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Recollecting the Body: Violence and Resistance in the Writings of a Theatre Actress in Colonial Bengal

By Anannya Mitra¹

Abstract

Critical interventions by black, third world, and/or postcolonial feminists against the homogenizing tendencies of majoritarian narratives of women have led to the emergence of intersectional feminist scholarship and its endeavour to postulate women's stories along the interfaces of race, class, caste, and gender hierarchies. Historicizing social and material bodies has been a constant engagement here, resulting in the analysis of symbiotic processes of subject formation and otherization, thereby entailing a confrontation with the heterogeneous nature of violence and its functioning in such processes. Using such scholarship, this article seeks to comprehend the interplay of various forms of violence in the historical production of given identities and spaces relegated to the bodies of the Other – the Other of Hindu elite women. To do so, this article explores the sub-world of women in the commercial theatre of Bengal during the late colonial period (late 19th to early 20th century). Through a close and critical reading of the writings of one of the most popular actresses of Bengali theatre during those times, Binodini Dasi, the article illuminates the ways in which violence has functioned on the actress to reproduce an otherized body. For the second objective, the article analyses how the actress subverts through the act of writing such subjection of violence. It can be argued that the actresses' writings do not specifically symbolize an unadulterated agential voice; instead, the effect of violence is such that the interiorities of the actress emanate anguish, inhabiting a liminal space between resistance and subversion.

Keywords: Violence, Resistance, Bengal, Actress, Subversion

Introduction

However, I shall say something of those days, I shall try to speak of those days. They are simple truths, knowing which the readers and spectators of today will realise what sort of mud lying in the bottom of the ponds they used—they who founded the theatre in this land—to fashion living, speaking dolls. (Dasi, 1998, p. 129)

Binodini Dasi, or Nati Binodini, was one of the most successful and popular actresses in 19th-century Bengali theatre. This excerpt is from Binodini's memoir, *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* (*My Life as an Actress*, 1924-25), where she documented her life as a professional actress on the public/commercial stage.² Apart from this work, she had also penned an autobiography, *Amar Katha* (*My Story*, 1912), a book of poems titled *Basana* (a collection of 40 poems,

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²a) The terms Dasi and Nati came to be used with Binodini's name more than to signify her profession. It contained symbolic meanings that have been acquired as a result of cultural iconization of the trajectory of her professional life (Bhattacharya, 1998, pp. 88-89). b) Both, *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* (1924-25) and *Amar Katha* (1912) have been translated into English by Rimli Bhattacharya and was published in 1998 as *My Story and My Life as an Actress by Binodini Dasi*. All the lines from Binodini's autobiographical accounts quoted in this article are from Bhattacharya's translation of the same.

1896), *Kanak O Nalini* (narrative poem, 1905), and *Letters* on theatre. While the journals and magazines penned by the Hindu elite women during this time had gained adequate attention in the public sphere and attained an important place in the writing of women's history in Bengal, it took several decades to recognize the writings of some of the first professional actresses of modern Indian theatre (Tharu, 1999, p. 581).³ Hence, Binodini's writings lay dormant for almost a century before getting translated in the late 19th century. Some other works of theatre actresses during that time which are yet to be translated include Teenkori Dasi's *Abhinetrir Katha* (or *Story of an Actress*), certain songs by Prova Devi, and a drama by Sukumari Dutta (*Apoorva Sati* 1875).⁴ Together, her autobiography and memoir of her professional life provide a window into the tumultuous life of Binodini, who started acting in 1874 at eleven years of age. Coming from a lower-class and prostitute background, she tasted instant success at an early age owing to her ability to be able to portray a huge variety of roles in association with the most prolific playwrights and directors of that time. Though there were many memories which, according to Binodini, had become "blurred and confusing," certain events from her early childhood like the initiation of her training, induction into public theatre, the different theatre companies she was attached to, and the different roles performed by her have been recounted passionately.

The commercial theatre of Bengal during the late colonial period (late 19th to early 20th century) provided a space of expression for many actresses who came from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or had been prostitutes. Further, it ended up consecrating these women only in their momentary embodiments of the *bhadramahila*⁵ (the upper-caste and middle-class Hindu woman) on stage while degrading them as the Other beyond it. Binodini's writings then serve as one of the ways to understand the interplay between different forms of violence in the historical production of identities given and of spaces relegated to the bodies of the Other – the Other of the Hindu elite women. Her writings not only bring the reader close to the events of her life, events that have been inscribed on her body, but they also bring the reader closer to her. Her work reveals actresses' bodies as sites of struggle and anguish, mostly because their bodies shuttle between being inflicted upon by violence and providing a fertile ground for the emergence of resistance. This article thus attempts a close and critical reading of Binodini's writings in order to firstly highlight the workings of the heterogeneous nature of violence that women are subjected to while working in theatre and, secondly, to note the subversive tendencies exhibited through her act of writing about her being.

³ According to Karlekar, four hundred works were estimated to have been written by Bengali women between 1856 and 1910; twenty-one periodicals which dealt with women's issues were also published during this time. See, Karlekar, M. *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991, p.62.

⁴ While it can be debatable, the most successful and popular actresses were Binodini, Tarasundari, Golapsundari, and Teenkori who seemed to have dominated in the latter part of the 19th century. They were succeeded by Prova Devi, Charushila, and Konkabati with the coming of the 20th century (Gooptu, 2015, p.115).

⁵ A common terminology used in Bengal, the *bhadramahila/bhadralok* has come to accommodate a multi-layered group, often with the groups not being exclusive of each other. It usually refers to Hindu upper-caste and middle-class Bengalis who are educated, economically ambiguous or open-ended (though there is a wide range between the upper and lower middle classes), who tend to work in the service sector (because getting an English/Western education helped them get government jobs in the colonial offices), and call themselves liberals. Thus, the *bhadralok* comprises the topmost layers of the affluent elite, a middle order/middle class (*madhyabitta*), and a lower-middle class stratum (*nimna-madhyabitta*) (Sharmishtha Gooptu, 2010, p. 14). To simplify even further, in accordance with the Bengali language, the term is actually constitutive of two independent words, that is, *bhadra* and *mahila/lok*; while *bhadra* pertains to something cultured, respectable, and refined, *mahila/lok* means woman or man. See, Gooptu, and Sarmishtha (2010). *Bengali Cinema: "An Other Nation."* Routledge.

Struggle with the Archives: From Selective Amnesia to Private Accounts

It would be apposite to note at the outset the lopsided nature of existing official and public documentation, or rather the politics of it, when it came to the actresses' lives. While there was a substantial body of scholarship on the subject of theatre, acting, and theatre personalities, actresses were largely absent from these works. The theatre magazines and newspapers of the time period were all controlled by the male patriarchs. Young and erudite theatre personalities were equally invested in engendering the idea of certain women becoming theatre actresses. With archival material on actresses being scarce, this male writing or overtly patriarchal perspective accounts for a large portion of it. Hence, the actresses seldom were central characters in these texts. There remained only two biographies where the actresses were the protagonists of the texts – one on Sukumari Datta by Kiron Chandra Data and another on Teenkori Dasi by Upendranath Vidhyabhushan.⁶ What becomes clear is that the relationship between official history and that of the lives of the actresses can be seen as producing a trend of “selective amnesia.”⁷ Through Carolyn Steedman's essay, “Archival Methods” (2005), one gets to look at archives in a different way which is influenced by her conceptualization of history itself, which pertains to “a form of thinking and a form of feeling, which gets done after the archive” (2005, pp. 22-23). The difference in her position regarding archives is that archives are not where the past lives per se, or where the truth of the past can be discovered. Rather, it is the “fragments, traces and little bits of floatsam” of the past that reside in the archives (Steedman, 2005, p. 23). Hence, one then cannot fall back on the archives in a conventional manner as a repository containing everything there is to know which awaits the historian's discovery. A private account of their lives can be gained from the actresses' autobiographies and their literary works, of which there are only a handful that have not acquired the same stature and popularity in the public sphere as writings from women from the upper strata of society during the same time. These writings by the actresses then can be seen to provide counter-texts to the official history's relation to their lives. I do not look at their private memories in their writings as unmediated repositories of authentic knowledge about the actresses. Still, the past encountered in this way provides an “affective return” to certain episodes of the lives of these actresses (Menon, 2017, p. 134).⁸ Drawing from the selective amnesia of the official history and the personal narratives, one has to engage in a kind of speculative history in order to weave together the lives of these actresses. While the domain of

⁶ While Teenkori's story came to us more credibly with the actress herself narrating her life to the author, in Sukumari Dutta's case, the biographer gave a biased picture of her life. In reality, the actress Sukumari Dutta was forced to leave the theatre and get married, only to be abandoned by her husband after he faced societal discrimination for marrying a fallen woman. Her biographer, though, defended her husband's decision and portrayed Sukumari in an accusatory light as she re-joined the theatre to sustain her family. See, Gooptu, S. (2015). *The Actress in the Public Theatres of Calcutta*. Delhi: Primus Books.

⁷ I use the word “selective amnesia” to characterize this trend because, firstly, it is only for a few actresses that there exists any kind of considerable documentation, thereby highlighting an exclusivity, though this could also be dependent on their popularity and the presence of their own writings. Second, even when certain actresses' lives are documented, they have been done quite strategically and selectively to form a narrative, thereby highlighting only particular events or episodes of their lives and leaving out the rest. For instance, in the case of the actress, Binodini, it is through the event of her being blessed by the religious saint Ramakrishna that she is talked about, remembered and re-visited. Episodes like these helped theatre gain respectability in the eyes of middle-classes with the acknowledgement and blessing received from the saintly figures for the actresses' performance. Thus, it is through certain episodes of the actresses' careers and personal lives (who were otherwise seen as fallen women) that the Bengali theatre acquired its respectable status, thereby deeming it fit for the cultured public, and it is through the documentation of these episodes that they tend to be remembered.

⁸ The term “affective returns” has been employed by Bindu Menon to describe how the life narrative of the Dalit actress P.K. Rosy (the heroine who appeared in the first locally produced film in Kerala) pieces together her otherwise officially undocumented life but also reveals the history of caste and gender politics perpetuated in Indian and Malayalam cinema. See, Menon, Bindu. (2017) *Affective Returns: Biopics as Life Narratives*. *Biography*, 40(1), 116-139.

traditional history had been dominated by the need for evidence and objective positionalities, the period between the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a shift towards unconventional forms of historical analysis following the change in the points of inquiry. Social and gender histories enabled historical possibilities, resulting in the creation of imaginary biographies in combination with relevant documents or the construction of characters through whom a host of ordinary forgotten lives could be symbolically projected. Along with the rethinking of commonly used resources like archives and official documents, silences, traces, speculations, and conjectures thus become crucial in understanding the politics of private accounts.

From the Prostitute to the Actress: The Violence of Inscribed Identities

Existing works on women in Bengali theatre include Rimli Bhattacharya's translation of Binodini's autobiography, *My Story and My Life as an Actress* (1998); her essay, "Public Women': Early Actresses of the Bengali Stage—Role and Reality" (1990); Sarvani Gooptu's book, *The Actress in the Public Theatres of Calcutta* (2015); and Bishnupriya Dutt's *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity* (2010). This body of scholarship has not only provided a glimpse into the lives of Bengali theatre actresses, but has also examined the politics of these women's location, their writings, and their relationship with their profession. With no women from respectable households being allowed to perform on stage, the red-light areas became a potent resource for recruitment (Bhattacharya, 1990, p. 5). This then provided an opportunity for these women to leave their profession and enter a "cultural milieu which exposed them to the seemingly best in classical and modern literature" (Bhattacharya, 1990, p. 107). Consequently, this remarkable moment of the induction of actresses into the Bengali theatre, which was initiated in 1872, was met with a varied number of reactions from the public. The fact that all of these women share a social location, class, and caste affiliation is one of the key takeaways from this literature. It is difficult to determine the exact caste community of most of these women in these cultural domains with only repeated references to the fact that many of them were from the lower castes and classes. Even if they are from upper castes, there exists a tendency to lose their caste once they leave home and partake in such professions. Again, the existing literature on the changing role of women in colonial Bengal, the consolidation of the stereotype of *bhadramahila* (the upper caste and middle-class woman), and the presence of marginalized women in the cultural industries lead us to particular deductions.⁹ That is, there was a symbiotic existence of consecration and iconization of the *bhadramahila* through their writings, which followed the ideals of womanhood on one hand, and on the other hand, degradation of the lower-caste and working-class women (or the Other of *bhadramahila*) and their professions which were mostly linked with entertainment/public performance. This led to the production of knowledge regarding the Other, the ascription of certain identities to them, and the relegation of certain spaces to them.¹⁰

The process of ascription was evident from the moment of their induction into the theatre. Various sections of society, the reformists, traditionalists, and reactionaries, debated over the recruitment of the actresses. The doubts were justified based on these women's questionable backgrounds and the potential threat or unfavourable effects that it might have

⁹ During the period of the 1850s to 1900s, there emerged the new ideal of womanhood, or more precisely, "the stereotype of *bhadramahila*" (Borthwick 358). The *bhadramahila* was to embody a balance between the traditional and the modern, though the latter was to be selectively chosen so as to fall in line with the former, more so in a complimentary manner. Shaped predominantly by the *bhadralok* (predominantly upper caste and middle-class men), these ideals of womanhood qualifying the *bhadramahila* were propagated through various women's organizations and journals of this time period. See, Borthwick, Meredith. "Introduction." *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905*. Vol. 2088. Princeton University Press, 2015.

¹⁰ With the difficulty of validating the exact caste category of these performers, the caste category itself being largely in a state of (in)expressibility in Bengal and only a small section of lower caste people in the region using the term Dalit to define themselves, the term "other" is being used here.

had on young minds. The traditionalists predicted that the uncultivated bearings of theatre would proliferate, leading to a distancing from the reformist and doctrinal agenda that it was primarily associated with (Bhattacharya, 1998). Criticism against such standpoints was led by the need to come on par with the ideals of enlightenment instilled within the educated male dictators of theatre in their aim to close the gap in their engagement with the colonizers.¹¹ These latter narratives propagated by the young male, English-educated bastions of public theatre then overshadowed the crucial moment of entry of women into theatre by a sense of obligation on their part in the resuscitation of the fallen women. It is through this kind of rhetoric that the actresses were exhibited on the stage, thereby manufacturing their bodies as sites of reform. This gets aptly translated into the process of becoming an actress, which entailed their transition from talented girls to the *nayika* (heroines). Throughout her autobiography, Binodini recalled various instances of being mentored by Girish Ghosh, one of the stalwarts of Bengali theatre. “It was true that on the stage I worked according to the instructions that were given me” (Dasi, 1998, p. 65). These instructions came to the fore as she noted how “Girish-babu would instruct me with great care on my role [...] he would [...] talk to us about numerous English actresses and the works of famous English poets such as Shakespeare, Byron, Milton and Pope. He discussed their works in the form of stories and sometimes he read out sections from the texts to explain them better. He taught us a range of behaviour, discussing every aspect separately” (Dasi, 1998, p. 78). Again, many of the incidents recounted by Binodini highlight how most of her decisions were either supervised, moulded, or overridden by her mentor. For instance, she had decided to either leave or be compensated with a higher salary by Pratap Johuree’s theatre company when she was denied her salary following her sick leave. Her mentor subsequently convinced her of the unfeasibility of such a step and made her withdraw her decision. Regarding the choice of staying with certain patron-protectors, Binodini had to pay heed to her mentor’s decision as many times they had ties with the patrons who had power over the future prosperity of the theatre world in general.

Moreover, the nature of the training that these actresses had been subjected to became more apparent in the roles that they performed on stage. If one is to look at the performances of actresses, apart from playing divine and religious characters from Hindu mythology like Sita, Draupadi, and Lakshmi, the actresses also donned the roles of some very well-known characters from contemporary novels by the most prolific Bengali writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Michael Madhusudan Datta, and Dinabandhu Mitra. While the historical figure was another category, for social plays, farces and *geetinatyas* (a genre of theatre dominated by songs), it was mostly the upper-caste, middle-class women or the *bhadramahila* who were brought to life by these actresses. The content of the plays and characters performed over time invariably revealed a pattern of transition from domestic and social dramas to mythologies (Dutt, 2010, p. 51). That is, this shift took the actresses from playing the roles of transgressive wives to chaste and domesticated ones to self-sacrificing proprietors of conjugal harmony to mythological heroines, and finally to playing muses of nationalist iconography (Dutt, 2010, p. 51). It has been posited that this extension from social dramas to mythologies was a result of the attestation of the ideals of domesticity through glorifying acts of self-sacrifice and martyring (Dutt, 2010, p. 52). It was a “hegemonizing and homogenizing” process of acquiring acceptability from the middle classes in order to convert theatre, or if one can say, canonize theatre, into an institution with a nationalist outlook (Dutt, 2010, p. 59). The reconfiguration of the actress as the ideal feminine figure was a crucial component to achieve that goal (Dutt, p. 50). The body of the actress then became a site where the ideals of femininity

¹¹ While the repudiation came from the writings (newspapers and autobiographies) of men in Brahma Samaj, which led to some Bengali intelligentsia cutting ties with the stage, the actresses were defended by the writings of proponents of public theatre, a younger population, such as Girish Chandra Ghosh and Upendranath Vidyabhushan (Gooptu, 2015, p. 69).

and domesticity were inscribed through rigorous training, discipline, and finally, through the roles of *bhadramahila* that they were supposed to embody on the stage. Every night, actresses were moulded into their *bhadramahila* sisters through such roles, necessitating a kind of violent debasement of their lower-caste and lower-class identities. The intersection of the actresses' caste, class, and gender and how she negotiated with it in the theatre culture was made to coagulate within the singular identity of a prostitute, which needed to be redeemed. As a result, her body was constantly redefined and attributed with the identity of the prostitute turned actress and/or prostitute-actress, from her training to her performed roles. This wasn't a static identity. Rather, she was designed to exist in a hyphenated identity somewhere between prostitute and actress, but never quite both. On one hand, Binodini, passionately remembered how "it [acting] had become as if an inextricable part of my nature, to study my role, to envisage a scene according to the demands of the part, and imprinting it in my mind, to stand before a huge mirror internalising the modes and gestures of each of those natural behavioural patterns; and then, to watch these pictures of the mind with rapt attention. So much so, that every aspect of the movement—walking, sitting, lying down—had also become my own" (Dasi, 1998, p. 80). On the other hand, even amidst having gained favourable reviews for her acting, she was still censured, because it was a sin for people of her sort to play such lofty characters (Dasi, 1998, p. 100).

Further, the actress was not only to embody an ideal feminine figure upholding the nationalist agenda of domestic conjugality. Rather, it was a dual persona that she had to inhabit in order to maintain the commercial viability of the theatre (Dutt, p.60). She was to gravitate toward a balance between being a public exhibit of nationalist ideology championing domestic harmony as well as an object of male desire – an alluring, sensuous entertainer who ensured saleability. Both the ideal and not-so-ideal inhabited by the actress were extremely instrumental in conditioning the acceptability factor as well as sustaining the theatre (Dutt, p.50). The fashioning of this dual persona of a muse and entertainer then invoked reverence for the characters portrayed as well as sensual and sexual desire. In particular, the latter sentiment played upon the existing referents of eroticism and the pornographic lexicon in colonial Bengali society to lure the male audience. As a result, the actresses were able to not only hold the audience's attention but also elicit feelings of veneration and fetishization at the same time. This affective dynamic underwent a drastic change beyond the stage. The same caste and class identities of the actresses, which were momentarily suspended in the embodiments of various roles, became the basis on which the actresses were stigmatized outside the theatre. Their rightful due from their professional fields was violated with total disregard for their remarkable talents and fame. Social and spatial segregation didn't allow them to enjoy the privileges meant for their *bhadramahila* sisters. Hence, the actresses were pathologized as fallen women based on the curse of their birth (*janmashap* or *janmadukhini*), the latter term being used by Binodini to express her position in society (Bhattacharya, 1998, p. 11). Such discrimination and degradation led the actresses to perceive themselves as "fallen" women (Gooptu, 2015, p. 9). Their lower-caste and class-marked public bodies were prescribed and surveilled as a threat to society which could contaminate the societal equilibrium.

Certain events from her life story illuminate this point. During the performance of the play, *Chaitanya Lila*, Binodini fainted on stage. The actress recounted that "when I regained consciousness, I found that a huge bearded *saheb* (a British man) wearing flowing garments, was running hands all over my body, from my head to my feet" (Dasi, 1998, p. 94). She was told by her mentor that this was a great pundit and scholar, Father Lafont, and that she should pay her respects to him. A similar incident is narrated by her during another performance of this same play:

And it was during this performance of *Chaitanya-Lila*, that is to say, not only this performance, but the incident around it which became the source of greatest pride in all my life, that I a sinner, was granted grace by the Paramhansadeb Sri Ramakrishna mahashoy. Because it was after seeing me perform in *Chaitanya-Lila* [...], he would place his hands on my head and cleansing with his touch my sinful body, he blessed me. (Dasi, 1998, p. 95)

These instances highlighted how the actress's body was pathologized and perceived as in need of some correction by the touch of a saint or a scholar.

Taken together, then, the reverence, the fetishization, and the pathologization all constituted different modes of violence on the actresses' bodies, leading to their otherization. This reached its culmination when Binodini's decision to leave the public theatre was attached to this above-mentioned moment of receiving the blessing of one of the most well-known Bengali religious saints (Ramkrishna) upon her portrayal of the religious figure of Chaitanya. The blessings of Ramkrishna were seen as pivotal for the public performer's retirement from the stage, as it echoed the sense of the fallen acquiring salvation in the wake of benediction. The figure of Binodini being redeemed then acted as a "metaphor for the regeneration of public theatre," bringing it into the more respectable folds of the middle classes (Bhattacharya, 1990, p. 194). The event of an actress who exhibited herself on the public stage every night being redeemed by the power of bhakti was thus upheld almost like a relic. It was enacted and re-enacted through plays, literary narratives, and popular journalism until the act "acquired the power of an exemplum" (Bhattacharya, 1990, p.194). Consequently, this led to the denouement of Binodini into a defeminised and desexualised body, which became the paradigm for the other actresses to follow (Dutt, 2010, p. 62). Hence, the network of reverence, fetishization, and pathologization actually worked in a way such that whenever the actress was on stage or beyond it, the societal gaze dissected, violated, and stigmatized their bodies. The intensity of this violence is evident throughout her text, as Binodini remarked, "Because I have no relations, I am despised. I am a prostitute, a social outcast; there is no one to listen to or to read what I feel within! [...] A polluted being can do nothing other than pollute!" (Dasi, 1998, p. 107).

The Actress Writes Back: Between Resistance and Docility

Though it has been mentioned by Binodini herself that her mentor had encouraged her to write about her life in the theatre as a professional actress, her writings do not quite match the kind of text that was expected from her. Rather than deliberating about her acting techniques and profession objectively, Binodini wrote about her personal life as it was inextricably linked to her profession, the theatre (Bhattacharya, 1998, p. 19). Her writing did not follow the framework of a conventional autobiography by being a narration of a life of achievement and success. In contrast, she recounts her despair, breach of expectation and trust from near and dear ones around her. The thrill that is noted in some of her discussions of acting or practicing her roles is sometimes notably absent. There are several times when she deliberates upon the meaning of her life: "My entire life has been wasted in repentance. I have been repentant at every step; had there been the means to correct my life I would have realised the fruits of repentance" (Dasi, 1998, p. 57). Binodini's personal narrative functions in two ways. One is noted by the author herself as the reason she wrote about her life: "The talented, the wise and the learned write in order to educate people, to do good to others. I have written for my own consolation, perhaps for some unfortunate woman who taken in by deception has stumbled on to the path to hell" (Dasi, 1998, p. 107). These statements are made by the author near the end of her autobiography, almost as if she desires some kind of connection and solace that her life story might be able to offer. Second, her personal narrative is also able to provide a social and gendered critique of theatre: "The theatre in those days was a place for literary discussions.

There was so much discussion on so many varied topics—I understood very little of it then, but I did realise that theatre was in those times a meeting ground for a distinguished group of bhadralok” (Dasi, 1998, p. 149). Observations like these bring to the fore that the cultural forms in colonial Bengal were not particularly democratic and inclusive spaces. They were very much the seats of consolidation and promotion of the power of the upper-caste and upper-class sections of society.

It is interesting to notice how the education imparted by their *mentors*, who were mostly theatre playwrights and directors belonging to the upper-caste and middle-class male milieu, helped the actresses to not only bring to life these characters with much perfection but also to write about their life on stage. Added to this, details of their meticulous learning and playing the part both outside and within the theatre showcased how they would outshine the dramatist, the novelist, and the director’s sketch of their characters and their comprehension of the demand of audience imagination (Bhattacharya, 1990, p. 153). Again, while they gradually came to exercise some control over certain aspects of their performance, matters pertaining to money and business were always off-limits to their intervention. On the one hand, Binodini came to hone and exhibit her impeccable tastes in costume and make-up, thereby acquiring some authority in the matters of stage and acting, but was betrayed when Star Theatre was not named after her, as had been promised to her on her investment in it. Hence, in her autobiography, Binodini expressed her feelings of “self-doubt, torment and insubstantiality” along with a sense of dejection and betrayal that she had received from many within the world of theatre (Bhattacharya, 1990, p. 159). Most of the existing literature on these women’s texts has marked a dual tendency and unrest in their lives wherein they have been undecided between their successful careers as actresses and their expectation of domestic bliss. It was understood that, despite negotiating their presence on stage, they were ultimately transitory. Association with the world of the stage was always a reminder of “the absence of having a place to stand, and a family to which they could belong,” which was considered to be an absolute necessity for attaining respectability (Bhattacharya, 1990, p.163). In their choice of domestic bliss, one can recognize their desire to attain the acceptance of the higher strata of society. On the one hand, the act of writing their lives or even others’ lives (through other genres) symbolized their talking back to the public sphere regarding the figuration of the actress; on the other hand, their writings entailed the internalization of ideals of womanhood like domesticity and chastity, along with a desire to redeem themselves based on these ideals. Hence, it can be argued that the same devices through which they assumed and actualized the roles of *bhadrmahila* on stage were also the ones to which they desired to conform. However, complying with such domesticity required them to terminate their association with their profession, that is, theatre. Her writings were then a recapitulation of all the anguish, desire, and violence that pulsed through her body. It was as if her body had been an archive of the complexities of these emotions that she had gone through or was subjected to. In her exercise of writing, it seems as if she was drawing from her body, which served as a repository for everything that she had observed and felt.

Consequently, to posit her body and, in extension, her writings as either pertaining to docility or resistance would only lead to overlooking the complexity of their victimization and agency and, in extension, the effect of violence. In order to make sense of the nature of the being and action of the actress, I take into account the concepts of agency, subversion, and resistance as theorized by the anthropologist Saba Mahmood in her seminal work, *Politics of Piety* (2011). Through her ethnographic study of the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood problematizes the normative liberal assumptions about agency and resistance, thereby complicating debates within feminist theory regarding the simplistic binaries of submission and patriarchy. For her, it is crucial to interrogate the universality of acts like resistance, since such universality fails to see “forms of being and action that are not necessarily

encapsulated by a narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms” (2011, p. 9). Hence, it is essential to complicate the tendency to conflate women’s agency with resistance against relations of domination. Further, the author draws from Judith Butler’s conceptualization of the subject and Foucault’s theorization of ethics to posit the idea of agency “beyond the confines of the binary model of enacting and subverting norms” (2011, p. 29). With the help of these theorists, Mahmood marks the possibility of reading agency “in terms of capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral actions” and as “ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which subject is formed” (2011, p. 29). So, Mahmood asks a very important question: how do we make sense of individual freedom when it is hard to tell the difference between the subject’s own desires, potentialities, self-realization, and socially authorized forms of performance, and when it is hard to tell the difference between submitting to external authority and doing what the subject wants to do?

Following from here, I recognize the actresses’ bodies as neither a site of resistance per se nor one of pure docility. Rather, I argue that her body existed in a state of in-betweenness or liminality¹² which was expressed through the constant anguish on the page. While the concept of liminality originated in smaller societies to explain ritual passages, it gradually spread to give meaning to political and cultural conditions. To summarize, liminality pertains to the intermediary and structurally ambiguous state within ritual passages wherein there is neither a sense of belongingness nor that of being cast away. While it has been pointed out that liminality marks a negation of structural assertions, allowing an existence within the gaps of social structures, it can also allow the extreme awareness of the lack of structure, thereby opening the possibility of newer ones (Beech, 2011). In this case, the accounts of their sufferings from having to choose between theatre and domestic life are a testament to their state of belonging in between. The state of liminality then offers a reflection of the heterogeneity and instability of violence, as it does not particularly lead the actress to be either subversive or docile. Moreover, it can be argued that the actresses’ being and action are beyond the control of binary positions of subversion and domination, and they lie splintered within the varied characters that are performed by them on and off-screen. This kind of in-between state should not be seen per se as stemming from a crisis of identity; rather, it should be perceived as allowing potentiality uninhibited by the universal registers of dissent or docility.

Conclusion

The lines written by Binodini quoted at the beginning of the article now make more sense. The truths that the actress had wanted to express through her writing were far from simple, as they laid bare the process in which “the living, speaking dolls” of the Bengali theatre were manufactured. By describing the actresses as dormant dolls, she highlights the cognizance or awareness of her body to this disciplining or fashioning that took place. A close reading of her life story points out the necessity of re-working the analytical lenses used in women’s histories if one is to get closer to the variegation and intersections of class, caste and gender. Further, in her exercise of writing herself, Binodini complicates the very nature of actresses’ being, thereby recognizing them “as a product of historically, politically and ethically discursive traditions in which they are located” (Mahmood, 2011, p. 32). Because of these factors, it is important to reread the lives of actresses and the memories they have archived to find and understand the different and sometimes contradictory points of their voices.

¹² Emerging in the 1900s in the work *Rites de Passage* by folklorist Arnold Van Gennep, the idea of liminality was further developed through Victor Turner’s work, *The Forest of Symbols* (1967).

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