

Crossing Boundaries: Emerging Identities from Folk Theatre

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Abstract : Female impersonation has existed through the length of human civilization and the breadth of its cultures. Transvestism and drag queen cultures have created multi-sited spaces where in the shadow of art, one can cross the gender barrier and express one's hidden identity. This paper will explore a dynamic cultural space that exists in Manipur, a state in the northeastern region of India, where the female impersonators (nupi shabis) of a folk theater (Shumang Leela) are using this traditional and popular art form to claim social acceptance of their homosexual identities through the medium of entertainment. It will highlight how by crossing the gender boundary, this third gender group has carved out a unique socio-economic niche where they have exploited their sexual identities to their advantage. The paper will trace the expanding cultural "borderland" of Manipur where there is an increasing sense of 'becoming', belonging and sharing" of identities through the interweaving of old and new media. The research will be based on interviews with the nupi shabis, cultural critics and other experts.

Keywords : transvestism, Manipur, female impersonators (nupi shabis), Shumang Leela, gender

Conference Title : ICCMS 2014 : International Conference on Communication and Media Studies

Conference Location : Venice, Italy

Conference Dates : November 13-14, 2014