novel uses of visual, sets and every other theatrical device. This kind of innovation was seen later in Chinu Modi's 'Aurangzeb' and Saumya Joshi's 'Dost chokkas ahi nagar vastu hatu'. In that sense, Rye's play was pioneering for many different reasons, and was seen as a model for both commercial as well as experimental theatre.

Modern Indian theatre had already seen productions of plays like Dharamveer Bharati's 'Andha Yug', Mohan Rakesh's 'Aashadh ka ek din', Sriranga's 'Listen Janmejaya', Girish Karnad's 'Hayavadana', Badal Sircar's 'Evam Indrajit' and Vijay Tendulkar's 'Shantata! Court chalu ahe!' before Rye entered the theatre scene with his play. These plays are considered the modern canon of Indian theatre.

Many of these plays drew from mythology and history, 'Evam Indrajit' drew from western absurdist traditions to intensify the existential angst of the directionless youth in modern India, while Tendulkar's 'Shantata!' was influenced by the elements of farce and social realism, but also demonstrates the elements of Pirandello'sque blurring of reality and drama. It is also the play which is closest to Rye's play in terms of form and content. The reason that Rye's play stands out is because it shows contemporary times underscoring the fragility of human relations. Such complex exploration of the psyche of characters only happened first time with Rye, and is only to happen later with Rakesh's 'Aadhe-adhure' and Karnad's 'Tughlaq'. The reason it is remarkable is because of its genre, as nobody before Rye thought of creating such dark story out of the genre of murder mystery, or to mix farce with both murder mystery and tragedy. The reason it is also starkly different from 'Shantata' is the agency provided to the female character. While Miss Benare of Shantata silently faces the trial and gets humiliated, Kamini actually deceives everyone and commits a murder to escape the humiliation. A comparative analysis of 'Shantata!' and 'Koi pan ek...' would surely make for an interesting research that can be further carried out.

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Abhimanyu Acharya, Master Of Arts, English Literature  
Manipal Centre For Philosophy And Humanities, Karnataka