

Queering the Canon: A Study of the Jatra Tradition in Bengal

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the structural and aesthetic mutations of Jatra, the traditional folk theatre form of Bengal, examining how its evolution from a sacred, rural ritual into a highly commercialized, late-twentieth-century and contemporary secular performance space opens up radical possibilities for a queer reading. By deploying Susan Sontag's foundational theories of Camp, Judith Butler's framework of gender performativity, and the intersectional feminist historiographies of Rimli Bhattacharya and Nabaneeta Dev Sen, this study investigates a central paradox: how the inherent Camp aesthetic of modern Jatra—defined by stylization, hyper-theatricality, auditory and emotional excess, and spectacular character archetypes—allows it to function as a naturally queer genre, even when its explicit plots reinforce conventional, heteronormative, or didactic moralities. It traces how the historical figure of the *joker* (clown) and the *chhiti-gayan* (chorus), alongside the legendary tradition of the *bhratya* or *streerole* (male female-impersonators like Chapal Bhaduri), laid an affective foundation where gender and social hierarchies were inherently unstable.

Shifting into the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, commercial Jatra transformed its content to tackle sensational, political, and secular realities—such as the rise of Marxism, the ravages of globalization, and historical scandals—while stubbornly retaining

its archaic, operatic performance grammar. Through this aesthetic tension, the paper argues that modern Jatra's resistance to realism subverts the disciplinary structures of postcolonial respectability, transforming the rural-urban performance stage into a sanctuary for emotional excess, stylistic extravagance, and radical gender subversion.

Keywords: Jatra Tradition, Bengali Folk Theatre,
Camp Aesthetic, Gender Performativity,
Steerole, Vernacular Performance,
Postcolonial, Subversion.

THE SOUND AND FURY OF THE JATRA STAGE

The folk theatre tradition of Bengal, known as Jatra—literally meaning “to go” or “journey”—has historically operated as a kinetic, multi-sensory, and fundamentally democratic cultural form. Originating in the medieval period as an itinerant musical procession tethered to religious movements, most notably the ecstatic Vaishnava revivals spearheaded by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the sixteenth century, Jatra was initially an act of collective devotion (*bhakti*). It was a performance that collapsed the distance between the divine and the mundane, unfolding not behind a proscenium arch but on the *asor*—a square, open-air earthen platform surrounded on all four sides by an immediate, highly vocal audience. This spatial arrangement dictated a specific performance grammar. To reach thousands of spectators sitting beneath the open sky without the aid of modern amplification, the Jatra actor had to rely on extreme physical extension, a high-pitched operatic vocal delivery, heavily stylized facial gestures, and an acoustic environment saturated with thunderous percussion and piercing brass instruments.

However, as Jatra transitioned into the late twentieth century and deep into the contemporary era, it underwent a profound structural transformation. The sacred mythologies of the *Krishna-jatra* or *Chandi-jatra* were largely supplanted by the commercial *palas*

(scripts) of a secularized, hyper-political, and sensational nature. The modern Jatra stage became an arena for dissecting the trauma of the Naxalite movement, the systemic changes of the Left Front regime in West Bengal, the rise of global capitalism, and immediate, highly sensationalized headlines ranging from cross-border espionage to local domestic scandals. Yet, an extraordinary paradox emerged within this commercial evolution: while the thematic content shifted toward the urgent, gritty prose of political and social realism, the *performance style* steadfastly refused the rules of realistic representation. Modern Jatra retained, and in many ways amplified, its historic commitment to flamboyant costumes, blindingly vivid makeup, larger-than-life character archetypes, agonizingly prolonged death scenes, and a relentless emotional excess that borders on the hysterical.

It is precisely within this gap between realistic, often conventional or didactic textuality and an aggressively unrealistic, hyperbolic performance style that the “queer” nature of Jatra resides. This paper argues that modern Jatra functions as an inherently queer genre through its systemic deployment of a folk-vernacular Camp aesthetic. By applying Susan Sontag’s formulation of Camp as a sensibility rooted in the love of the unnatural, of artifice and exaggeration, alongside Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which exposes gender as a repeated, stylized act rather than an essential truth, we can see Jatra as an artistic form that systematically denaturalizes social and sexual normativity.

Furthermore, this inquiry roots itself in the material and historical realities of Bengal’s performance history by engaging with the interventions of Rimli Bhattacharya and Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Bhattacharya’s recovery of the precarious histories of early actresses and public women on the Bengali stage, and Dev Sen’s analysis of subverted, marginalized feminine narratives in folk traditions, provide a necessary critical lens. They allow us to see how the marginalized body—whether the male *streerole* (female impersonator), the exploited commercial actress, or the hyper-melodramatic political martyr—uses

the Jatra arena to mount a rebellion against the sanitized, bourgeois morality of postcolonial respectability (*bhadralok* culture). Ultimately, this study seeks to answer: how does the structural and emotional excess of modern commercial Jatra allow it to “queer” the canon of South Asian performance, turning a popular, mass-market medium into a radical site of subversion?

SUSAN SONTAG’S CAMP AND THE AFFECTIVE LANDSCAPE OF MODERN JATRA

In her seminal 1964 essay *Notes on “Camp”*, Susan Sontag describes a unique aesthetic sensibility that prioritizes style over content, aesthetics over morality, and artifice over nature. For Sontag, Camp is characterized by a “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration,” a vision of the world not in terms of beauty but in terms of the “degree of artifice, of stylization” (Sontag 1964, 515-516). Crucially, Sontag identifies that Camp is consistently drawn to the double entendre, the hyper-theatrical, and the “epicene” quality of things—where characters are drawn with exaggerated, archetypal strokes and actions are performed with an intensity that completely overshoots the literal demands of the plot. When we transpose Sontag’s Western, largely urban-queer formulation of Camp onto the vernacular landscape of modern commercial Jatra in Bengal, a striking, highly productive theoretical resonance emerges.

Modern Jatra is, by its very structural definition, an exercise in unmediated Camp. Let us consider the spatiality of the modern Jatra *asor*. Even when transported to massive, brightly lit commercial pavilions or rural festival grounds (*melas*), the stage remains a platform of pure exposure. The performance cannot rely on the atmospheric lighting, subtle set designs, or psychological interiority that define Western realist theatre or modern arthouse cinema. Instead, everything must be externalized. The characters do not merely enter the stage; they erupt onto it through the *ramp* (the long walkway cutting through the audience), preceded by deafening musical cues—

often featuring a jarring blend of traditional drums (*dholok, khol*) and Western synthesizers, trumpets, and electric guitars. The costumes are a riot of historical and contemporary anachronisms: political leaders in glittering, over-tailored suits, mythological villains in synthetic, sequined robes, and modern housewives in hyper-saturated, lustrous sarees accompanied by makeup so heavy it transforms the human face into a vivid, mask-like icon.

This aesthetic is not a failure of realism; it is a deliberate, joyful victory over it. Sontag notes that “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’” (Sontag 1964, 519). In modern Jatra, this operates on an institutional level. A political leader addressing a crowd in a contemporary political *pala* does not speak in conversational tones; they deliver a monologue laced with operatic high notes, rhythmic pauses, and sweeping physical gestures that evoke the grandeur of a Shakespearean monarch. The emotional registers of the performance are deliberately dialled to an extreme intensity. Grief is marked by body-shaking wails and physical collapses; anger is signalled by chest-thumping delivery and wide, unblinking stares; virtue is rendered so pristine it is denoted by a halo.

This hyper-theatricality functions as a queer mechanism because it completely disrupts the “naturalized” social codes of the spectator’s reality. By presenting political struggles, class warfare, and domestic crises through a lens of absolute artifice, Jatra exposes these real-world structures as highly constructed, performative systems. The excess of emotion—what J. Jeffrey Hanes, in his analysis of South Asian performative affects, links to the classical but mutated concept of *bhāva* (emotional states) as a site of visceral, transgressive transmission—creates an affective overload (Hanes 2025). This overload breaks down the rational, disciplined distance required by bourgeois spectatorship.

The spectator is not invited to calmly empathize with a character’s plight through a realistic portrayal; rather, they are subjected to an assault of pure performance. The sheer excess of the Jatra style

destabilizes the stable meanings of the text. A play might feature a highly conservative storyline—such as a virtuous daughter-in-law enduring immense suffering to preserve the sanctity of a patriarchal household—but the way she performs this suffering, with an explosive, larger-than-life operatic defiance, completely eclipses the submissive content of the script. The performance style is fundamentally anarchic; it celebrates the glorious triumphs of style, vocal stamina, and physical bravura over the disciplinary constraints of everyday reality, fulfilling Sontag's assertion that Camp is "the solvent of morality" that neutralizes moral indignation through the sheer joy of the spectacular (Sontag 1964, 523).

JUDITH BUTLER, GENDER PERFORMATIVITY, AND THE LEGACY OF THE *STREEROLE*

To fully understand how Jatra's Camp aesthetic operates as an inherently queering agent, one must look closely at its historical reliance on, and contemporary inheritance of, cross-dressing and gender impersonation. For centuries, Jatra was an exclusively male domain. Because the acting troupes were itinerant, traveling by boat or cart across remote districts, and because the social status of public performers was severely stigmatized, respectable women were strictly forbidden from joining the ranks. This material reality gave birth to one of Jatra's most iconic and artistically sophisticated institutions: the *streerole* or *bhratya*—the male actor who specialized exclusively in the impersonation of female characters.

This practice directly invokes Judith Butler's groundbreaking theories of gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler argues that gender is not a stable, biological essence that precedes action; rather, it is "an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 1990, 140). Gender is a continuous social performance, sustained through bodily gestures, vocal intonations, clothing, and movements that are culturally coded as masculine or feminine. Butler famously points to

the practice of drag not as an imitation of a true, original gender, but as a performance that exposes the fact that the supposedly “original” gender is itself an imitation without a copy. Drag reveals the imitation that constitutes gender itself.

In the context of the traditional Jatra, the *streerole* was not merely a functional stand-in for a missing female body; they were the very pinnacle of aesthetic desire and emotional depth on the stage. Actors like Chapal Bhaduri—affectionately known to millions as “Chapal Rani” (Queen Chapal)—achieved unparalleled stardom in the mid-to-late twentieth century by embodying the feminine with an intensity, grace, and vocal mastery that left audiences spellbound. As Niladri R. Chatterjee observes in his meticulous study of Chapal Bhaduri’s “hyperformative female impersonation,” Bhaduri’s performance did not simply aim for a passive illusion of womanhood; instead, it deployed a hyper-codified, ultra-stylized femininity that was far more potent and recognizable to the audience than the behavior of ordinary, real-world women (Chatterjee 2009).

Bhaduri’s body on stage became a radical site of gender subversion. He wore elaborate wigs, false bosoms, and heavy silks, and trained his vocal cords to access a soaring falsetto that could carry across vast, chaotic crowds. Yet, the audience was fully aware that the shimmering goddess or the weeping, tragic heroine before them was biologically a man. This dual consciousness—the simultaneous awareness of the male body and the hyper-real feminine manifestation—is the essence of Butlerian performativity. It completely shatters the illusion of gender as a natural, biological inevitability.

When Chapal Rani performed the role of the goddess Shitala or the tragic heroine Mahiya, the performance did not merely depict a woman; it threw into sharp relief the entire apparatus of how womanhood is constructed through costume, posture, and voice. As Butler notes, “the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of the body” (Butler 1993, 2).

The *streerole* successfully hijacked these regulatory norms, proving that the vocabulary of femininity could be mastered, inhabited, and beautifully weaponized by a male body.

As Jatra entered the late twentieth century, commercial pressures and changing social mores led to the mass induction of biological women into the troupes, largely displacing the traditional *streerole*. However, the *aesthetic legacy* of the *streerole* did not vanish; instead, it was absorbed by the incoming actresses. The women who entered the modern commercial Jatra stage did not bring with them the low-key, conversational realism of modern television or film. Instead, they had to step into the massive, hyper-stylized performance shoes left behind by generations of male female-impersonators. They had to learn to play a “woman” through the same larger-than-life, high-pitched, and grandly gestural parameters established by the *streerole*.

Consequently, modern Jatra actresses perform a form of femininity that is itself a second-order imitation—a biological woman imitating a male actor who was imitating an idealized aesthetic of womanhood. This layering of performance perfectly illustrates Butler’s assertion that gender is an ongoing, slippery drag show. The contemporary Jatra heroine, with her neon-bright makeup, explosive vocal outbursts, and stylized theatrical movements, continues to queer the stage by presenting gender not as an intimate, interior essence, but as a spectacular, highly externalized, and completely malleable artifice.

INTERSECTIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHIES: BHATTACHARYA, DEV SEN, AND THE MARGINALIZED BODY

To fully trace the political stakes of this aesthetic, we must anchor our reading in the distinct material and literary histories of Bengal, particularly through the theoretical insights of Rimli Bhattacharya and Nabaneeta Dev Sen. In her foundational work *Public Women on the Stage: Theatre Histories in Bengal*, Rimli Bhattacharya meticulously unpacks the social, economic, and moral precarity that defined the lives of the first generation of actresses who entered the public

theatres of Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Bhattacharya 2003). Drawn primarily from the marginalized red-light districts (*bonedi parás*) of Calcutta, these women were viewed by the dominant, patriarchal *bhadralok* (bourgeois gentleman) society as moral castaways—prostitutes whose bodies were public property. Yet, once they stepped onto the stage, they were tasked with embodying the highest ideals of bourgeois virtue, domestic purity, and mythological divinity.

Bhattacharya highlights a deep-seated institutional anxiety within Bengali cultural history regarding the visible, vocal female body in public spaces. The proscenium theatre of the urban elite sought to discipline these women, forcing them into a respectable, sanitized mold that mirrored the domestic ideals of the colonial middle class. Jatra, however, by virtue of its fluid, popular, and deeply rural-urban itinerant networks, offered a fundamentally different space. When the marginalized female body entered the Jatra circuit, it was not domesticated by the clean boundaries of a proscenium arch or the quiet psychological interiority of bourgeois drama. Instead, it was thrown into a wild, carnivalesque atmosphere where the lines between the respectable and the transgressive were constantly blurred.

The modern commercial Jatra actress leverages this historical marginality through the medium of emotional and physical excess. Because she is performing for an audience that demands high-octane spectacle, she does not conform to the quiet, submissive, and deferential modes of behaviour expected of women within traditional patriarchal structures. On the Jatra stage, she is loud; she is physically commanding; she screams her defiance, her desire, and her grief across the *asor*. This performance style allows the actress to reclaim her body from the voyeuristic, disciplinary gaze of respectability. Her hyper-theatricality functions as a protective armour and a weapon of subversion; by blowing up her emotions to mythic, operatic proportions, she transforms her historically stigmatized body into an undeniable powerhouse of cultural production.

Complementing Bhattacharya's material history is the brilliant literary and folkloric analysis of Nabaneeta Dev Sen. In her seminal essay *Lady Sings the Blues: When Women Retell the Ramayana*, Dev Sen examines how women's folk songs, particularly the village songs of Chandrabati's sixteenth-century Ramayana, dismantle the grand, patriarchal, and heroic narratives of the classical epic (Dev Sen 1997). Dev Sen notes that when women retell these dominant narratives, they completely shift the focus from the heroic, public triumphs of male warriors to the intimate, interior, and often unacknowledged traumas, griefs, and quiet rebellions of the women—specifically focusing on Sita's pain, vulnerability, and resilience. They strip the epic of its cold, state-building moralism and replace it with a deeply emotional, visceral counter-narrative.

When we look at modern commercial Jatra through Dev Sen's lens, we see a similar vernacular strategy of subverting the canon. The modern *pala* may be ostensibly titled after a grand political figure, a historical revolution, or a traditional moral lesson—for instance, scripts dealing with the fall of Hitler, the heroic sacrifices of local freedom fighters, or the evils of corporate greed. Yet, the actual performance mechanics mirror the folk subversions identified by Dev Sen. The grand, ideological narratives of state politics, economic theory, or abstract morality are consistently dragged down into the fertile, messy earth of domestic melodrama and high-pitched emotional vulnerability.

The grand Marxist revolutionary or the powerful capitalist titan in a modern Jatra does not spend their time on stage debating abstract dialectical materialism or market economics. Instead, their ideological struggles are played out through explosive domestic confrontations, agonized soliloquies about parental betrayal, and hyper-dramatic declarations of love, honor, and loyalty. Modern Jatra effectively translates the dry, intellectual prose of the masculine, public canon into the highly charged, emotional poetry of popular folk expression. By filtering urgent political realities through an aesthetic of domestic

excess and visceral melodrama, Jatra “queers” the cold, rationalized, and patriarchal structures of modern political discourse, making it deeply accessible, affectively explosive, and thoroughly grounded in the marginalized consciousness of the subaltern masses.

THE STRUCTURAL ANARCHY OF MODERN COMMERCIAL JATRA: THE JOKER, THE CHORUS, AND THE PALAPROTAGONIST

The queer subversion embedded within modern Jatra is not merely a product of individual performances; it is woven into the very structural architecture of the genre. Even as modern commercial Jatra shifted its themes to mirror the secular and sensational crises of the late twentieth century, it stubbornly retained ancient structural tropes that purposefully fragment the narrative, preventing the consolidation of a singular, realist, or heteronormative authority. The most prominent of these structural disruptions are the figures of the *joker* (the clown/fool) and the *chhiti-gayan* (the detached chorus).

Historically, the *joker* in Jatra has held a radical license to transgress all boundaries. Operating both inside and outside the primary plot, the *joker* is a shape-shifting, carnivalesque entity. In modern commercial Jatra, while the primary protagonists might be locked in a serious, high-stakes political or domestic drama, the *joker* frequently bursts onto the *asar* to deliver biting satire, slapstick comedy, and highly suggestive double entendres. The *joker*'s body is explicitly coded as non-normative and eccentric; they wear mismatched, absurd clothing, use distorted physical gestures, and speak in a rapid-fire vernacular that mocks the elevated, serious rhetoric of the main characters.

This structural fragmentation is profoundly queer. In a standard realist play, the audience is encouraged to maintain a singular emotional focus, losing themselves in the illusion of a linear, logical narrative. The Jatra *joker*, however, completely shatters this illusion (*Verfremdungseffekt* or the alienation effect, to borrow from Bertolt Brecht's modern performance theory). By mocking the high-blown

seriousness of the patriarchal heroes and political leaders, the *joker* exposes the ridiculousness of their self-important authority. The *joker* functions as a living, breathing Camp critique of the main narrative, reminding the audience that the grave, rigid structures of state power, class status, and gender roles are ultimately games that can be pulled apart with a well-placed joke or an absurd dance.

Similarly, the *chhiti-gayan* or the musical chorus cuts through the narrative at moments of peak emotional tension. When a character faces an impossible moral dilemma or a tragic demise, the action is abruptly frozen, and the musical ensemble steps forward to sing a commentary that is often packed with philosophical, existential, or highly melodramatic metaphors. This structural device completely destabilizes the psychological realism of the characters. The characters do not belong to an isolated, private reality; they are part of a shared, public, and explicitly artificial performance ritual.

Furthermore, this structural fragmentation creates a safe harbour for the depiction of non-normative desire and relationality. Madhurananda Gupta, in his semiological reading of the evolution of *Krishna Jatra*, notes that the structural flexibility of the folk stage has always allowed for a fluid, highly ambiguous interpretation of signs (Gupta 2022). In the traditional religious *pala*, the relationship between Krishna, Radha, and the Gopis transcended the rigid, legalistic definitions of worldly marriage and heteronormative propriety; it was a space of ecstatic, transgressive, and boundary-less love (*parakiya prem*).

When modern commercial Jatra secularized these plots, this semiotic fluidity was transferred onto contemporary relationships. Because the performance space is inherently artificial, characters can express intensities of platonic solidarity, male-to-male emotional devotion, and female-to-female alliances that would be heavily policed or deemed pathological within the strict confines of realist bourgeois art. The modern Jatra protagonist—whether a fiercely independent

woman fighting corrupt politicians or a male hero weeping openly in the arms of his comrade—is allowed an extraordinary range of emotional and physical expression. The genre’s structural refusal to adopt the clean, ordered, and disciplined narrative arcs of Western realism turns the modern Jatra pavilion into a site where alternative ways of feeling, desiring, and being can be flamboyantly performed and celebrated.

SECULAR SENSATIONALISM: THE POLITICAL SUBVERSION OF THE BOURGEOIS CANON

The political implications of Jatra’s Camp aesthetic become explicitly clear when we look at the content of late-twentieth-century and contemporary commercial *palas*. During this period, Jatra companies based in Chitpur—the historic centre of the Jatra industry in North Calcutta—began producing scripts with sensational, international, and deeply political titles such as *Ebaar Nazrul Ke Rokhe Ke* (Who Can Stop Nazrul Now?), *Hitlerer Patan* (The Fall of Hitler), *Vietnamer Juddho* (The Vietnam War), and *Marxbader Prothom Shurjyo* (The First Sun of Marxism). To the casual observer, these plays appeared to be highly didactic, ideological propaganda pieces designed to align with the dominant leftist political consciousness of post-independence West Bengal.

However, a closer look at the actual staging of these secular, political *palas* reveals an entirely different dynamic. When abstract political ideologies like Marxism, anti-imperialism, or historical fascism are filtered through the Jatra aesthetic, they undergo a radical transformation. They are completely stripped of their dry, intellectual academic armour and are re-clothed in the dazzling, flamboyant garb of pure melodrama and Camp theatricality.

It is worth noting how a figure like Adolf Hitler or Karl Marx is portrayed on the modern Jatra stage. He is transformed into a spectacular archetype. A Jatra actor playing Hitler does not deliver a historically accurate, psychologically realistic speech; instead, he

storms onto the *asor* in an over-designed, glittering military uniform, eyes lined with thick black kohl, delivering thunderous, rhythmically syncopated monologues that are punctuated by dramatic strikes of the kettle drum. The political struggle is no longer just an intellectual battle of ideas; it becomes a visceral, physical, and sonic spectacle.

This hybridity—the intersection of serious, radical political themes with a flamboyant, deeply artificial performance grammar—represents a profound subversion of the mainstream, elite cultural canon. The urban *bhadralok* elite has historically dismissed Jatra as *mota dager golpo* (coarse or vulgar storytelling), criticizing it for its lack of subtlety, its loud volumes, and its refusal to adhere to the high-minded principles of dramatic realism. This elite critique is deeply rooted in a class-based and postcolonial desire to present a sanitized, highly disciplined, and “respectable” image of Indian culture to the world—an image modelled on the serious, literary traditions of Western realist theatre.

By stubbornly refusing this middle-class discipline, modern commercial Jatra mounts a powerful counter-cultural resistance. It asserts that the working class, the peasantry, and the rural-urban masses do not need to adopt the quiet, repressed, and polite aesthetic codes of the bourgeoisie to engage with complex political realities. Jatra takes the grand historical narratives of the global elite and translates them into a popular vernacular language of pure, unadulterated emotion and visual extravagance. This is Camp at its most politically radical. It weaponizes vulgarity and excess to democratize the performance space, proving that the most profound political questions of human rights, class exploitation, and freedom can be fought out on an open-air earthen stage, enveloped in clouds of synthetic smoke, under the flashing glare of multi-coloured strobe lights.

THE RADICAL PRESERVATION OF THE UNNATURAL

“Queering the Canon: A Study of the Jatra Tradition in Bengal” reveals that the traditional and modern folk stage of Bengal has

never been a passive repository of conservative, unchanging values. Instead, it has continuously operated as a dynamic, deeply adaptive, and structurally transgressive performance ecosystem. By tracking its evolution from the sacred, ecstatic spaces of medieval Vaishnavism through the gender-bending brilliance of the traditional *streerole* exemplified by Chapal Bhaduri, and into the hyper-commercialized, secular, and sensational arenas of contemporary Bengal, this paper has demonstrated how Jatra systematically undermines the foundations of aesthetic and social normativity.

Through the theoretical frameworks of Susan Sontag and Judith Butler, we can recognize that Jatra's defining features—its operatic vocal delivery, its grandly exaggerated physical gestures, its flamboyant and anachronistic costumes, and its total embrace of emotional excess—are not primitive artistic shortcomings. Rather, they constitute a sophisticated, deeply intentional folk-vernacular Camp aesthetic. This aesthetic celebrates artifice over nature, style over moralism, and performance over essence. By rendering gender, politics, and domesticity through a lens of absolute, unmediated theatricality, Jatra continuously exposes the real-world structures of patriarchy, class hierarchy, and bourgeois respectability as fragile, performative constructs.

Furthermore, by integrating the critical historiographies of Rimli Bhattacharya and Nabaneeta Dev Sen, this study highlights how the historically marginalized bodies of the actress, the female impersonator, and the folk storyteller find a unique liberation within this structural anarchy. Stripped of the disciplinary boundaries of urban proscenium realism, these performers use the raw exposure of the *asor* to scream, weep, and perform their defiance with an authority that completely eclipses any conservative constraints written into the literal scripts.

Modern commercial Jatra stands as a monumental monument to the radical preservation of the unnatural. In a contemporary global

cultural landscape that increasingly prizes the sanitized, predictable, and quiet aesthetics of digital media and middle-class realism, the Jatra stage remains beautifully, unapologetically loud, messy, and extravagant. It is a genre that is naturally queer, a brilliant space where the margins take centre stage, where style reigns supreme, and where the sound and fury of human performance continue to shatter the canons of respectability.

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