



Subaltern to 'Signora': Feminist Factors in Binodini Dasi's Autobiography *My Story*

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Abstract:

Binodini Dasi's lifelong contribution to the rise of Bengali theatre and the beginning of the Bengal renaissance has been deliberately subjected to historical amnesia. Her mentor, Grishchandra Ghosh, whom she had requested to edit her maiden attempt at writing an autobiography, ridiculed her efforts, equating the manuscript to 'mad black scrawls' (Binodini, 1998, p. 31). This paper critically examines how Binodini Dasi's autobiography, *My Story*, reaches its crescendo of feminist resistance by highlighting the meticulous strategies she adopts to legitimize an alternate femininity. My endeavour in this article will be to present Binodini Dasi not merely as a victim of social constraints but as an empowered individual who navigates and subverts the expectations and attributes imposed upon her, thereby contributing to a richer understanding of feminism and gendered defiance in historical and literary contexts.



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The primary reason behind the existence of feminism is to acknowledge the diverse experiences of women and to highlight the much-overlooked aspect of humanism. Yet a vastly misinterpreted segment of feminist criticism tends to generalise feminist texts under categories of common issues they address. But to put Sappho's ideology in the same chart as Mary Wollstonecraft's is the most anti-feminist agenda feminism can preach. For the unlettered, underprivileged, ultimate subaltern Binodini, radical feminism was more alien than the dream of having a family. When the eminent feminist Simone de Beauvoir was having a lovely romance with Sartre, Binodini was thrown out onto the streets by Gurmukh Roy's (her benefactor) family after his death. In 1941, when Virginia Woolf died teaching women the comfort of having a room of their own, Binodini died a lonely, crippled woman in her very own house. The very same year, Elaine Showalter was born with the future notions of the 'female', 'feminine', and 'feminist' (Showalter, 1979, p. 2) authors, while Binodini in her lifetime had belonged to much of all three criteria. Her autobiography, *My Story*, defies, in its own exceptional way, the gender difference that shapes the genealogy of the socio-cultural history of Bengal. Many critics have refused to consider her life writing as a social text, as she has been viewed as one of the many women being trained by the Bengali upper classes to become a de facto face of ethnic identity that rejects the colonial influence upon culture. However, a critical reading of the autobiography clearly reveals that the essence of the self has in no way been curtailed to present a national identity. Rather, Binodini vehemently opposes the idea of refashioning herself at the insistence of outsiders. Her refashioning of the self happens according to her own will, and its gradual progress can be traced throughout her writing. Her criticism is brief, as if a few words would suffice to shun off all unpleasantness labelled upon her name. Such confidence exuded by a woman not belonging to the upper classes urges us to re-examine the aspects of cultural identity that contradict her identity as a feminist libertarian. For Binodini, the act of writing and performing a violation of the dictates of feminine respectability becomes an instrument of self-expression and emotional autonomy.

Autobiographies written by women are often accused of being loosely structured and aesthetically unappealing because of their overly emotional narratives. This accusation can be doubled for a woman like 'Nati' Binodini, who writes from a social position of absolute humiliation and ostracization. In nineteenth-century Bengali aristocratic society, the term 'Nati' (a publicly dancing woman) was a derogatory attribute assigned to a woman of loose morals, alias a prostitute who deceitfully acts (employs 'nataka') to be a man's lover and caregiver for her own benefit. The very title of her autobiography then becomes an act of dismantling the socially inherent, sexual allegations thrown on her and restoring her discourse to be unblemished and acceptable to the predominantly male readers. This endeavour is supported by her acknowledgement that women's education is the force of moral upliftment, regardless of one's social standing: 'Even though I was a despised prostitute, I had received higher education, and I hated deception and untruth from the core of my heart' (Binodini, 1998, p. 82). While Bengali aristocratic female autobiographers employed more artistic titles, such as *Jiboner Jhorapata* (The Scattered Leaves of my Life) or *Janaika Grihabadhar Diary* (The Diary of a Housewife), Binodini's *My Story* demands no layered connotations. It is a simple yet firm establishment of her narrative, being uniquely hers and hers alone. Manada Devi, in the preface to her *Autobiography of an Educated Prostitute*, stressed the same fact:

I'm a sinner, reproached, not worthy of fame - hence no nobleman has spoken of the story of his life as honestly as I can and am speaking of. (Devi, 2024, p. 1)

Amidst the stage, society, and surroundings that trivialised her life itself, for Binodini to clarify her life-writing as influence-free, is a bold claim indeed. The deconstruction of her past and the reconstruction of the self unfold through a series of facts and their subtle, almost indirect, castigation, to portray her as an enigma whose identity transcends all binaries. To the patriarchal society, the act of a woman writing an autobiography was equivalent to undressing in public. Binodini very strategically avoids such probable comments as in the preface she writes: '...the anguish of the heart can be only comprehended within oneself' (Binodini, 1998, p. 49), casting a semi-transparent screen between her and the world where whatever she edits and projects is seen. She further utilises this mysterious appearance to intensify the already intense fanbase she had, as in 'The First Story' of her autobiography, she reveals her residential address to both assert the height of success she has reached, and to let her admirers know exactly where to find her confidently. Whereas conventional autobiographies begin by tracing the ancestry, Binodini foregrounds the absences in her life to sketch the trajectory of her achievements. She weaponizes her deficiencies to become the triggering energy behind her growth. Binodini, who enters the stage with a salary of ten rupees, later, in *My Life as an Actress*, says that the five thousand rupees once offered by a nobleman was a 'paltry sum' (Binodini, 1998, p.142) and elaborates: 'I have once or twice had access to fifty thousand rupees' (Binodini, 1998, p. 142). Binodini transforms women's antagonized emotionality into the finest sensibility for literature and acting that enables her to merge her psyche to the self of any character, to the saturated point of enacting negative capability or vanishing point in Renaissance perspectival art: 'In order to experience as many bhavas as possible, I kept my mind constantly occupied, living in the world of imagination' (Binodini, 1998, p. 81). The struggle to elevate herself in the social ladder indicates that patriarchal interpellation could not dismiss Binodini as a powerless object of male chauvinism. To the public eye, she becomes the ignoble and the noble, the fallen but the victor, the fractured yet an achiever nonetheless.

Binodini's resistance to patriarchal structures and norms operates on multiple levels. The countless examples of how elite, eminent male figures were desperate to make her their mistress, logically invert the gendered asseveration of seduction imposed upon the 'Nati'. Putting herself as an example before the prejudiced society, she redefines prostitution –

It may be that there are some who, of their own accord, plunge themselves into darkness and clear the path of hell. But there are many who are taken in by the artfulness of men and trusting in them are doomed to carry an everlasting stigma and bear the pain of unending hell. Who are all these men? Are there not some among them who are respected and adorned in society? (Binodini, 1998, p. 104-105).

Equally, she debunks the class binaries, questioning the basis of the status quo. The stark difference between Binodini, who sold her body to Gurmukh Roy to assist theatrical social reform despite growing up in abject poverty, and the wealthy family that gave away fifteen-day-old, pungent sweets of funeral charity to her family during their days of ultimate misfortune, is enough to expose the hypocrisy of aristocracy. Compared to the ungrateful behaviour she received from the upper class, the gratitude of Ganga Baiji (Binodini's first music teacher) and the humility of the nameless female neighbour towards Binodini's family during their toughest

times celebrate the moral purity of the downtrodden. Binodini recounts the couple who were not married yet living together in their house of the 'outcast', where the rules of the standard world are suspended. But in the respectable society, the married 'Babu'[s]' having multiple mistresses was the legal standard which she herself had been subjected to. Furthermore, thespian artistry becomes her tool for deflating the 'Bhadromohila-Barangona' (Elite woman-Public woman) binary. Despite being an unlettered, non-Brahmin, unpolished woman, she could gracefully enact heavily Sanskritized characters to such a realistic extent that to her audience, the actor Binodini would morph into the characters she had been playing. 'I had no talent, nor was I well educated then, nor could I sing well' (Binodini, 1998, p. 68); yet, she could gracefully utter the jaw-breaking Old Bengali pronunciations and dialogues of female characters who were princesses, queens, or belonged to the hierarchical summit. But Binodini's reality was far removed from the glorious lives of Cleopatra, Pramila from *Meghnadbach Kanya*, Monorama from *Mrinalini*, Ayesha and Tilottama from *Durgeshnandini*, Sita from *Sitar Bonobas*, Britannia from *Palashir Juddho*, etc. But she was a master in art of 'split[ting] oneself into two' (Binodini, 1998, p. 72), both on stage and in reality, casting a persistent sense of amazement about the fact that she can enter these 'lofty' roles and recreate them in a manner that seemed not simply realistic, but uplifting even to the refined taste of the male intelligentsia. Among the numerous examples, three stand out in particular. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, upon seeing Binodini's performance in his play *Mrinalini*, comments: 'I had created Manorama's character only in a book. It had never occurred to me that I would see her manifested in flesh and blood.' (Binodini, 1998, p. 81). After a period of recession, when Binodini's consecutive performances led to the National Theatre being Housefull every day, its proprietor Pratapchand Johuree remarked: 'Binod has achieved the impossible' (Binodini, 1998, p. 77). Born a fallen woman, treated as a fallen woman, and dying with no less pain than that of a fallen woman, to the exclusive newspapers as 'The Statesman', this fallen woman becomes 'The Flower of the Native Stage' and the 'Signora'. The 'Barangana' not only wears the cape of 'Bhadromahila' but also ensures the public validates it with claps and cheering. She counter politicises the politics of representation as in one instance where she talks of Late Sharatchandra Ghosh's fatherly affection for her, she writes: 'I doubt if he had a daughter of his own, whether she would have enjoyed greater love' (Binodini, 1998, p. 71). What she tried to establish is that if a marginalised woman like Binodini, who has no paternal lineage to boast of, can receive equal care as an elite, legitimate woman, then the position of the fallen and the privileged can be perceived as interchangeable.

Against the critiquing agenda of the male-dominated readership, Binodini opts for multiple strategies to legitimise her discourse. Apart from the numerous self-scrutinising adjectives, such as 'unfortunate', 'despicable', 'foolish' that she attributes to herself, her epistolary narrative is addressed to an anonymous male listener whom she calls 'Mohashoy' (Master), to strengthen the necessity and validity of her storytelling. Much like Rassasundari Devi, Binodini too employs a religious framework and God's indiscriminatory grace to invisibilize the lines between the sinner and the saint. In the preface, she states

Almighty God ... has granted the great and the small, the wise and the ignorant, the power to experience joy and sorrow ... Pain and consolation.
(Binodini, 1998, p. 49)

Comparing the stage to the shrine of goddess 'Lakshmi', she advocates for theatre being the institution that brings women's monetary stability. She uses terms like 'Bhava' (sense) and 'Rasa'

(spirit) to present acting as a spiritually illuminating force that justifies the professional limelight she enjoyed against the enquiry and disdain of patriarchy. Through the legendary performance of *Chaitanyaleela*, she could portray herself as divinity incarnate, not only to the common mass but also to the saint SreeRamkrishnaParamhansa. Although Girishchandra Ghosh credits the 'religious heart of the Hindu'(Chatterjee,2007,p.185) for such success, Binodini's transvestitism and sheer will power could minutely capture the 'devbhava'(divine essence) of a gender percolative character like Shree Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Throughout the autobiography, except for a very few instances, her resilience, 'resourcefulness', beauty, and brilliance are revealed indirectly through the observations of those around her. For example, Binodini recalls her first teacher remarking: 'This girl is sure to perform well as Hemlata'(Binodini,1998, p 67). The rapidity of her advancement towards excellence has been brought out through comparison with other esteemed actresses. The incident in which Kadambini, a renowned actress and much senior to Binodini, slaps Binodini out of jealousy and insecurity proves that she, even as a mere child, was a threat to others' fame. Her magnetic skills to attract a scale of viewership never attracted before, made her an economical weapon, as Sharatchandra Ghosh says, 'I would suffer losses if I let go of her'(Binodini 76) when Girishchandra Ghosh wanted to appoint Binodini for his own theatre.

One modern feature of feminist criticism is its exploration of alternative femininities, redefining women's experiences and perspectives. Yet Binodini, in a nineteenth-century Bengali society that was progressive only for men, provides a counter-documentation of the female code of conduct. In 1885, Krishnabhabini Dasi published India's first women's travelogue, *A Bengali Lady in England*, recording her experiences as a middle-class adult lady, accompanying her husband abroad. But Binodini's *My Story* challenges the separate spheres theory as she, despite being a minor and a pauper, travels around India professionally as an earning, independent woman, transgressing the boundary of the 'Ghar'(Home). The confines of the home percolate into the freedom of the world. Although her entry onto the stage did not happen on her own accord, the theatre still becomes the space and place through which she asserts her agency. Even when she received her master's proposal of a handsome allowance, but on the condition that she would act without salary, she refuses to sacrifice financial independence over temporal luxury: 'I had always worked for money'(Binodini, 1998, p. 82). She rigidly departs from the National Theatre after being refused her rightful pay. On being asked not to be so 'difficult', Binodini doesn't hesitate to demand the worth of her skills: 'I want a higher salary . . . Otherwise I shan't work'(Binodini, 1998, p. 83). Whereas, even affluent women hardly spoke up against domestic labour, Binodini fearlessly resisted the physical and mental exploitation she went through. Performing with injuries after falling from a horse, playing so many as seven roles in a single play, unethically made to play the character of some absent co-actor and lastly, being convinced to commodify her body for the establishment of the Star Theatre (initially to be named 'B-Theatre' but later changed to avoid controversy)-Binodini's occupational slavery was not merely circumstantial but a planned betrayal. In mid-nineteenth-century London, many English actresses were becoming managers or part-owners of theatre companies. But even the slightest possibility of Binodini occupying an official position of any kind was made impossible by those she blindly trusted. Growing up with a traumatic past in a disturbed home, she found a family in the theatre groups she worked with, where she was pampered, loved, given gifts, and provided with necessities. She mentions: 'I had become like the youngest child in a

family'(Binodini,1998,p.79). The fact that the conspiracy of these very elders and mentors led to her coerced departure from the theatre for life wounded Binodini deeply. She testifies, 'I wondered afterwards, was all their love and affection only a show of words in order to get some work out of me?' (Binodini, 1998, p. 90). In the very autobiography, final portions of which were rejected to be serially published in public newspapers and journals for the 'Bhadromahila' class, she exceeds the minimal agency of the genteel class of women through outrageously, scandalously being herself in a censoring community.

My Story exudes a textured sense of dedication, the untiring industry, the erasure of her unworthy self, the rigorous disciplines of body and intellect that were necessary to embody the dramatic conflicts, the sentiment, the devotional fervor that would be the very soul of Binodini Dasi's self-representation. While the eminent, prominent autobiographies of Gandhi and Tagore applicate and replicate the central theme or reason behind their narrative to make those relevant, Binodini valiantly announces: 'The talented, the wise and the learned write in order to educate people, to do good to others, I have written for my own consolidation' (Binodini, 1998, p. 107), jeopardizing the very genre of autobiography women are debarred from. Binodini's resistance and transcendence focus more on manifestation rather than critiquing, providing a non-extremist yet empowering form of feminism. The feminist factors are more colourful in the very existence of Binodini Dasi rather than her autobiography, which captures only a fragment of the shades of her personality. While in the suffocating domain of everlasting misogyny, *My Story* remains a feverish ramble of 'mad black scrawls'(Binodini, 1998, p. 31), to the homely warmth of the universal sisterhood, Binodini Dasi and her words inspire the immemorial revolt against homogenic historical amnesia.

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise. (Angelou,1978)

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