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The Politics of Spectatorship: Audience Dynamics and the Distribution of Benefits in Subaltern Performance

Fareeha. M

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Complete Address of Publisher/ Editorial Board Office

KTM College of Advanced Studies

Karuvarakundu (PO), Malappuram (Dt), Kerala-676 523



Phone

04931-280096



Mobile

+919747635369



Email

info@ktlyst.org
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The Politics of Spectatorship: Audience Dynamics and the Distribution of Benefits in Subaltern Performance

Fareeha. M

(Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, KTM College of Advanced Studies, Karuvarakundu,
Malappuram)

Abstract

Subaltern performance has become an important area of study in postcolonial theory, performance studies, and cultural anthropology. Most discussions focus on the performers themselves. They are marginalised, oppressed, or socially silenced communities who express resistance through their bodies, stories, rituals, street theatre, folk traditions, and even digital forms. However, very little attention is given to the role of the audience. This paper shifts the focus from the performer to the spectator. It studies who watches subaltern performance and how the identity and position of the spectator shape the meaning of the performance. It argues that watching is not a neutral act. Spectatorship is a political act that involves power, privilege, and control over interpretation. Therefore, subaltern performance must be understood not only through what is performed but also through the gaze that receives and interprets it.

The main purpose of this paper is to understand who watches subaltern performances and who gains from it. The audience is shaped by social structures such as caste, class, gender, education, and urban privilege. Spectators also include tourists, policymakers, academics, filmmakers, NGOs, and online

viewers. When such dominant groups watch subaltern performances like Dalit theatre, hijra performances, Adivasi rituals, protest songs by domestic workers, or migrant labour stories, the meaning of the performance changes. The subaltern performer often becomes an object of curiosity, sympathy, entertainment, or study. Their body and voice are turned into cultural material for others to consume. The original political intention of the performance gets reshaped to meet the expectations or comfort of privileged spectators. As a result, the benefits of the performance often go to the institutions, researchers, audiences, or markets that consume these cultural forms. The performers themselves may not receive equal recognition, economic support, or social dignity.

This paper draws on Gayatri Spivak's idea of representation from "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Frantz Fanon's theories of objectification, and Judith Butler's concept of performativity. These ideas help explain how the gaze of the audience can either reinforce existing power structures or challenge them. The paper shows how spectatorship can lead to exoticisation, the beautification of suffering, cultural appropriation, or the conversion of political resistance into simple entertainment. Case studies include Dalit street theatre performed for NGO funders, Theyyam artists admired by upper-caste tourists but marginalised in daily life, and tribal dances displayed at government festivals to promote tourism. In each case, the spectators gain cultural capital, authority, or economic profit. The performers, however, often continue to live with social exclusion and limited resources.

The paper also recognises new forms of resistance. Many subaltern communities are now finding ways to control spectatorship. They use digital platforms to speak directly to their own audiences. They create community-based performances that centre their own experiences. Protest art also forces spectators to confront their own role in maintaining inequality. The study concludes that ethical spectatorship must involve awareness, responsibility, and a shift in power. Subaltern

performers must gain agency, fair representation, and real material benefits from their performances, rather than serving only the interests of privileged viewers.

Keywords: subaltern performance, spectatorship, representation, cultural politics, marginality

Introduction

Performance has long functioned as an important cultural space through which marginalised communities express resistance, preserve memory, and assert identity. In postcolonial contexts, subaltern performance occupies a significant position in challenging dominant historical and cultural narratives. Practices such as street theatre, ritual performance, protest songs, oral traditions, and embodied storytelling allow subaltern groups to articulate lived experiences that institutional structures often exclude or silence. These performances operate not only as artistic expression but also as political acts rooted in collective history and social struggle.

Scholars in performance studies, anthropology, and cultural theory have examined the role of such performances in enabling the subaltern to communicate through embodied forms when access to formal modes of representation remains limited. Existing studies highlight how performance becomes a means of expression when language, institutions, and official discourse fail to accommodate marginalised voices. However, much of this scholarship focuses primarily on the performer, the performative act, or the symbolic content of performance. As a result, the role of the spectator often remains under-theorised or is treated as neutral and passive.

This paper argues that neglecting spectatorship creates a critical gap in the study of subaltern performance. Performance does not occur in isolation; it always assumes the presence of an audience. Meaning emerges through the interaction between performer and spectator. Spectatorship is not a passive process but one

shaped by interpretation, judgement, and power. The social position of the spectator defined by caste privilege, class location, educational access, and institutional authority significantly influences how subaltern performances are interpreted, circulated, and valued.

When dominant social groups engage with subaltern performance, unequal power relations often structure the act of watching. Political expressions may be reinterpreted as cultural display or aesthetic spectacle. Cultural institutions, academic platforms, festivals, and digital media further mediate this process by framing subaltern performance for wider audiences. In such contexts, the symbolic and material benefits generated by performance frequently shift away from subaltern communities and accumulate with spectators, curators, or institutions.

By shifting analytical attention from the performer to the spectator, this paper examines the politics of spectatorship in subaltern performance. It addresses two central questions: Who watches subaltern performance? and Who benefits from it? The paper argues that dominant modes of spectatorship often transform acts of resistance into consumable spectacles, thereby redistributing both symbolic recognition and material gain away from subaltern groups. At the same time, the paper acknowledges emerging practices that challenge unequal spectatorship, including community-controlled performances and alternative spaces of circulation. These practices seek to reclaim interpretive authority and economic control, thereby reasserting the political potential of subaltern performance.

Subalternity, Performance, and the Problem of Representation

The concept of the subaltern, as theorised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to social groups whose voices remain systematically excluded from dominant structures of power, knowledge, and representation. In her influential essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak argues that subalternity is not merely a condition

of economic or social marginalisation but one of epistemic exclusion. The subaltern does not simply lack a voice; rather, the structures through which voice becomes legible actively prevent subaltern speech from being heard or recognised within dominant discourse (Spivak 283). Even when marginalised subjects appear to speak, their voices are often mediated, translated, or overwritten by elite frameworks of knowledge.

Spivak further cautions that attempts to represent the subaltern, even when motivated by ethical or political concern, often reproduce the very hierarchies they aim to dismantle. She distinguishes between two meanings of representation: *vertretung* (speaking for) and *darstellung* (re-presenting). Both forms carry significant risks. Speaking for the subaltern may silence them by replacing their agency with that of the intellectual or institution. Re-presenting them may fix their identities within dominant narratives, rendering them objects of interpretation rather than subjects of political action. As a result, representation itself becomes a site of power, where visibility does not necessarily lead to empowerment.

Within this context, performance initially appears to offer a productive alternative to textual or institutional modes of representation. Through embodied practices such as ritual, street theatre, oral storytelling, and protest performance, the subaltern seems to communicate beyond elite forms of language and documentation. Performance foregrounds the body, affect, and presence, which appear to resist abstraction and mediation. Many scholars therefore view performance as a space where marginalised groups can assert agency and express political realities that dominant discourse often excludes.

However, performance does not exist outside the politics of representation. Once performed in public or semi-public spaces, subaltern performance enters fields shaped by unequal power relations. Meaning does not arise solely from the act of

performance itself but from how audiences interpret and frame it. When dominant spectators encounter subaltern performance, they often do so through cultural, aesthetic, or anthropological lenses. Such frameworks may recast political expression as tradition, folklore, or heritage. In this process, the critical and resistant dimensions of performance risk being neutralised. What begins as an act of protest or survival may be transformed into an object of consumption.

Frantz Fanon's analysis of objectification offers further insight into this dynamic. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon describes how the colonised subject becomes fixed under the white gaze, reduced to a body that exists for observation, classification, and control (Fanon 109). This gaze strips the subject of agency and transforms lived experience into spectacle. Although Fanon writes in the context of colonial domination, his analysis remains relevant to postcolonial cultural encounters. The colonial gaze does not disappear; it re-emerges in new forms within cultural institutions, academic discourse, and aesthetic consumption.

In contemporary contexts, subaltern performance often gains visibility without gaining power. Marginalised bodies become present on stages, screens, and platforms, yet this visibility frequently serves the interests of dominant spectators rather than those of the performers. When performance is consumed without political accountability or material redistribution, it risks reproducing the same objectifying gaze that Fanon critiques. The subaltern body becomes visible but remains controlled, interpreted, and valued by others. Thus, performance, like representation, remains an ambivalent space capable of resistance, yet deeply vulnerable to appropriation.

Spectatorship as a Political Act

Spectatorship has often been understood as a passive act, positioned as secondary to the creative agency of the performer. In this view, audiences merely receive meaning that performance already contains. Contemporary cultural theory,

however, challenges this assumption by emphasizing the active role of spectators in producing meaning. Watching involves interpretation, evaluation, emotional response, and ethical judgement. These processes shape how performances circulate within cultural, academic, and institutional networks and determine their social and political significance.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity helps explain this process. Butler argues that meaning emerges through repetition, recognition, and reception rather than originating solely with the performer (Butler 179). Applied to subaltern performance, this perspective suggests that the political force of an act depends on how spectators recognise and legitimise it. A performance acquires meaning through the conditions under which it is watched, discussed, documented, and circulated. Spectators therefore participate directly in shaping the afterlife of performance.

In the Indian context, subaltern performances often move across unequal spaces of reception. Forms such as Dalit street theatre, Adivasi ritual performance, folk theatre traditions like Therukoothu, Theyyam, or Ottan Thullal, and contemporary protest performances frequently originate within local communities as expressions of resistance, memory, or survival. However, when these performances enter public or institutional spaces, spectators often belong to dominant social groups. These include academics, cultural critics, NGO workers, policymakers, festival organisers, urban audiences, tourists, and digital viewers. Their social location grants them interpretive authority and access to platforms that shape visibility and legitimacy.

For example, Dalit theatre groups performing narratives of caste violence and exclusion often encounter different forms of spectatorship depending on context. Within community spaces, such performances function as acts of testimony and political assertion. When staged at national theatre festivals or academic

conferences, however, spectators may evaluate them in terms of aesthetic form, emotional impact, or cultural significance. While such recognition may increase visibility, it can also shift attention away from the structural realities the performance addresses. In this process, spectatorship functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that determines which performances are considered meaningful, authentic, or worthy of preservation.

Similar dynamics appear in the institutional circulation of folk and ritual performances. Performances such as Theyyam in Kerala or Adivasi ritual dances in central India carry strong political and spiritual meanings within their communities. When reframed for tourism, cultural festivals, or heritage documentation, dominant spectators often interpret them as symbols of tradition or cultural richness. This framing can strip the performance of its political and social context. What remains is a visually striking spectacle detached from the material conditions of the performers' lives.

Spectatorship thus becomes a political act. By interpreting subaltern performance through frameworks of sympathy, exoticism, authenticity, or cultural appreciation, spectators frequently reshape resistance into spectacle. The performance becomes something to be admired, photographed, archived, or consumed rather than engaged with as a political demand. Digital platforms further intensify this process. Protest songs, street performances, and acts of embodied dissent circulate widely on social media, where viewers respond through likes, shares, and commentary. While this circulation increases reach, it often benefits intermediaries more than performers and rarely leads to structural change.

At the same time, these dynamics reveal tensions within spectatorship itself. Some contemporary performance groups attempt to challenge dominant modes of viewing by limiting documentation, controlling circulation, or situating

performances within community-specific spaces. Such strategies seek to resist the conversion of political expression into cultural commodity. These efforts highlight spectatorship as a contested site rather than a fixed position.

By foregrounding spectatorship as an active and political process, this paper argues that subaltern performance cannot be fully understood without examining who watches, from where, and under what conditions. In the Indian and regional context, spectatorship does not merely reflect existing power relations; it actively reproduces or challenges them. Recognising this role is essential to understanding how subaltern performance moves between resistance and spectacle, voice and appropriation.

Case Study I: Dalit Street Theatre and NGO Spectatorship

Dalit street theatre has historically functioned as a powerful medium of protest, political education, and collective mobilisation. Emerging from lived experiences of caste-based oppression, these performances have addressed issues such as land dispossession, bonded labour, everyday discrimination, and caste violence. Performed in public spaces such as streets, village squares, factory gates, and protest sites, Dalit street theatre has traditionally aimed to confront power directly and to create dialogue within marginalised communities themselves. In these contexts, performance operates as both resistance and pedagogy.

In recent decades, however, the conditions under which Dalit street theatre is produced and received have undergone significant changes. As non-governmental organisations and funding agencies increasingly engage with cultural practices as tools for social awareness and development, they have become key spectators of subaltern performance. This shift has altered both the audience composition and the purpose of performance. Dalit theatre groups now often perform in workshops, seminars, training programmes, and urban cultural

spaces where audiences consist largely of educated, middle-class spectators who possess institutional authority and control access to resources.

Within these settings, spectatorship assumes a regulatory function. NGO representatives, donors, and development professionals often approach performance with specific expectations. They may favour narratives that emphasise empowerment, resilience, and social progress, as these align with development discourse and funding priorities. As a result, theatre groups may feel pressure to adapt their content accordingly. Sharp critiques of structural caste violence, state complicity, or class exploitation may be softened. Emotional appeal and moral uplift often replace political confrontation. While such adaptations may increase institutional acceptance, they risk diluting the original intent of the performance.

This form of spectatorship also shapes the circulation and valuation of performance. NGOs gain cultural capital and moral legitimacy by supporting Dalit theatre as evidence of inclusive practice and social commitment. Performances become symbolic resources that enhance organisational credibility in reports, grant proposals, and public outreach. In contrast, Dalit performers frequently remain in conditions of economic insecurity. Their labour generates visibility and awareness, yet this visibility rarely translates into stable income, long-term employment, or improved social mobility.

The asymmetry becomes particularly evident in the distribution of benefits. While institutions accrue recognition, funding, and professional advancement, performers often receive short-term honoraria or project-based payments. The structural inequalities that the performances critique remain largely intact. In this context, spectatorship operates as a mechanism through which value moves upward, from marginalised performers to institutional spectators.

This case study illustrates how spectatorship, when embedded within development and funding frameworks, reshapes subaltern performance. It transforms acts of resistance into tools of representation that serve institutional agendas. Dalit street theatre continues to speak of injustice, but the conditions of its reception limit its political reach. The performance remains visible, yet its capacity to disrupt dominant structures diminishes. Spectatorship, therefore, does not merely witness subaltern expression; it actively reorganises power, meaning, and material benefit.

Case Study II: Ritual Performance and the Touristic Gaze in Theyyam

Theyyam is a ritual performance tradition practised mainly by historically marginalised and lower-caste communities in northern Kerala. It provides a significant context to examine how spectatorship reshapes cultural meaning. Theyyam operates as ritual rather than entertainment. The performer embodies the deity through costume, music, and possession. During the ritual, the performer commands authority and reverence. Devotees from all castes approach the performer for blessings, justice, and protection.

This ritual authority remains temporary and spatially limited. It exists only within the ritual moment. After the performance, the performer returns to everyday social life. That life remains shaped by caste hierarchy and economic insecurity. Many performers face discrimination outside the ritual space. Their divine status does not ensure lasting social respect or material stability. This contrast exposes the limits of ritual empowerment.

Cultural tourism has further transformed spectatorship in Theyyam. Upper-caste domestic tourists and international visitors increasingly attend performances. Many view Theyyam as a visual spectacle. They engage with it as an aesthetic experience rather than a sacred ritual. Travel blogs, documentaries, and social media images frame Theyyam as exotic and dramatic. These representations

focus on appearance and intensity. They often remove the performance from its social and ritual context.

The touristic gaze converts Theyyam into a cultural commodity. Spectators gain cultural knowledge and symbolic value through consumption. State institutions also benefit from this shift. Tourism departments promote Theyyam as cultural heritage. They use it to attract visitors and generate revenue. Heritage branding highlights tradition while ignoring social inequality.

The performers receive limited economic benefit from this cultural economy. Payments remain irregular and insufficient. Intermediaries and cultural institutions gain greater profit. The process does not challenge caste-based structures. It instead reproduces them in subtle ways. Cultural recognition replaces social justice.

The change in spectatorship reshapes the meaning of Theyyam. Ritual participation gives way to passive observation. Sacred practice becomes consumable culture. Reverence within the ritual does not extend to everyday life. This case shows how spectatorship can depoliticise subaltern performance. It aestheticises cultural difference while leaving structural inequality untouched.

Case Study III: Tribal Performance and State-Sponsored Cultural Festivals

State-sponsored cultural festivals often present tribal dances and music as symbols of national diversity. Government bodies organise these events to promote tourism and national integration. The performances suggest harmony and cultural richness. However, these platforms often remove the political and historical meanings of tribal performance.

Tribal dances originate within specific social, ecological, and cultural contexts. They carry collective memory and knowledge of land, seasons, and community life. In state-organised festivals, these dances shift into staged displays.

Performers present them on formal stages before urban and elite audiences. The performance loses its connection to everyday tribal life and struggle.

Spectators engage with tribal culture as visual entertainment. They admire costumes, rhythm, and movement. They rarely encounter the realities faced by tribal communities. Issues such as land displacement, environmental destruction, and state control remain invisible. The performance offers culture without context.

The state gains symbolic value from these displays. Cultural festivals project an image of inclusivity and respect for difference. They help construct a narrative of unity within diversity. This image often masks ongoing conflicts over land, resources, and rights. Culture becomes a tool of governance rather than resistance.

Performers receive temporary recognition through these events. They gain visibility for a short time. However, they rarely receive sustained economic support or political representation. The festivals do not improve access to land, education, or legal protection. Visibility replaces justice.

In this context, spectatorship plays a crucial role. It allows audiences to consume cultural difference without ethical engagement. The state manages diversity through performance. Spectators participate in symbolic inclusion. Structural inequality remains unchanged. Tribal performance becomes spectacle rather than a site of political expression.

Digital Spectatorship and Emerging Forms of Resistance

Despite persistent structural barriers, subaltern communities increasingly explore new forms of spectatorship. Digital platforms create alternative spaces for performance and circulation. These platforms allow performers to bypass traditional cultural gatekeepers. Artists can address audiences directly without

institutional mediation.

Protest songs, spoken-word poetry, and community theatre circulate widely through social media. These forms reach audiences who share similar histories of marginalisation. Digital circulation enables faster and broader engagement. It also supports collective identification and solidarity.

Digital platforms do not remove inequality or exploitation. Access remains uneven, and algorithms shape visibility. However, these spaces offer performers greater control over representation. Artists can frame their own narratives and define the terms of engagement. This control contrasts with state-sponsored or touristic platforms.

Some performers use digital spaces to critique spectatorship itself. They expose how audiences consume suffering and cultural difference. These performances demand ethical attention rather than passive viewing. They challenge spectators to recognise their role in systems of exploitation.

These practices reframe spectatorship as an active political encounter. Watching becomes a form of accountability. Digital spectatorship thus opens possibilities for resistance. It shifts performance from domination toward critique and self-representation.

Towards an Ethics of Spectatorship

An ethical approach to spectatorship requires more than sympathy or emotional engagement. Empathy alone does not challenge unequal power relations. Ethical spectatorship demands reflexivity and accountability. Spectators must reflect on their own social location. They must recognise how caste, class, and institutional access shape their ways of seeing.

Spectators also exercise power over meaning and circulation. Their interpretations influence how performances gain visibility and value. Sharing,

documenting, and consuming performance are not neutral acts. These actions can either reinforce or challenge existing hierarchies. Ethical spectatorship requires awareness of this influence.

Institutions that profit from subaltern performance carry greater responsibility. Cultural organisations, media platforms, and funding bodies often benefit from such performances. They must ensure fair and consistent compensation for performers. Performers should retain control over authorship and representation. They must also participate in decisions about how their work is framed and circulated.

Scholars occupy a particularly powerful position as spectators. Academic research often turns subaltern performance into data or textual material. This process can extract value without offering return benefits. Ethical research must move beyond mere documentation and analysis. It should adopt collaborative and participatory frameworks. Such approaches must prioritise consent, shared authority, and community agency. Knowledge production should support the social and political interests of performers.

An ethics of spectatorship, therefore, links viewing to responsibility. It insists that spectators engage critically rather than consume passively. Only through such practices can spectatorship contribute to justice rather than reinforce domination.

Conclusion

Subaltern performance cannot be understood by examining the act of performance alone. Analysis must also focus on the gaze that receives it. Spectatorship plays a central role in shaping meaning and value. It determines how performances circulate and who benefits from them. In many contexts, spectatorship reinforces existing social hierarchies rather than challenging them.

This paper has shown that cultural consumption often privileges dominant

audiences. Spectators gain cultural knowledge, pleasure, and symbolic capital. Subaltern performers, however, receive limited material or social return. The unequal distribution of benefit exposes the political nature of spectatorship. Viewing is never neutral. It operates within systems of power.

By foregrounding the politics of spectatorship, this study shifts attention from representation to reception. It reveals how audiences, institutions, and markets shape cultural meaning. Spectatorship becomes a mechanism through which inequality is reproduced. Performance, in this sense, functions within broader structures of domination.

At the same time, emerging practices point toward alternative possibilities. New forms of circulation allow performers greater control over visibility and narrative. Ethical and critical spectatorship can transform the relationship between performer and audience. When performers define how they are seen and heard, power begins to shift.

Under such conditions, performance moves closer to its emancipatory potential. Spectatorship can become a site of responsibility rather than consumption. It can support dignity, agency, and social justice. Reimagining spectatorship is therefore essential to any critical understanding of subaltern performance.

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