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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: In this research paper, attention is given to the autobiographical writings of one of the most famous theatre actresses of nineteenth-century Bengal, Binodini Dasi, to explore how her experiences on and off the stage create various and overlapping identities as presented in her autobiographical writings, *Amar Katha (My Story)* and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban (My Life as an Actress)*. Based on theoretical literature that addresses the ontology of selfhood, this paper attempts to examine how gender, class, and performance interrelate to construct and express the subjectivity of Binodini Dasi, which is split and fragmented through her domestic, public, and artistic identities. Also, it posits that the existence of alienation or instability in Binodini that is brought about by the fragmentation of her 'self' reflects the structural and institutional forces that finally push her out of the mainstream socio-cultural life. This fractured sense of identity situates her life in what Judith Butler defines as precarity, a condition that is defined as vulnerable, dependant and marginalised by the social and cultural structure of that time.

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

Introduction

One pioneering actress in the 19th-century Bengali theatre was Binodini Dasi (1863-1941). Her theatrical performances and her autobiographical writing made her a well-known woman in the theatre world. Binodini was born in 1863 at 145, Cornwallis Street, a locality of North Calcutta where the prostitutes lived, at a time when, at a relatively short distance from the prostitute quarters, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Narendranath Dutta (Vivekananda-1863-1902) were born. In *Amar Katha (My Story)*, she herself admits her own belonging to a prostitute family, 'For I am a social outcast-a despicable prostitute.' She began her acting when she was a teenager in the year 1872 at the Bengal Theatre under the guidance of Saratchandra Ghosh. But her perfection in performance was shaped by the mentoring of Sri Girish Chandra Ghosh. Through hard work, training and practice, she soon gained fame in Bengali theatre and received critical acclaim. Her career was

busy and lasted twelve years between 1874 and 1886, with over eighty roles involved. Due to this, she emerged as one of the renowned performers of her age. One of her many innovative works was *Chaitanya Lila*, a devotional play that was inspired by the teachings of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The play was a challenge to the society that tends to demean women based on their religion, caste, and class. In fact, Binodini was forced to experience social injustice of the same nature. She felt betrayed, and she had to retire prematurely, regardless of her artistic works and large-scale popularity. Her autobiography, *Amar Katha (My Story)* written on the request of her guru, Sri Girish Chandra Ghosh, presents a complicated story of her suffering, exploitation, marginalization and social exclusion particularly due to her being a social outcast which made her identify as a *janamdukhini*, *barangona* (courtesan) and *kolonkini* (fallen woman), and how stigmatized actresses were in those days.

It is on this basis that this paper seeks to critically examine through the lens of emerging theories of selfhood, the multiplicity and fragmentation of selfhood manifested in the life and works of Binodini Dasi in a social structure that supported her art and performance, but condemned and denounced her identity. It also underlines the paradox of her life where her stage performance, her body as spectacle, is publicly valued, yet her personhood was denied ethical and social legitimacy. Her life thus exemplifies Judith Butler's notion of precarity, which operates not merely as economic vulnerability but as a politically induced insecure recognition, wherein visibility does not translate into agency and social belonging.

The Idea of Multiplicity in the Theory of Selfhood

Autobiography is a literary genre that prefigures the self of the author. It is a subjective narration of the experience that the author lived. In his essay, "*Subject, Persona, and Self in the Theory of Autobiography*", Barry N. Olshen attempts to form the ontological basis of autobiography, providing three basic ideas, namely, subject, self, and persona. He refers to the subject as 'a centre of awareness, transcendental (Kantian) or otherwise constructed' (6), implying that the subject, in a way, can be synonymous with the autobiography itself. The persona, in its turn, is defined by Olshen as 'the mask worn by the actor in classical theatre' (6), and the modern-day understanding of persona derives from this concept. It is completely comprised of 'discourse' (6) and is the autobiographical ego, the textual signifier, or the literary subject, essentially, an identity that has been created using language. Olshen defines the self as a type of 'subjective structure' (6) which supports the

conscious and unconscious, psychological and somatic awareness of identity of the subject. It is an expression of uniqueness, a comparatively stable and integrated being. The self has also been figuratively termed as the 'map of the interior' (6), which every person has inside their own body. This subjective structure of the 'self' of Binodini is the immensely complicated and multifaceted structure that has been formed due to the conscious and unconscious experience of her life, a 'self' that has internalised the emotional and physical cost of performing femininity, being subservient, and desiring in the patriarchal public space. As the 'map of the interior, her 'self' should be seen in her various capacities as actress, mother, devotee, outcast-all of these capacities have been influenced by the socio-cultural forces which seek to determine and define her.

The 'self' in postmodernism is sometimes viewed as a textual, discursive subject, which is not necessarily, but is constructed using language and mediated by practices of discourse. A self that results in such processes of textual interpretation is thus split, contingent and without any definite coherence or consistent unity. It is a view that challenges the old assumption of a steady, singular identity and puts in its place a 'self' made up of multiple, and frequently, conflicting expressions. Identity is perceived more as an ongoing and even dynamic interaction of different and even contradictory selves, and in this regard, the concept of a pluralistic 'self' is not only logical but also unavoidable. In her book of 1998, Sidonie Smith presents the notion of multiplicity of the self by differentiating between the 'writing self' and the 'written self'. She stresses the fact that the narration of the autobiography by an 'I' is not the same 'I' who is the subject in the narrative. The difference provokes the question of the conventional belief that autobiography reflects a definite, true past 'self'.

Rather, according to Smith, what we consider to be the 'self' is not a static thing, but a creation by the process of autobiographical narration in which reality is crafted by the very process of storytelling. Similarly, the autobiographical or writing self - like the written self - is not a fixed, authentic or pre-existing identity. Both selves are created during the process of writing; they are results of the autobiographical process, not the images of a constant reality, according to Smith. The current 'self' interacts with the past through the prism of all the experiences one has ever had, and changes with the change in ideology and shifting values. This interpretive present 'self' attempts to draw meaning out of the past events and therefore forms its concept of the former 'self'. The narration of the present 'self' is, in turn, affected by the recalled past. In this way, the writing and the written selves rely on each

other; they are mutually constitutive and construct the other in the process of the autobiographical act and retain their uniqueness.

The difference suggested by Smith between the 'written self' and the 'writing self' and the concept of the co-constructiveness of the past and present selves offer a significant tool of understanding the multiplicity of the self in the autobiographical writings of Binodini Dasi *Amar Katha (My Story)* and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban (My Life as an Actress)* in which she describes the fluid and changing aspects of selfhood personified in them. Binodini has provided a youthful yet introspective voice of the world of the theatre in *Amar Katha (My Story)*, written when she was in her early 20s. But, in *Amar Abhinetri Jiban (My Life as an Actress)*, written when she was no longer associated with the stage, the voice is much more critical, self-conscious, disillusioned; the voice of the 'writing self' has changed, redefining and even contradicting the former 'written self'. That is not the voice of the innocent girl that she used to be - it is the writing self-moulding the events to create a social commentary. This writing is definitely a re-creation of every self without losing its individuality, but it is also a bargaining of what to write and what to repress, given the circumstances of editorial censorship, thus revealing the politics of representation. Indicatively, it brings out intimate personal relationships but never explains them fully (indicating editorial control and self-fashioning). When Binodini agreed to Gurmukh Rai's offer to open the Star Theatre, she was worried about losing the connection with her former patron, the Rich Youth, mentioned in *My Story* (84), who was once her protector and whom she felt had betrayed her. She hints at the fact of such a betrayal when she says, "I shall tell you later", Mahashoy (Bhattacharya 85), in a word, what has been the nature of this evidence, but again does not do so, implying that there is some outside force and limitation that does not permit her to claim her voice of narration.

The concept of the fragmented or multiple self is the predominant concern in the form and structure of the autobiographical writing of women. In *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, Estelle Jelinek compares the standard form of autobiography, traditionally adopted by male writers, and the other forms that have become largely popular among women, including diaries, journals and personal notebooks. She postulates that these non-linear episodic forms are an indication of the fact that the lives of women are usually interrupted and fragmented due to social and home obligations. Jelinek writes that throughout history, women were drawn towards such forms as they are inclined to the irregular and multifaceted form of their everyday life.

The fragmented and discontinuous aspects of the writings of Binodini and their publication history complicate the creation of an authentic and chronological version of her autobiographical work. The introduction of *Amar Katha (My Story)*, as in the Preface, the Dedication, and the Letters to Mahashoy, was not composed in a progressive manner. As Rimli Bhattacharya notes in her Introduction to *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress*, her autobiographical work is characterised by an “uneven chronology” (Bhattacharya 18). She continues to note that *My Story* resembles a palimpsest. It consists, actually, of fragments, several texts created at different periods of time, published in fragments, and rewritten and edited by the author herself in “various reincarnations” (Bhattacharya 18). An example is the correspondence to Girish Ghosh, which she includes in the first published edition of her autobiography, *Amar Katha*. Ghosh has also written the same in his *Srimati Binodini in the Bengal Rangamancha, (Banga-Rangaloye Srimati Binodini)*, originally written in Bengali, that “it would have been better if this short biography had been written in one go, but instead, it has been written in different situations and at different times, which is understood as soon as someone reads it” (Bandyopadhyay 255). The autobiography is divided into seven parts; the first and the last parts of the book are used as the frames for her story of life as an actress. This disunity is also evident in the names of her two autobiographical books - *Amar Katha (My Story)* and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban (My Life as an Actress)*- which in their turn imply a division between a wide range of self-representation.

Fragmentation of Self and Precarity

In a broad sense, the “self” of Binodini Dasi is portrayed by her personal identity, her identity as a woman in society, her own imagination of creativity, and the imagination of the mother that is built at the intersection of patriarchy, colonial modernity, and the new culture in society. This configuration of Dasi’s identity is thus a complex intersection of social, gendered, creative, and maternal dimensions that evolves the sense of multiplicity of her “self”. Consequently, the construction of her public self is also characterised by multiplicity. For example, we find that in *Amar Abhinetri Jiban*, she makes at least two or three references to the role of Girish Chandra Ghosh, her male patron, whose role in training and directing her in theatre allowed her to become a successful actress and helped to fashion her public self. Equally important is the audience’s gaze in shaping her public image as a performer. This self is not a natural, but a highly mediated product of theatrical culture, patriarchal patronage and the discursive formations of colonial Bengal. This public self of

Binodini Dasi has been described by Rimli Bhattacharya as her 'self-exiled' self (Bhattacharya 17). Formation of this self involves the negation or suppression of the authentic self and the internalisation of multiple socially prescribed roles. This self is thus essentially performative as it was repeatedly created through her roles on the stage as a mythological goddess, historical heroine or a social character to receive recognition and cultural representation. So, this social image, according to Olshen, the mask of the actor, was a male-constructed image which re-created Binodini Dasi into *Natibinodini* - a commodified object to be circulated, consumed, admired, and disciplined to the enjoyment of the male gaze. This perception of male gaze has been theorised by Laura Mulvey in her piece of writing carried out in 1975 titled '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*' wherein she writes that women are looked at and presented with their appearance being coded to have a high visual and erotic appeal in the sense that they can be said to connote 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 11). By this, she refers to the fact that women in patriarchal visual culture (she refers to this in the area of cinema) are not depicted as subjects, but rather as passive objects produced by others, to be looked at, and her gestures, beauty and presence are oriented towards what men are meant to desire. Her 'public self' was, therefore, not an independent expression of the authentic self but a well-designed persona which is shaped by theatre managers, patrons and audiences.

Her private self is entirely different from her public self. It shows inner conflicts, wishes and weaknesses, which are often concealed by the success of the image of her public self. The development of Binodini Dasi's private self is a progression from childhood innocence and vulnerability through betrayal and disillusionment to the assertion of a reflective selfhood, ultimately culminating in a state of spiritual longing. In the Preface to *Amar Katha (My Story)*, Binodini expresses the state of her inner self in a very concise way. She laments that there is nothing in this world with her but eternal despair and the fear of a heart full of sorrow, yet there is no one willing to hear her suffering. There is no one in this world whom she can express her agony to; the world thinks her a sinner--a fallen woman. She finds herself utterly isolated - without family, community, or friendship - bereft of anyone she can truly call her own. And still, she acknowledges that it is the Almighty who has endowed her with the capacity to experience both anguish and solace (Bhattacharya 49). This admission is a revelation of the emotional landscape of her inner self as despair, alienation, loneliness and the unremovable label of being branded as a fallen woman, socially outcast and deprived of the solace of kinship.

Another psychic ability by which Binodini tries to oppose the societal and patriarchal denial of female agency is her creative self. The process of being a writer in Binodini is a way of recording, both her own and the general experience of pain and suffering, and at the same time serves as a tool of protest against patriarchal power and social deprivation of identity. Such denial occurred in the case when the manuscript of *Amar Katha (My Story)* was originally prepared, Binodini tried to obtain the permission of Girish Chandra Ghosh, to whom the preface was to be dedicated. Girish Chandra Ghosh rejected her attempts and reduced them to a level of her so-called “mad black scrawls” (Bhattacharya 50). His words had not only diminished her creative drive but also disenfranchised her as a writer and as an intellectual. The self of Binodini as the mother is the projection of her inner desire, her yearning to overcome the stigma of her social standing and imagines her daughter having a dignified future, an educated and a virgin one. In addressing her child as a flower of heaven - the parijat, Binodini pictures her as naive, innocent, and cultured. This is portrayed as her wish to escape the stigma that is attached to her own identity as a nautch-girl or baiji turned into an actress. But this personal hope is changed to an inmost grief by the tragedy of the death of her daughter.

The conditions that result in this fragmentation of Dasi’s self can be more effectively understood when examined through the lens of the theoretical discourse on precarity. In works like *Precarious Life*, Butler claims that some lives are vulnerable as they face insecurity, loss of property, and social neglect. This fractured sense of identity inherent in her assuming various roles and social denial of her respectability argues that women are susceptible and precarious within the deeply entrenched systems of a patriarchal social order due to this fractured sense of self. The paper analyses the role of this vulnerability in the lives of Binodini Dasi, a colonial Bengali actress, through the theory of precarity by Judith Butler, which is conceived not just in the form of economic vulnerability but also in the omnipresence of social abandonment and structural displacement. To the extent that is the case with the actresses of the Bengali theatre, this precariousness was created as a result of the colonial modernity intertwining with gender, caste, and class. Here, it should be mentioned that, even though the successful performance of the actresses was the key to both artistic and commercial achievements of the stage, they were still being marginalised in the social system where they could not gain access to power, property, and social entitlement. Although these women attempted self-fashioning in the way of writing their memoirs, taking on roles in their different plays and community organisation to establish their agency in the

highly patriarchal and colonial society, they were not included in positions of power and ownership of property. In this connection, *Amar Katha (My Story)* and *My Life as an Actress (Amar Abhinetri Jiban)* by Binodini Dasi is a strong example of such precarity and at the same time the emphasis on contradictions of self-representation, agency and marginalisation that form the basis of autobiographical subjectivity of women in colonial modernity.

Conclusion

The life-writing of Binodini Dasi speaks of her identity as fractured and destabilised between her privacies, publics, creativity and maternity in a force of patriarchal domination, marginalisation, and social denial. Such a refusal is a socially constructed state of weakness. In her works and acting, Binodini tried to demonstrate her voice and make herself heard and recognised. However, the society of the Bengali middle classes in the contemporary period in a systematic manner, failed to provide her both the social legitimacy and the cultural recognition. There is, then, more than personal experiences in her autobiography but an incisive political commentary on the gendered and classed hierarchies which defined colonial Bengali society, in her autobiography.

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