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## **Multiplicity and Marginality: An Examination of Performance, Identity, and Precarity in Binodini Dasi's *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress***

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the construction of selfhood in Binodini Dasi, one of the most celebrated theatre actresses of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, as represented in her *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress*, analyzing how her lived experiences produce multiple and intersecting identities within the autobiographical narrative. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of the self, the study examines how gender, class, and performance intersect to shape Binodini's fragmented subjectivity, articulated through her private, public, creative, and maternal selves. It further argues that this multiplicity of selves reveals the structural and institutional forces that continually marginalize her. This fractured selfhood situates her existence within what Judith Butler theorizes as precarity, a condition marked by vulnerability, dependency, and systemic exclusion from social and cultural recognition.

**Key Words:** Selfhood, gender, performance, fragmented, precarity.

### **Introduction**

Binodini Dasi (1863–1941), a pioneering actress in 19th-century Bengali theatre, secured a prestigious place in theatre through her spectacular performances and candid autobiographical writings. Born in 1863, in a prostitute quarter in the 'metropolis of Calcutta,' now in Kolkata, Binodini entered the theatre as a teenager. She quickly gained a reputation due to her talent and dedication. Throughout a dynamic twelve-year career from 1874 to 1886, she fascinated audiences with more than eighty roles, establishing herself as one of the most renowned performers of that time. One of her many groundbreaking performances was in *Chaitanya Lila*, a devotional play based on the teachings of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The performance posed a challenge to a society fraught with religious and caste-based stigma attached to women. Despite her artistic triumphs and widespread popularity, she had to retire early with a sense of betrayal. Her autobiography, *My Story (Amar Katha)*, written at the request of her Guru, Sri Girish Chandra Ghosh, unravels the layered story of her suffering, exploitation, social exclusion, and marginalization, particularly due to her status as a social outcast,

which led her to consider herself a *janamdukhini*, *barangona* (courtesan) and *kolonkini* (fallen woman), highlighting the stigma attached to actresses at that time. This glimpse into Binodini Dasi's life reveals the multiple roles she was compelled to assume - on and off the stage - reflecting the multifaceted and fragmented layers of her selfhood in a society that praised her performance and art but denounced and condemned her identity.

Set against this context this paper aims to critically examine the multiplicity and fragmentation of selfhood as manifested in the life and writings of Binodini Dasi through the lens of evolving theories of selfhood. It argues that this fractured sense of identity renders women precarious and vulnerable within the entrenched structures of a patriarchal social order. Using Judith Butler's theorization of *precarity*—understood not only as economic insecurity but as a pervasive condition of social abandonment and structural dispossession - the paper explores how such vulnerability shaped the lives of colonial Bengali actresses. Within the Bengali theatre milieu, precarity emerged from intersecting hierarchies of gender, caste, class, and colonial modernity. Although the labour of the actresses was indispensable to the aesthetic and commercial success of the stage, they remained structurally marginalized, denying them access to power, property, and social legitimacy. Despite the strategies of resistance and self-fashioning by these women in the forms of memoir writing, selecting role in plays and community formation to assert their agency in a deeply patriarchal and colonial context they were excluded from power and property. Binodini Dasi's *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress (Amar Abhinetri Jiban)* serve as a compelling illustration of such precarity.

### **The Idea of Multiplicity in the Theory of Selfhood**

Autobiography is a literary genre that foregrounds the author's self. Despite ongoing critical debates surrounding the interplay of fact and fiction, it can be asserted that autobiography remains a subjective account of the author's lived experience.

In his essay "*Subject, Persona, and Self in the Theory of Autobiography*," Barry N. Olshen seeks to establish the ontological foundations of autobiography by delineating three fundamental concepts: subject, self, and persona. He defines the *subject* as "a centre of awareness, transcendental (Kantian) or otherwise constructed" (6), suggesting that, in a sense, the subject could be equated with the autobiography itself. The *persona*, by contrast, is described by Olshen as "the mask worn by the actor in classical theatre"(6), a notion



from which the modern concept of persona is derived. It is "entirely constituted by discourse"(6) and represents the autobiographical ego, the textual signifier, or the literary subject essentially, an identity constructed through language. Olshen characterizes the *self* as "a kind of subjective structure," (6) one that sustains the subject's conscious and unconscious, psychological and somatic awareness of identity. It reflects a sense of being that is unique, relatively persistent, and cohesive. The self has also been metaphorically described as "the map of the interior" (6) that each individual carries within their own body. The "subjective structure" of Binodini's self is deeply complex and layered, shaped by both conscious and unconscious experience of her life, a self that has internalized the emotional and bodily toll of performing femininity, subservience, and desire in a patriarchal public sphere. As "the map of the interior," Binodini's self is to be understood in her different roles as actress, mother, devotee, and outcast- each of which has been shaped by the socio-cultural forces that attempt to define and confine her.

In postmodern thought, the self is often conceived as a textual and discursive construct, produced not inherently but through language and mediated by discursive practices. A self that emerges from such processes of textual interpretation is therefore fragmented, contingent, and devoid of fixed coherence or stable unity. This perspective undermines the traditional belief in a stable, singular identity, proposing instead a self, composed of multiple, and often contradictory, expressions. Rather than being a unified whole, identity is seen as a dynamic and complex interplay of diverse and sometimes opposing selves, making the idea of a pluralistic self both logical and inevitable.

Sidonie Smith, in her 1998 work, introduces the concept of the self's multiplicity by distinguishing between the "written self" and the "writing self." She emphasizes that the "I" who narrates the autobiography is not identical to the "I" who is the subject within the narrative. This distinction raises questions about the traditional assumption that autobiography captures a fixed, authentic self from the past. Instead, Smith suggests that what we perceive as the self is not a stable entity but a construct produced through the act of autobiographical narration, where reality itself is shaped by the storytelling process. In a similar vein, the autobiographical or writing self - like the written self - cannot be considered a fixed, authentic, or pre-existing identity. According to Smith, both selves emerge through the act of writing; they are products of the autobiographical process rather than reflections of a stable reality. As the present self engages with the past, it



does so through the lens of accumulated experiences, shifting ideologies, and evolving values. This interpretive present self seeks to extract meaning from past events, thereby shaping its understanding of the former self. In turn, the remembered past influences the narrative construction of the present self. Thus, the writing self and the written self are interdependent and co-constructive, each shaping and defining the other in the autobiographical act while preserving their distinctiveness.

Smith's distinction between the "written self" and the "writing self" and the notion of the co-constructiveness of past and present selves provide a crucial framework for analyzing the multiplicity of self in Binodini Dasi's autobiographical texts, *My Story* and *My Story as an Actress* illuminating the fluid and evolving dimensions of selfhood represented within them. The self who is writing (*writing self*) and the self who is being written about (*written self*) are not identical. In *My Story*, written when she was around 23, Binodini offers a voice that is introspective, youthful, and still embedded within the world of the theatre. In contrast, in *My Story as an Actress*, written after she had distanced herself from the stage, the voice is far more critical, self-conscious, and disillusioned, indicating that the "writing self" has evolved, reinterpreting and even challenging the earlier "written self." This is not the voice of the naive girl she once was - it's the writing self shaping events to make a social critique. This act of writing certainly reconstructs each self while retaining its uniqueness, yet it simultaneously negotiates what to include and what to suppress under the constraints of editorial censorship, thereby exposing the politics of representation. For example, certain intimate personal relationships are hinted at but never fully disclosed - suggesting editorial control and self-fashioning. In *My Story* before committing to Gurmukh Rai's proposal to establish the Star Theatre, Binodini expressed apprehension about severing ties with her former patron, the "Rich Youth" (*My Story* 84), once her protector whom she believed had betrayed her. She alludes to having evidence of this betrayal, remarking, "I shall tell you later, Mahashoy, in brief, the nature of this evidence" (*My Story* 85), yet she refrains from fully disclosing it suggesting that external pressure and constraints do not allow to assert her narrative authority. This constraint illustrates how selfhood is mediated and produced within discursive limits and subjectivity is constituted through the dynamics of power and knowledge.

The notion of a fragmented or multiple self is central to the form and structure of women's autobiographical writing. Estelle Jelinek, in *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, contrasts the

traditional form of autobiography - typically associated with male authors - with the alternative modes more commonly adopted by women, such as diaries, journals, and personal notebooks. She suggests that these non-linear, episodic forms reflect the often disrupted and discontinuous nature of women's lives, shaped by social and domestic responsibilities. According to Jelinek, women have historically gravitated towards these forms because they resonate with the irregular and multifaceted structure of their daily experiences.

The scattered and incomplete nature of Binodini's writings and their publication history make it difficult to construct a coherent, chronological, and edited version of her autobiographical work. The opening section of *My Story*—including the Preface, Dedication, and *Letters to Mahashoy* - was not written in a linear fashion. As Rimli Bhattacharya observes in her Introduction to *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress*, her autobiographical writing is marked by an “uneven chronology” (Bhattacharya 18) with her literary life extending across three decades and marked by gaps and omissions that obscure a coherent narrative. She further remarks that *My Story* “reads like a palimpsest. It comprises in fact, discontinuous, multiple texts written at different times, published in pieces, and rewritten and edited by the author herself in their various reincarnations”( Bhattacharya 18). For instance, the letters written to Girish Ghosh appear in his introduction to the first published version of her autobiography, which was serialized as *Abhinetrir Katha*. In its final form, the autobiography consists of seven sections, with the opening and concluding parts functioning as “frames” to the narrative of her life as an actress. This fragmentation also extends to the titles of her two autobiographical works - *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress* - which themselves suggests a split between different registers of self-representation. Binodini had intended to write a second part to *My Story*, focusing on her years with her protector - what she described as the happiest thirty-one years of my life. However, this continuation was either never written or never published. In contrast, *My Life as an Actress*, serialized thirteen years later, though abruptly ended, presents a more cohesive narrative.

### **Fragmentation of Self and Precarity**

Broadly speaking, Dasi's fragmented and multidimensional selfhood is represented by her private self, public self, creative self and the self of a mother, constructed at the nexus of patriarchy, colonial modernity, and the emergent public culture. In so far as the formation of her public self is concerned we see that in *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* she repeatedly mentions the role of Girish Chandra Ghosh, her male patrons, who not only



trained and guided her in theatre, enabling her to become a successful actress but also helped her to fashion a public self. The pervasive male gaze of the spectators who consumed her performance also contributed to the construction of her public self. This public self of Binodini Dasi, as Rimli Bhattacharya calls it 'self-exiled self,' (Bhattacharya 17) was not an organic extension of her individuality but a carefully engineered product of theatrical culture, patriarchal patronage, and the discursive structures of colonial Bengal. This selfhood was fundamentally performative, repeatedly constituted through the roles she embodied on stage in the form of mythological goddesses, historical heroines, or social figures in order to gain recognition and cultural visibility. So this public persona, as Olshen states 'the mask worn by the actor' was a male-constructed image that refashioned Binodini Dasi into *Natibinodini* - a commodified subject circulated, consumed, admired, and disciplined for the pleasure of the male gaze. This notion of male gaze has been theorized by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 text '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*' where she says that women are 'looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness ... she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire' (11). By this statement she means that women, in patriarchal visual culture (she mentions this in the field of cinema), are often represented not as active subjects but as passive objects created for others -to look at and her gestures, beauty, and presence are aligned with what men are supposed to desire. So her "public self" was not an autonomous projection of identity but a carefully constructed persona shaped by theatre managers, patrons, and audiences who dictated the terms of her representation.

The private self of Binodini Dasi is very different from her public self. It reveals the inner struggles, desires, and vulnerabilities hidden beneath the success of the image of her public self. The trajectory of Binodini Dasi's private self moves from a stage of childlike innocence and vulnerability, through experiences of betrayal and disillusionment, towards a reflective selfhood, gradually transforming into assertion, and ultimately culminating in spiritual longing. In the *Preface of My Story*, Binodini very economically articulates the condition by which her private self is marked: "There is nothing in this world for me but everlasting despair and the fears of a heart filled with sorrow. And yet, there is not a soul who will listen even to this. There is no one in this world before whom I can lay bare my pain, for the world sees me as a sinner—a fallen woman. I have no kith or kin, no society, no friend—no one in this world whom I may call my own. Yet, it is



Almighty God who... has also given me the power to feel both pain and consolation' (*My Story* 49). This confession lays bare the emotional terrain of her private self, shaped by despair, alienation, loneliness and the indelible stigma of being categorized as a "fallen woman", socially ostracized and denied the comfort of kinship. The striking paradox here is that although she achieved immense visibility on the public stage, her inner life was rendered voiceless, unacknowledged, and silenced by the very society that celebrated her performances.

Binodini attempts to resist societal and patriarchal denial by another psychic faculty - her creative self. The act of writing for Binodini becomes a means to document both her private and public experiences of pain and suffering, while simultaneously functioning as a mode of resistance against patriarchal authority and social denial of recognition. One such denial happened when the manuscript of *My Story* was first completed Binodini sought the approval of Girish Chandra Ghosh, for whom the preface was intended. Girish Chandra Ghosh dismissed her efforts, reducing them to a 'burden' of her so-called "mad black scrawls" (*My Story* 50). His remarks not only trivialized her creative impulse but also undermined a woman's claim to authorship and intellectual agency. The mother's self of Binodini is the extension of her private aspiration, embodying her desire to transcend the stigma of her own social position by envisioning for her daughter a future of dignity, education, and purity. By calling her child "that heavenly flower - *the parijat*, Binodini imagines her as innocent, pure, and culturally refined. This reflects her longing to transcend the stigma attached to her own identity as a *nautch-girl* or *baijis* turned actress through her daughter. Yet the tragedy of her daughter's death transforms this personal hope into a profound source of grief.

### **Conclusion**

Binodini Dasi's life-writing reveals how her identity unfolds through a multiplicity of selves - private, public, creative, and maternal - each revealing how a woman's subjectivity in colonial Bengal was fractured and destabilized under the weight of patriarchal domination, marginalization and social denial. This denial of recognition is a socially produced condition of vulnerability. Through her performances and writings, Binodini endeavored to assert her voice and claim the recognition she rightfully deserved. Yet, contemporary Bengali middle-class society systematically denied her both social legitimacy and cultural acknowledgment.



Her autobiography, therefore, stands not merely as a record of personal experience but as a sharp political critique of the gendered and classed hierarchies that structured colonial Bengali society.

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