LIFE WRITING: MONOGRAPH SERIES
SERIES EDITOR: **G.S. JAYASREE**

RE-VIEWING LIFE-NARRATIVES BY INDIAN WOMEN: CONTESTING GRAND-NARRATIVES OF HISTORY

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Re-viewing Life-Narratives by Indian Women: Contesting Grand-Narratives of History

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The Monograph titled "Reviewing Life-Narratives by Indian Women: Contesting Grand-Narratives of History" seeks to utilize life-narratives by two Indian women as instruments to re-view the idea of Indian femininity as perceived by contemporary Indian public sphere. The life-narratives chosen for study are Binodini Dasi's *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress* and Nilambur Ayesha's *Jeevithathinte Arangu*. These narratives, though belonging to different cultural and temporal milieu, have one thing in common – the fact that both the authors are performers, or to be more specific theatre artists. By drawing parallels between these two narratives, this study seeks to trace the evolution of the performance of Indian femininity in the Indian public sphere from the times of the Nationalist Movement for Indian Independence.

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Through the prism of life...

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This monograph finds its context in the larger spectrum of discourses within the Indian academia, regarding the relevance of life-narratives as source material to document women's history and feminist theory/thought. The general issue raised here, will be the contemporary relevance of feminism in the existing social and cultural conditions in India. To be more specific, does feminist theory and thought as it is 'discoursed' by Indian academics and scholars have any contemporary practical relevance in the public sphere as it is now? If not, how will re-viewing life-narratives by women contribute towards contemporizing it? Before embarking on re-viewing life-narratives by women, it is important to conduct a comprehensive critique of the scholarship generated on life-writings by Indian women, women's place in Indian history as well as feminist thought and theory in the subcontinent. One of the main contradictions in the life-narratives discourse by men and women is the presence of everyday lives in the narratives by women and its uncanny absence in almost all life-narratives by men. While men make grand narratives out of their performances on the stage of life, women generally tend to narrate what happened in the backstage before, while and after the grand performances.

Contemporary scholarship generally uses the term 'life-narrative' to refer to a wide range of material which includes autobiographies, biographies, life histories[1], diaries, memoirs, letters and journals. In the present context however, the scope of the term is limited to narratives in the first person thereby excluding biographies from the study. Though the given definition of the term 'life-narrative' is adequate by way of introduction, it is inevitable for a higher understanding of the concept and practice of life-writing to address the various definitional issues inherent in the term. Most of the questions surrounding the definition are incumbent on the various historical manifestations of the autobiographical subject; this can be best illustrated by tracing the origins of the most popular term for self-referential writing, i.e. autobiography, and distinguishing it from the relatively modern usage life-narrative.

Autobiography has its roots in the three Greek words *autos*, *bios* and *graphein* which respectively mean 'self', 'life' and 'to write'. This term carries the semantic and historical baggage of referring chiefly to the orthodox Western European tradition of self-referential writing. This tradition is characterized by a centering of the self, as advocated by Saint Augustine and later by Rousseau. The ideas embodied in this term and tradition can be broadly divided into two depending on the relation of the autobiographical subject to its social world. It can either conceptualize the autobiographical act as the testimony of a transcendent self which considers the individual as an autonomous entity removed from its social/ideological environment. Or it can be conceptualized as the autobiographical statement of a self which is absolutely integrated into its ideological domain so as to be able to represent the latter to perfection as well as speak on behalf of the rest of its inhabitants. While autobiography is the most widely used and popular term for life narrative still, it is also a term that has been strongly challenged in the wake of the postmodern (and postcolonial) critique of the autobiographical subject as conceived by Enlightenment. The advent of

1 A life history is a life story as told to a second person who writes it down

postmodernism thereby raises a set of issues about the tradition of autobiography and the process of its composition.

The phrase postmodernism serves as an ambiguous overarching terminology for skeptical interpretations of culture, literature, philosophy and art. However, it is essentially a three-pronged attack on the ideas generated during the Enlightenment which reached its zenith in the Modern period. The first attack is on the Enlightenment notion of the self as whole, stable and knowable to itself and others. Secondly, postmodernism critiques 'grand' narratives that claim to describe, explain and predict the world. Third, postmodernism is skeptical of the view that language can represent the world through direct correspondences between words (signifiers) and the things/concepts (signifieds) they stand for. All the three postmodern critiques hold great relevance in life-writing pedagogy. It is to relieve the life narrative from the entrenched hierarchies of the term as the grand narrative of a whole and stable self which has direct correspondence to its reality, contemporary scholars prefer to use the term 'life-narrative'[2] instead of 'autobiography'.

While the autobiographical tradition claims that the autobiographical act is born out of a mediation between the autobiographer/subject and the ideological habitat in which his consciousness thrives and evolves, the postmodern tradition of life-narratives posit that this process of mediation is ridden with tensions, struggles, contestations and conflicts. The concept of life-narratives also takes into account the extensive practices of self-referential writing not only in the West but elsewhere in the world; the opening up of generic boundaries enables the inclusion of a wide range of practices which were earlier invalidated for scrutiny by the pedagogy. For example as the 'grand' narrative of a sovereign self which represents an ideal relationship of the individual with his social environment, the autobiography excludes people in a negative position in culture such as women,

2 It is a common mistake to use the idioms life-writing and life-narrative interchangeably. However, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life-narratives* observes that life-writing is an umbrella term for all kinds of writing that has as its subject, life. On the other hand, life-narrative refers to self-referential writing alone.

black people and working-class people. These sections of the population are ostracized from the generic boundaries of the autobiography in lieu of the fact that they cannot and are not equipped to conceal their highly embattled relationship with the society and its norms and mores. By challenging historical, geographical and generic constraints, postmodernism opens up the site of self-referential writings to questions of embodiment, agency, and personal legitimacy.

The need of the individual autobiographer/autobiographical subject to impose order via subjective experience is dangerous not only in its asocial aspect, whereby the individual appears to bypass society in his relationship to nature but also because it transcends history. The importance of self-referential documents have increased in rank with the writings of Michel Foucault, whose formulations on the concept of archaeology and technologies of the self have established life-narratives as containing traces of a larger history. Therefore interpreting the autobiographical texts as part and indicative of a larger history and/or as alternate histories (in some cases) is a rapidly growing endeavor in the field of the study of life-narratives.

Life- narratives have played a significant role in the growth of women's history as a well respected and popular field in India. In fact, no other field has demonstrated the symbiotic connection between life-narratives and history better than the study of women and gender. India has a strong tradition of women's writing which dates back to a long time as *Women's Writing in India*: *Volume I and II* edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha indicates. Volume I, published in 1991, covers a large span of time from the 600 B.C. to the early twentieth century. It includes songs by Buddhist nuns and Sangam poets, testimonies of medieval rebel poets and court historians, around 60 pieces of writing by writers from the 18th and 19th centuries, an account by the first feminist historian Tarabai Shinde[3], rare early essay by an 'untouchable' woman[4], and a selection from the first novel written

3 Tarabai Shinde's treatise in Marathi titled *Stri Purush Tulana* (A Comparison of Men and Women)

4 Savitribai Phule's*Letter to Jothiba Phule*

in English by an Indian woman[5]. The second volume published two years later anthologizes selections from poetry, fiction, drama and autobiography by 73 writers born after 1905.

Using life-writing material by women for historical, sociological and other theoretical purposes is more or less a twentieth century phenomenon. Feminist scholars, both in India and the West, have written extensively about Indian women since the 1990s. Nupur Chaudhari elaborates in her research paper, analyzing the travel narrative of Krishnobhabini Das for the intellectual foundation of nationalism and feminism in Bengali women:

> Since the 1990s, both in India and in the West, feminist scholars have written about Indian women. Their works brought Indian women's history to the center stage of South Asian history and women's history. To change popular perception about South Asian women both in the Western world and South Asia, these scholars had to emphasize that many of those Indian women were not passive subjects but activists. Even in the subcontinent, only a few works have been published focusing on Indian women's ideas and concepts since the 1920s. In the West, most of these works concentrated on the writings of Western-educated Indian women, many of whom wrote in English. Only a handful of works have been published in English about women's writings in regional language literature. (198)

Tanika Sarkar's *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography* and the essays in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid) can be considered as trendsetters in the study of life-narratives from regional languages towards the larger project of contributing to documenting women's history. While the volumes edited by Tharu and Lalitha are important in this regard, they merely provided footnotes as to how the selections included in the volumes can be used for a historical understanding of literature,

5 Cornelia Sorabji's *India Calling*

feminism and the making of modern India. Tanika Sarkar's *Words to Win* is not only an English translation of the original text in Bangla, but also a critical reading of it. Rashsundari's text has great documentary value because it is the first autobiography to be published in the Bangla language and considered to be a parable of the emergence of modern female subjectivity in colonial Bengal. Sarkar's critical commentary enquires about the specific character of this subjectivity while looking into the socio-historical conditions out of which this subjectivity originated. The path breaking formulation in Tanika Sarkar's critique is her observation that "it would be simple-minded to posit a straight connection between female subjectivity and female writing, to assume that the latter reflects the former in some direct, unmediated way"; she presented the idea that "the act of writing itself would have reconstituted her subjectivity in radically new ways" (5).

The collection of essays in the Sangari-Vaid edited *Recasting Women* breaks new ground in the historiography of the 19th century Bengal renaissance. While the work is marked out by its Marxist propaganda to deconstruct the favorable history of the Bengali *bhadralok* and the Euro-American neo-colonial scholars who keep the same historiography alive (because it reflects their own elitist and male supremacist values), it has nevertheless had a huge impact on 'recasting' Indian femininity and the female subjectivity. *Recasting Women* paved the way for later studies which focused on identity problems amongst feminists. The Indian feminists who were part of this project wanted to extricate themselves and their identity from the legacies they criticized – British colonialism, *bhadralok* elitism, Euro-American neo-colonialism; they insisted that their paradigm for criticizing the historiography of the Bengali renaissance was authentic because their scholarship was derived from what can be christened as indigenous contextuality. In this process of deconstructing and subsequently reconstructing the Indian female subjectivity, the essayists frequently resort to life-narratives to validate their claims; these include celebrated life-narratives from Bengal, Maharashtra, oral narratives, and interviews. Other noted

scholars in the field include Uma Chakravarti, Urvashi Butalia, Indrani Mukherjee, J. Devika, Janaki Nair, Chitra Deb, Bharati Ray, Geraldine Forbes, Antoinette Burton, and Mrinalini Sinha; their contributions have gone a long way in the documentation of women's history as opposed to the grand patriarchal narrative of Indian history.

The monograph will seek to theorize the politics and possibilities of women's self representation in order to argue for a mode of reading that exposes life-writing as a manipulative discourse. The preliminary objective is to revise prevailing strategies of interpreting life-narratives as documents which contain traces of a larger history and/or as source material for alternate histories. The revised strategies will then be applied to analyze select life-writing material by Indian women in order to chart the cartography of Indian femininity in the context of the 'modern' Indian public sphere. The underlying presumption in this interpretation is that the referent(s) possess a contested subjectivity: the public identity or 'image' as a participant in the Indian public sphere and the identity unraveled in the life-narrative which may or may not have a one-to-one correspondence with the public identity. Recognition of a given subjectivity as essentially contested implies the recognition of multiple significations of the subjectivity as not only logically possible and humanly likely but as of permanent potential critical value to one's own interpretation of the subjectivity in question.

As she embarks on a process of reflection, the writer/subject simultaneously juggles with the memories and experiences which rendered her the individual that she is at a given moment. The author engages with identity, embodiment and agency in the act of autobiographical composition. Unlike in fiction, life narrators have to anchor their narratives in their own temporal, geographical and cultural milieu. Hence, while the autobiographer conceives her subjectivity in the act of autobiographical composition, she does so by anchoring the self (conceptualized in the process) in the contemporary cultural milieu. The autobiography, therefore, becomes a true measure of the cultural influences on the subjective self.

However, the life- narratives would not just be evaluated only for their documentary value. Unlike in historical writing, self-referential writing has to be approached as an inter subjective process that occurs within the writer-reader pact rather than as a true-or-false story. The emphasis of reading the life-writing material thus shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding. While treating the autobiographical text as a performance, it is conceptualized as a historically situated practice of self representation with due attention to the aforementioned process of exchange and understanding. Hence, the text is relegated into a genre by a rhetorical setting and not because of the presence of a set of formal elements. Writers of life-narratives 'selectively' engage their lived experience through personal story telling. Located in specific times and places, they are at the same time in dialogue with the personal processes as well as the archives of memory and history. A critique of document of this nature is therefore at the same time political and apolitical.

Whether and when a life-narrative emerges as an authoritative discourse on narrative and reality, has less to do with that text's presumed accuracy about what really happened than with its apprehended fit into culturally prevalent discourses of truth and identity. Within the volatility generated by this kind of representativeness, the 'private' becomes ambivalent and assumes multiple significations as it transforms into autobiographical and subsequently public discourse.

The ambivalent subjectivity is envisaged as a product of manipulation prior to or in the act of writing the life. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler observes that the past in any kind of self-referential writing comes across as recollected; in the act of composition, these recollected fragments of the past are reprocessed, assimilated and analyzed. The pieces of reality are sometimes the elements of the author's community which is to say that the subject's representation of reality is unconsciously (if there are disclaimers of intentionality) endowed with archetypal or communal meanings and attitudes. Therefore, the little pieces of reality or 'experience' are not what differentiate the male and

female narratives into separate categories. The difference occurs in the reprocessing, assimilating and analyzing stages at which points the archetypal or communal meanings and attitudes get (un)consciously integrated into the discourse.

If the practices of giving an account of oneself in India are to be understood in positive terms, there is an urgent need to move away from the model where it is assumed that the normative structures of the society enact its restraining hands on the 'autobiographical' impulses within the author. The intersection of autobiography and history provides a useful site for exploring the phenomenon of autobiographers from India almost always concentrating on their public selves in writing. A large number of Indian life-narratives written in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were pre-occupied with the experience of historical change. Using the life of the author at times a mere pretext and at other times as the pivot, these narratives sought to provide their readers with a slice of history. It may be erroneous to regard the confluence of these two elements as an accidental feature of particular autobiographies. Given the frequency of such convergence, it should be looked upon as a vital feature of the genre in India and it is inevitable to engage more vigorously with their avowedly public character. In so far as the autobiographical act involves an exhibition of one's lived life before the gaze of a reading public, paradigms of spectacle and performance may be more relevant to the study of self- narratives than models of authentic expressiveness.

Most public figures create and project an image(s) that is befitting to the situation at hand, so that they can protect their reputation. Performances are a means to know and understand experiences which are central to our social, cultural and personal identities. These performances are not to be seen as attempts to manipulate others but as normal and unavoidable; because humans are social, and therefore must co-ordinate their identities and actions with those of others. The dramaturgical model,where life is represented as a stage performance or drama, adopts roles, principles and terminology of theatrical performance in order to explain human communication. Scripts or frames are

guidelines for interaction based on cultural conventions. They reduce uncertainty about how to behave and define situations. The dramaturgical model of "impression management" (Bell, 148) describes how people shape others' impressions of them as well as how people convince others to adopt certain, and not other, definitions of a situation. The collation of poststructuralist critique with impression management conceives the internal landscape of an individual as revealed in the life narrative, as a set of stylized acts-that is, performative. This performative aspect of the life-narrative is consistently taken into account in the larger project of re-viewing the life-narratives in terms of contesting the grand narratives of Indian history.

The disparities between the various significations of the same identity can be reconciled within the parameters of this theoretical setup. What an actress does onstage or onscreen is to pretend to be someone other than her true self. The re-view of life-narratives conducted here seeks to dwell primarily on this distance between the 'real' and the 'restored' identities of the author of a life-narrative. It points to a certain distance between self and behaviour, analogous to that between an actor and the role the actor plays onstage. Even if an action onstage is identical to that in real life, onstage it is considered to be 'performed' while offstage it is merely 'done'. There is a thin line differentiating an action 'performed' and 'done' and that is a consciousness of the performance which can easily move from the stage, from ritual, and from other special and clearly defined cultural situations into everyday life. The re-view attempts to extend this differentiation into the realm of life-narratives, which will add another dimension to the historical narrative that it is supposed to reinforce. Life-narratives by two theatre artists have been chosen for this re-view; but the emphasis is not on the understanding of the various nuances of their performance, which involves a display of skills, nor about the training that went into these performances. It is about recognizing the culturally coded patterns of feminine behavior that finds its climax in the life-writing material.

Roger J. Porter substantiates in *Self- same Songs: Autobiographical Performances and Reflections*, which over the last twenty years performance has offered a space for feminist

artists to explore the self as subject all over the world; many of the issues raised by performance have analogies in autobiographical writings and much current theoretical writing about feminist autobiographies also illuminates performance art. Women artists had long struggled to negotiate the relationship between woman as the object of artistic representation and the woman artist as agent and author of her own work. Many women artist began to feel that in the merging medium of performance they were able to challenge and work with this complex relationship through bringing their own live presence into the work. Performance offered a form in which to speak to new voices as well as act in new and authentically female ways. This deep-rooted connection of performance and performance artists to the evolution of a modern femininity is explored by focusing on the life-narratives by theatre artists – Binodini Dasi's *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress*, Nilambur Ayesha's *Jeevithathinte Arangu* (This stage called life).

For example, Durga Khote was a Marathi actor who gained popularity for her strong manly roles on silver screen. Throughout the rest of her life, Khote was, in a way struggling to live up to these expectations of being a strong woman. In *I, Durga Khote,* she explores the relation between self as agent and self as subject – a gap which can allow for the playful assuming of identities whilst still signaling the real life presence of the artist, enabling an artist to invoke many aspects of herself brought into play through her live performance. The notion of performance (the performance being referred to being the text of life-writing) as directly accessing an artist's real self continues the project to bring the everyday directly into the pages of the autobiography. However, as writers are always aware, there is always a friction between the two, an edge or boundary over which the everyday is transformed, a space which art seeks to articulate.

At no point in her narrative does she whine or complain about the patriarchal world of cinema. The 'I' in the autobiography is multi-faceted and marked by all the contradictions and paradoxes contained in Khote's rich and elite background; it chronicles the many pleasures and pains she went through as a woman going

out to earn a living for herself and her family. She writes about everything with almost the same degree of passionate attachment or dispassionate distance. Her writing can be enjoyed as a testament to the multiplicity and ambivalence, the determination and confusion of the period she belonged to. Khote's portrayal of herself as free-willed as well as chained by the opinions of others are to be equally appreciated; on the one hand Khote as a woman capable of acting independently and on the other hand as a woman unable to take harsh decisions putting an end to things that brought her only pain. As a performance therefore the orientation of *I, Durga Khote* is related to women's personal experience and her collective past. But the paradoxical truth is that even this attempt gets tainted by the multiple politics of gender and class as was operative in the Indian society.

The intention of an autobiographer may indeed be mediated through any number of impersonal systems that slightly modify those intentions but as Roger J. Porter observes in *Self-same Songs: Autobiographical Performances and Reflections*, "…even radical skepticism about a self's non textual existence does not negate the presence of an intention; it merely relocates intention to another realm" (xiii). The one sure way of making out the intentions behind the act of writing is to examine the intentions that exist 'outside' the text via statements in interviews or letters. Since there are few documents of this nature as regards Durga Khote, one is limited to construe the intentions from the act of writing.

Generalizations about how the organization of an individual's daily life produces or even causes the autobiographical form as the reader/audience perceive it depends on a kind of logic that transcribes lived experience on to textual production and then presumes to read textual effects as experiential cause. According to Leigh Gilmore, "when experience as a category of analysis is thematized rather than historicized and is used to cover the complex links securing 'identity' to 'politics' in the practice of self representation, it plays a role in the politics of interpretation as well" (x). In the context of the autobiographies selected for study, the term 'politics' encompasses primarily gender, class and nationality.

Her non conformity in the public space relegates Durga Khote into an aberrant private individuality at the cost of effacing the public individual. It is, nonetheless, in these moments of "acting out" (Hart, 1) that "the factitous identity of the subject disappears" (Hart, 1). Catherine Clement speaks of identity as "prosthesis" (qtd. in Hart, 8) or "armor" that one must wear in order to be understood. Identities are necessary if we are to live in reality and feminist identities embrace the monstrous possibilities of 'performance' or 'acting out'. Cutting herself off from reality can be the woman's way of escaping the inundation in a masculine imaginary that passes off as the symbolic order. However cleverly concealed, the autobiographical texts leak out such moments of repressed agony. The intention must have been the construction of a coherent self which is impervious to the pains inflicted by the forces of life; an attempt to reconcile with the rapacity of life. However, the integral self turns out to be an illusion which is revealed to be the emergence of shifting, contentious subjects who speak in a range of discourses. This in turn will lead to the tension(s) in the professed intentions and the political as well as cultural ideologies that gave rise to these tensions.

The observations above point the finger towards the Hindu cultural chauvinism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; though not the exclusive reason Hindu nationalism is definitely the strongest ideological underpinning that has reformed the way Indians looked at women for decades to come. There was a fundamental transformation in the structures of political-cultural sensibility in the late nineteenth century, wherein liberal reformism was abandoned in favor of a hard and closed nationalistic culture. From the later decades of the nineteenth century this nationalism- which was the construct of upper caste men, had annexed both the caste question and the women's question into the sphere of the cultural and the private. This is apparent in the strength of resistance to widow remarriage and other gender issues, which lay in the fact that it represented the adoption of lower caste models for the higher castes. Further, the fear of losing caste was a deterrent against any popular acceptance of reforms. Uma Chakravarti has drawn attention

to the branding of Pandita Ramabai as a betrayer of the nation because of her rejection of oppressive patriarchal practices integral to Brahmanical Hinduism. Her conversion to Christianity came to be seen as a betrayal of a nation that was *ipso facto* Hindu. But as Chakravarti rightly notes, Phule or Ramabai, "the so-called betrayers, were in fact the ones who were betrayed by the narrow basis of nationalism which was a construct of upper caste men" (342). The "nationalist resolution of the women's question" (Chatterjee, 87) relegated the women to the private sphere – the middle class, upper caste woman became the symbol of all Indian women and a reconceptualized Hindu culture – but it did not go uncontested.

The tradition of autobiographical writing, as idealized by the Western Enlightenment concepts, in India cannot boast of a long history like its Western counterpart of the genre. According to Udaya Kumar, "the late emergence of autobiographical writing in India has been viewed at times as a sign of civilizational difference or historical lack: it has been argued that the idea of a reflective individual subject, essential for the development of the genre of self- writing, was alien to Indian culture or unavailable in the country until the colonial encounter" (419). This position has been contested in recent years by anti and post colonial scholarship, with a growing acknowledgement of figures of individuality in pre modern and early modern India. Hence, in a critical reading of the Indian autobiographical tradition, the more pertinent questions would be regarding the nature of autobiographical practice in India. Another important aspect which requires due attention with this regard is whether the politics of representation is any different for the 'autobiographed' self in terms of the gender of the subject. Udaya Kumar observes:

> Readers schooled in the Western canon are sometimes struck by the indifference that Indian autobiographies --especially those written by male authors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries --often display towards the private, interior lives of their protagonists. Most of these self-narratives present themselves as resolutely public utterances.

> Arguably, all autobiographies written with a view to publication-and perhaps even the others-may be considered public utterances in the larger sense. However, we need to make distinctions: the 'publicity' assumed by the majority of Indian self-narratives seems to be different in kind from the exposure effected by personal confessions. Unlike a Rousseau, who justified his autobiographical effort by pointing to his singularity as a person, the Indian autobiographer often highlights the typicality or representativeness of his or her experiences. (419)

The effort is to take a quick glimpse at such self-writing ventures while it asks the significant question as to whether individuals from different societies articulate life-narratives and consequently their subjectivity in distinctive ways; does the Indian life-narrative tradition, extending to the current age, have its moorings in an entirely different autobiographical pact?

The survey on the Indian autobiographical tradition starts *in medias res*, splitting the history of the Indian autobiographical tradition into two, and three autobiographical texts can be situated in the space of this split: *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Gandhi), *An Autobiography* (Nehru) and *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (Chaudhuvri). As mentioned earlier, though scholarly interest in life-narratives from India is a fairly recent post colonial development, this form of writing "[has] been a historically persistent and socially pervasive form of cultural expression in the subcontinent" (Arnold and Blackburn 6). This body of writing would be placed as preceding the afore indicated split and the modern autobiographical ventures greatly influenced by Western and colonial forces would succeed the split. All three of the autobiographies originate from the times of the British Empire in India but from three different perspectives. Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography is a record of his childhood and early adulthood experiences till 1920 when his policy of noncooperation with the British government is passed by the All India Congress Committee. Gandhi remarks that by this point in his life what he did had become so public and part of the narrative of India's struggle for independence that there is no need for him to write about it. Nehru's self narrative which has

the subtitle *Toward Freedom* is more or less a personal account of the freedom struggle. What is remarkably different about these two autobiographies is the fact that while Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography seems to be an intimately personal account of his life while Nehru's text is more or less like a chronicle of events, it juxtaposes India's history with his personal history in such a way that reminds one of Saleem Sinai and *Midnight's Children*. It is also quite interesting that scholarly interest in life-narratives from India also begins in medias res with David G. Mandelbaum's much acclaimed essay published in 1973 on Gandhiji's autobiography: "The Study of Life History: Gandhi". James M. Freeman continues the work on life-narratives with his account of an 'ordinary' man, an untouchable named Muli from Orissa, in *Untouchable: an Indian Life history* published in 1979.

In the case of the body of life-writings from before this juncture, the tradition can further be split into two broad categories chronologically: the life-narratives (mostly memoirs and autobiographies) of Indians who belong to the first generation of Western educated natives and the less popular narratives from pre colonial India. An interesting detail that should catch the attention of the scholar who conducts a literature review of life-writing material from the pre colonial period is the fact that most of the catalogued and published material available to contemporary scholarship are not in the strictly autobiographical or memoir forms but confessional in tone and semi- autobiographical. Various such pieces written by women, translated from the respective regional languages into English, is anthologized in the Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha edited *Women's Writing in India, Volume I*. But the most extensive study of pre modern and/or pre colonial life-narratives done so far is the project "Life Histories" undertaken by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, which later evolved into a volume of essays *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life Narrative* edited by David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn.

Autobiography, as it is understood in the West, can be misleading while surveying the Indian context. In their introduction to the collection of articles, Arnold and Blackburn deems it fit to use *carita*, a term which also encompasses the

concepts of "history" and "legend" in its meaning, for the Indian scenario. They elucidate the existence of life-narratives in the subcontinent from the pre modern times:

> Early Pali and Sanskrit narratives told the life story…of Shakyamuni Buddha; Buddha's life, from Boddhisatva to Enlightenment, was also represented visually in the didactic iconography of Buddhist temples from the second century AD onward…Genealogies both orally transmitted and written, and horoscopes (again in both oral and written forms) might be considered part of this wider genre, but the great majority of pre modern life-narratives were hagiographical—oral and written accounts of the lives of deities, kings and cultural heroes, saints, poets, poet- gods and poet- kings….
>
> …told from varying points of view, they are characterized by a tendency to praise their subjects and to place the narrative within a mythic framework…Lives of individual poets and poet-saints were often transmitted as part of a self-conscious and explicitly named tradition (*sampradaya*)….(7)

The use of the term *carita* can lead one to think of the interesting phenomenon of the *atmacaritra* in general and the phenomenon of the prolific output of autobiographies by women in Maharashtra in particular. Now the reference here is not to the extraordinary number of autobiographies written and published in Marathi by women from the early twentieth century of which a few titles include *Sangate Eka* (by Hansa Wadkar), *Mee, Durga Khote* (by Durga Khote), *Smritichitree* (by Laxmibai Tilak), *Jina Amucha* (by Baby Kamble), *Bandh-Anubandh* (by Kamal Padhye). The reference to *atmacaritra* here is to a much older tradition which dates back to as early as 1276: Chakradhar, a prominent follower of the Mahanubhava sect, is generally acknowledged as the first to write an autobiography in Marathi. According to Gayatri Chatterjee, in her Introduction to the English translation of *Mee, Durga Khote*, Chakradhar's autobiography in prose was destroyed in a fire and a disciple recomposed it later by collating material from other people's writings and their collective

memory of the earlier work. This practice was later taken up by several followers of the Mahanubhava sect and members of other religious sects like Varkaris. Maharashtra also provides examples of life-writing material by saint-poets, to be more specific saint-poets like Namdev, Tukaram, Janabai and Bahinabai whose works had prominent autobiographical moorings. Bahinabai is in fact popularly considered to be the first woman autobiography-writer in Marathi.

A follower of the Varkari sect saint Tukaram, Bahinabai, a 17th century poet and philosopher wrote *abangas* (verses sung in praise of the Hindu God Vithoba), of which 473 *abangas* are available to the modern reader; "the first seventy-eight are an *atmanivedan*, an autobiographical account of her soul's journey through seven previous lives as well as through her present one."

While her guru's *abangas* travelled far and wide, Bahinabai seems to be aware that it was not to be so in her case:

> …she provides the world with bonafides…through her past and present lives. She first draws up a spiritual lineage for Tukaram and the other important saints before him, and then places herself within that lineage. What she lacks in terms of a large following she tries to fill up by dotting her life's account with the representation of scores of miracles(there is hardly any in Tukaram's writings—he did not need them). As a Brahmin's wife desiring to become a disciple of a lower- caste person, the obstacles before her were monumental.…(Chatterjee xxi)

So when the early twentieth century women of Maharashtra write their autobiographies they are not only following a contemporary 'Western' trend but also placing themselves within an old tradition. In a long range of works which deals with Tamil oral and folk history, Stuart Blackburn also talks about the existence of *carita* texts in Tamil.

With the advent of Islam and Christianity a tradition of religious biography "lives as lessons" also began to circulate. These included, at a popular level, the lives of Sufi *pirs* and *ghazis* as well as the accounts of the life of Christ and those of Christian

saints and heroes as disseminated by Christian missionaries and their converts. At the level of court culture, the autobiographical memoirs of the Mughal emperors *Babur-nama* and *Akbar-nama* as well as the travel memoirs of Persian travelers who visited and stayed in the Mughal courts for extended periods can be accounted. The encounter with Western ideas and education influenced and supplemented this hagiographical tradition giving rise to the 'new' form of biography and autobiography in which greater attention was given to the complexity of character and personal development unlike the former *sampradaya* where though "the subject faces dilemmas and makes decisions…there is little 'character development' because, in the end, the course of events is beyond his or her control" (Arnold and Blackburn 7). The changes caused by the infusion of Western ideology and education span over two broad teleological phases in Indian history: the early modern and colonial modern periods. According to historiographical evidence, the early modern is not necessarily a 'period' with specific dates marking its beginning and end; it characterizes elements of thought and/or practice that have been identified as belonging to early modern historical formations. From a global perspective, the most important features of the early modern period were its globalizing character and innovative elements within traditional literary and cultural disciplines that call into question the veracity of older beliefs and practices. In the Indian subcontinent, the period which has the features of an early modern historical order was the time of the Mughal Empire, dated to have begun in 1526, when the last ruler of the Delhi Sultanate - Ibrahim Lodhi - was defeated and killed in the First Battle of Panipat by Babur.

Historical writing, in general, during the early modern period followed the conventions established in the Turko-Afghan and Iranian traditions with their classical sources rooted in Greek culture as well as influenced by the recent political encounter with the Crusades. These conventions were necessitated by the political agendas of the conquerors and framed by the ethical principles of Islamic political tradition. It does mean that the Indo- Persian chroniclers adhered to the same standards blindly; while writing Indian (life) histories they developed their own body of practices

chiefly due to the fact that the bulk of the population ruled by the sultan were non- Muslims. The political doctrines inherited from the dogmatic traditions of Islam had to be questioned and re-formulated to suit the sensibilities of an indigenous public sphere. The evolution of the biography/autobiography forms, based on the Enlightenment- generated notion of the self, from the Indo-Persian life-narratives is not a smooth and easy transition.

The change in the content and/or intention of life-narratives from India is the root of the popular misconception that the life narrative approach was more or less absent in India and it is closely related to a question frequently asked by experts in the field of Indian historiography: "was there history writing in India before the British colonial intervention?" (Chatterjee,1). Creating a link between historiography and life-narratives is quite useful in the context of the subcontinent. The *caritra* tradition co- existed with *itihasa*, *purana* and *vamsavali*; these three genres collectively constitute the vernacular history in the Indian milieu. Ramayana and Mahabharata are the most important *itihasas* and they are a kernel of narratives about historical events and characters. But the peculiarity of these Indian *itihasas* is the fact that they are largely indistinguishable from the mythological literature which is referred to by the term *purana*. *Vamsavali*, on the other hand, is the collective term for genealogical chronicles of ruling dynasties and prominent families which most often than not overlap with the hagiographical (*carita*) tradition.

It can be observed that the mythological, historical, political and the personal overlap in Indian historiography preceding the British colonial intervention and this leads to the formulation of what can be called the paradigm of collectivity. It is this same phenomenon that Udaya Kumar refers to in his essay as "a sign of civilization difference or historical lack". He falls into the trap of the paradigm of collectivity when he gives undue importance to the observation: "Even Gandhi, whose autobiography displayed a clear differentiation of himself from others, stated in his Preface that the book was the story not of his life but of his 'experiments with truth'; his narrative had taken the shape of an autobiography only because his life contained nothing but such experiments."

The paradigm of collectivity in the Indian context weakens the case of Indian historical enquiry (free from the grapples of colonial forces) because by default it questions the existence of life-narratives in pre colonial/ pre modern India and thereby as part of a conscious or hidden agenda reinforces the Occident notion that the 'Oriental' does not possess a developed sense of selfhood.

The nationalist movement was struggling against these kinds of misconceptions that ensured the psychological subjugation of the colonial subject by parading the civilisation of the colonial master as axiomatically superior. The Indian intelligentsia was simultaneously attracted and torn by a need to escape from it to one's own past, one's culture and roots. These roots had, however, been tarnished by comparisons and questioning induced by the exposure to a more successful cultural order. A success which was measured in terms of a new consciousness of teleology and progress with which India had never kept in step, which produced an intolerable anxiety and desire to break free from that inexorable march of time and return to one's past. The tremendously agonized quest that began in the 19th century for the (re)construction of this authentic past is inexplicably related to conceptualizing a subjectivity and self that is truly differentiated as Indian. The life-narratives chosen in this paper as starting points for the survey on self-referential writings from India are involved in the same tedious and troublesome process of demarcating the Indian self making use of the Western conventions of autobiography. Hence there is a landmark rise in the production and publication of life-writing material in the mould of the Western autobiography from the 19th century. Though it is quite fallacious to assume that the content and intention of these life-writing materials are also Western, in the sense that subjectivity formulated in these texts are essential Indian, each text trying to mediate and assimilate the various deep- rooted changes in the political (development of nation-state in the place of various princely states, national struggle for independence, Partition) and social (reform movements, communal riots) landscape of the country.

One glorious example of the life-writing material which can said to be encapsulating the changing social landscape is *Kanneerum Kinaavum- My Tears, My Dreams*, by the social reformer from Kerala- V. T. Bhattathiripad. The autobiographical narrative written in the form of interconnected essays invokes the tragic plight of the majority of Brahmin households in Kerala, mired in convention and ignorance. The text maps his transformation from a young boy schooled in his ancestral calling of priesthood to a radical writer and activist, locating his self-awakening in the collective struggle of committed progressive young men and women. *The Nocturnal Court Darbaar-e-Durbaar, The Life of a Prince of Hyderabad* is a firsthand account of life in the early 20th century in the court of the last Nizam of Hyderabad. Taken from the diary of Sidq Jaisi, a poet- courtier, and originally written in Urdu (edited and translated into English by Narendra Luther), it recounts the splendor and the decay of court life in vivid detail.

In order to critique the paradigm of collectivity, beginning *in medias res* of the life narrative tradition is quite useful simply because it is the teleological phase when the country witnessed major changes as a consequence of the nationalist movement. It helps to dismantle the false notion that only privileged and/or exceptional people wrote life-narratives in India and facilitates to go back and forth in the timeline so as to corroborate with evidence from history and present that the Indian self, quite contrary to the popular Western notion, was quite developed before British colonial intervention, and the contemporary Indian self is not a mere product of the Western model of education but deeply rooted in the history and culture of the subcontinent. It is an undeniable truth that caste is/was one of the essential attributes of the Indian society and a major section of the Indian population to this day and time places their subjectivity within the framework of caste and religion and more often than not their individual agency and sense of selfhood drown in this politics which leads to the conception of the paradigm of collectivity in South Asian thought and behaviour. A critical survey of the life narrative/history tradition from the subcontinent can help illustrate how a constant interaction and negotiation between

collective identity and self- consciousness can be constructive. It also places life-narratives as a point of intervention into the highly complicated caste- class- religion- kinship networks in this land of unity in diversity. As rightly stated by David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn:

> Life-narratives in India do not necessarily conform to Western conventions and modes of expression (some do, many don't), nor should one expect to find the peculiar forms of individualism that emerged in the West replicated in India…One of the appealing possibilities opened up by examining life histories…is not only to show the variety of forms life-narratives can take within a single region, but also to shed fresh light on the way we perceive and analyze Indian society. (3)

The intention is to be part of the larger ongoing effort to destabilize the construct of knowledge, truth and reality centered on the equation of 'human' is equal to 'male'; the larger purpose is to evolve a more inclusive conception of reality. Contrary to popular[6] belief, feminism has deep roots in the intellectual and cultural heritage of the sub-continent. New global developments in the field of feminism and women's studies assert that feminism is multicultural and diasporic, that the needs of women who live in different countries are not similar and are conditioned by various external factors like familial, societal, marital, economic and cultural influences as well as individual consciousness. There has been various interdisciplinary academic projects tracing the indigenous roots of feminism in India as well as applying the paradigms of third-world post-colonial feminism in the documentation of women's history and feminist critiques of male dominated historiographical traditions. However, a feminist theory which helps in the resolution of the Indian female's 'experience' and subjectivity in the Indian public sphere is more or less inadequate by account of being Western. Theodor Adorno postulates in *Problems of Moral Philosophy* that "[o]nce the state of human consciousness and the state of social forces

6 The belief which has been propagated by the colonial and later neo-colonial Euro-American history scholars for decades now.

of production have abandoned these collective ideas, these ideas acquire repressive and violent qualities." (17) The feminist theory circulating in the Indian public sphere presently can be considered to be one such set of collective ethos.

Binodini Dasi and the Grand Narrative of Bengali theatre history

Binodini Dasi was a Bengali theatre actor, often referred to as the Prima Donna of the Bengali Stage. Her career as an actress spanned twelve years from 1874 to 1886, which were chiefly spent acting in plays for the National Theatre and the Bengali Theatre. Owing to her dedication to her craft, towards the end of her time on stage, she helped establish the Star Theatre in Calcutta. Owing to her indisputable role in the cultural history of Bengal, especially Calcutta, Binodini Dasi's life-writings have often been used as supporting documents for the grand narratives of the cultural as well as the social history of the state. Her first life-writing *Amar Katha* (My Story) was published in 1912 and the second one *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* (My Life as an Actress) was published in 1924/25. Both life-writings initially written in Binodini's native language Bengali were later edited and translated into English by Rimli Bhattacharya and published by Kali for Women in 1998. Ever since its publication, the two texts have proved Binodini's mentor – Girishchandra Ghosh's words true. In the Preface to the translation, Bhattacharya notes:

> The documentary value of Binodini Dasi's autobiography, *My Story*, was highlighted almost at its inception when her theatre-guru, Girishchandra Ghosh (1844-1912), titled his prefatory essay to the book: 'Srimati Binodini Dasi and the Bengali Theatre'. In this essay…Girishchandra explains at length his own reluctance to record the history of the Bengali stage in the form of an autobiography; he did not think, however, that it would be possible to do so in any other form, considering the extent of his own involvement with the founding and shaping of the public theatre. Girishchandra then criticizes Binodini's book for its many defects, but finally it is implied that

> the book will fill in the lacunae he himself was unable to fill. Subsequently, Binodini Dasi's autobiography and her own life became popular material for books as well as for dramatic productions of various kind. (ix)

By new theoretical intervention standards in the field of life-narratives, the fact that Binodini's *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress* have never been read as her 'story' or as social texts, calls for a re-view of the mentioned life-narratives. Binodini was born in 1863 as the eldest child of an extremely poor family of lower class status. Binodini's class status has always been an issue in the Bengali society where not only the intelligentsia but also the middle class were intensely class-conscious. For instance, when the Star Theatre was founded, Girishchandra Ghosh wanted to name it after Binodini who had played a huge role in popularizing Bengali theatre. However, owing to stiff resistance from various quarters, including the theatre-going public, it was later christened as Star Theatre. The titles of the two life-narratives might indicate a clear delineation between her personal life and professional life respectively. However, what we seek here is the cartography of the everyday life of a woman who was known as Nati Binodini in the public sphere.

The recorded history of the public theatre in nineteenth-century Bengal cites that women were recruited to play female parts in the year 1973; the first four professional actresses are cited to be Gopalsundari, Elokeshi, Jagattarini and Shyamsundari. As evident, Binodini is not among the first but she definitely belonged to the first generation of women actors in the public theatre of Bengal. While the Bengali theatre played a pivotal role in shaping the passive resistance of the upper class intelligentsia against the westernization spearheaded by the British ruling class, the question of casting women was riddled with problems. Bhattacharya comments:

> …Binodini Dasi and the other girls or women who were brought into the theatre halls were *employed* for their labor. And thereby, they were inserted almost overnight into a cultural enterprise in whose 'projection' they had never had a part – although, as actresses, they were instrumental in

> making theatre possible. At the same time, because most of them were recruited from the prostitute quarters (since no *bhadramahila* could be found to perform with the *bhadralok*), the stage actress was already read as a 'fallen woman', and outside of the nineteenth-century projects being constructed for women. (5)

In a tradition which questioned the right of an individual to write an autobiography based on her gender, caste and class, the fact that Binodini Dasi endeavored to turn into a life-narrator is remarkable in itself. In order to comprehensively understand Binodini's place in the social history of Bengal, it is quite important to look into the class origins of Bengali public theatre. Theatre historians generally use the term *natyanuragis* to refer to the theatre enthusiasts in Bengal. Critics like Manoranjan Bhattacharya further categorize them into *utsahis* and *utsahadatas*, enthusiasts and enthusers respectively. For the sake of precision it can be said that the *natyanuragis* came from various backgrounds and classes. However, theatre historians are always eager to point out the middle-class location of the theatre enthusiasts, mainly comprising the newly educated younger generation of the Bengali middle-class. It is also to be noted that the categorization put forward by Manoranjan Bhattacharya were often rendered null and void , owing to the fact that the producer/performer/consumer divisions often blurred and overlapped in the case of Bengali public theatre. This continuum that existed in terms of the producer-performer-consumer categories were absent as far as the female presence in theatre was concerned; while the male presence in theatre easily shifted from the multiple roles, the female presence was strictly restricted to being employed on stage. When the male presence indulged in public theatre for intellectual and grave social purposes, the female actors were often driven onstage for their daily bread alone. The primary factor in Binodini Dasi's entry onstage is not different from that of others, namely financial reasons. However, her commitment and dedication to the craft lifted her to the heights of being the prima donna of Bengali theatre. This identity locus created by Binodini Dasi is quite problematic when juxtaposed with the middle-class location of Bengali public theatre. Middle-class

newly educated intelligentsia turned to develop the public theatre exclusively into their brand of cultural index as opposed to the upper class theatre which did not want to have anything to do with the indigenous street culture of Bengal. In her Introduction to Binodini's translated life-narratives, Rimli Bhattacharya substantiates this point:

> The third group of theatre aficionados comprising the middle-class 'lads' formed the bulwark of the early public theatre…included Nagendranath Bandhopadhyay, Girishchandra Ghosh, Radhamadhab Kar and Ardhendhushekhar Mustafi, all from fairly well-off families with upper-class connections. A remarkable number of this group were 'problem kids', i.e. those who were school drop-outs or had been asked to leave by the principal…rebels or misfits of the new educational system which was primarily aimed at producing respectable clerical and administrative job holders. There are obvious connections between their distaste for formal education in the established schools of the day…and their affinity for and even expertise in different performance forms, as they were being practiced in mid-nineteenth century Calcutta…The gravitation towards amateur theatricals seems inevitable, given that they did not fully belong either to the group of upper-class intellectuals who could carry on literary or theological debates through meetings and journals and newspapers, nor had the professional qualifications (and class backing) for a white collar job…they were willing to endure physical hardship for their beloved theatre. Theatre afforded a group of déclassé intellectuals an access, however limited, to a public sphere. (9-10)

The nineteenth-century of public theatre of Bengal which seemingly finds its reflection in Binodini Dasi's life-narratives was thus imbued with multiple social indices; Binodini's identity as a woman adds the index of gender into this complicated matrix. An attempt to access the inscape of the actress through a reading of the life-narrative that is sensitive to these cultural and social indices also involves an understanding of the tradition that the

first generation of female theatre actors were stepping into. Rimli Bhattacharya notices with amusement that before the advent of girls/women into Bengali public theatre, the female roles were played by men as popped to the English theatre tradition which employed boys to play the female characters. She writes:

> …the male impersonators were *bhadralok*, whose traditional occupation had never been theatre or dance. However, earlier accounts of Jyotirindranath Tagore as a *nati* (in this instance, meaning the actress who introduces the play in the prologue of Sanskrit drama), as well as contemporary reviews, for example, those praising Ardhendushekhar Mustafi and Khetramohan Ganguly, suggest that the men acquitted themselves very well and were proud of their female impersonations. (11)

More often than not, these male impersonations of female characters were held up as the standard of female conduct in some cultures. In her life-narrative the Marathi actress Durga Khote talks about the Marathi theatre stalwart Bal Gandharva in this regard:

> Narayanrao's body had a softness that made it perfect for female roles. His movements were so graceful and attractive that even the most beautiful women of the time attempted to model themselves on him. There was not a trace of theatricality or affectation in the way Narayanrao carried himself. His movements were absolutely natural…
>
> …the beauty of his hands and gestures lay beyond description. You couldn't help but notice them, whether they were Bhamini's hands wielding a rapier; Rukmini's holding the garland for her chosen bridegroom's neck; Sindhu's turning the thick peg of the grindstone; Draupadi's hand held out to Krishna in tearful supplication, or even a courtesan's seductively offering paan. From shoulder to wrist his arms glowed with a soft luster, almost like ivory in their fairness…His fingers were the epitome of natural grace when they twisted and untwisted the end of a sari in maidenly coyness…

> …People have argued that men playing women amounts to dishonoring women. But one thing is indubitably true, that there was nothing even remotely perverse or unnatural in the way Narayanrao played his heroines. In deportment, costume, jewellery and every other detail, his female characters were imbued with the grace and dignity of women from upper-class families. (43-45)

All the similarities and dissimilarities of the Bengali and Marathi public sphere aside, the first generation of female actors always faced the challenge of living up to these 'ideal' impersonations by male actors. In fact, unlike Durga Khote who belonged to an aristocratic family, Binodini Dasi faced the added challenge of rising out of a lower class and caste, into the world of theatre. The Bengali public sphere was notorious for labeling cast-off women, who did not have identity of a patriarch attached to them as prostitutes whether or not they came from the prostitute quarters. When Binodini Dasi constantly refers to herself as *janmadukhini* in her life-narratives, she is also describing the position of several women like her who had to live with the wretched title throughout their lives.

Unlike Durga Khote's life-writing material, which is an exclusively censored account of the private life of a female performer, Binodini Dasi's self-referential writings can justifiably serve as footnotes to the Bengali public theatre history. Binodini Dasi was one of the first South Asian female theatre actors to write a life-narrative; her professional life as an actress comprises twelve years in the long seventy years of her life. *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress*, as life-narratives cannot be held accountable for constructing a comprehensive identity of the author of the life-narrative but merely offers a glimpse into her public life as an actress and the hardships that went into it. Her writing career (in terms of publication) spanned a larger time frame. According to Bhattacharya,

> Even to a reader who is unaware of the many histories which produced it, *My Story* reads like a palimpsest. It comprises of discontinuous, multiple texts written at different times,

> published in pieces and rewritten and edited by the author herself in their various incarnations. (18-19)

Hence a project of constructing her life in the chronological order from her life-narratives is highly problematic and flawed.

The first section of *My Story*, which includes the Preface, Dedication and Letters to Mahashoy (her mentor Girishchandra Ghosh) were not written at the same time, or even in any linear chronology. The letters, evidently part of an actual exchange between Binodini and her guru, spans the time period from her childhood to her days as an amateur on the Bengali stage. It is a *bedonagatha* – a story of personal pain, completed almost immediately after the death of her protector. In the Preface, Binodini writes:

> These are only the shadows of an unfortunate woman's heartache. 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…Yet it is Almighty God who has granted the great and the small…the power to feel both pain and consolation. But He has not given me anyone to whom I may recount my sorrows and who may comfort me…I have therefore put pen to paper…I realize only now that I have no words to make known my anguish…All I have done is to waste so much paper and ink. (49)

This undertone of pain is present in many life-narratives by women from India and abroad. However, the tone of self-debasement is not very frequently detected in them. While life-narrators like the Malayalee writer Lalithambika Antharjanam contemplate the improbability of writing their lives, given the social matrices in which they lived, Binodini Dasi seems to be convinced of the futility of putting pen to paper.

My Life as an Actress appeared in serialized form, thirteen years after *My Story*, in another magazine and it appears to be more 'of a piece'. In its final version, the autobiography is made up

of seven sections. It is possible to read the first and last sections as 'frames' to the story of her life as an actress. In his prefatory essay to *My Story*, Girish Ghosh faults it for being too personal, for containing too many details about her self, and for being a bitter social critique. He goes on to say that it is not professional enough and wishes it were more concerned about details of her performances. It is possible that Binodini also had her guru's criticism in mind when she wrote *My Life as an Actress*. While *My Story* is characterized by a conscious resistance to a split between her personal and professional life, the second narrative is characterized by a conscious desire to "recall and record an age gone, and is addressed specifically to young(er) actresses" (Bhattacharya, 20). Binodini observes:

> There was no showing off when acting in those days. No airs of having done something special, of having dressed up specially for a show. It was all very natural, part of an everyday domestic routine. One went on stage and performed one's role. Our teacher had specifically instructed us never to look at the audience while acting; one had to pretend as if there was no audience in front of us. We had to carry on with our business amongst ourselves. There was no need at all to keep an eye on who was watching or ponder over what they would think or say about our acting. I realized with time that this kind of teaching was intended to make us concentrate totally on our acting. It was necessary that we forget everything else and did to the best of our ability whatever each one of us had to. (133)

This passage from Binodini Dasi's life-writing read in juxtaposition to that of Durga Khote's narrative, can shed some light on the question whether the boundaries of the private and the public spheres are rigid, especially their representations in life-narratives. There are sections in *I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography* which deal with the professional nuances of being an actor:

> Shantarambapu was a strict teacher. Nothing was allowed to pass on the basis of 'It will do'. He took immense pains, observed my walk, speech, gestures, posture, the way I

> moved before the camera, and every other such detail with a minute eye to get exactly what he wanted out of me. He placed two mirrors opposite each other in front of me and told me to make a mental note of all my movements… Acting had to be natural but attractive at the same time. (59)

Such anecdotes about her professional training figure in very few places in the life-narrative as opposed to that of Binodini Dasi's, where the major bulk of the narrative reads like a history of the Bengali public theatre of the nineteenth century. When she does reminisce about her personal life, it is to recount a traumatic experience or tragedy. Even such experiences were heavily censored in the second life-narrative *My Life as an Actress*. Even though both *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress* were composed in colloquial Bangla, the latter has a more controlled narrative and remains intransigent to the lure of reminiscences. To dwell on the life-narratives by Binodini Dasi and Durga Khote simultaneously, also reminds of the phenomena of *bhadramahila* writing and *atmacaritra* as well as the fact that there was a prolific output of autobiographies by women in both Bengal and Maharashtra. In more ways than one, while scripting their life-narratives Binodini Dasi and Durga Khote wee following a contemporary trend as well as an old tradition. Binodini Dasi stands apart while following a tradition, in the sense that she did not categorically belong to the *bhadralok*; this sense of not-belonging pervades her life-narrative. A discerning reader may assume that this sense of not-belonging might be the root cause of the sentiment which leads her to believe that the anguish within her cannot find expression in the form of a life-narrative. Durga Khote, on the other hand, has the rich legacy of the Khote and Laud family names to cement her sense of belonging in the *atmacaritra tradition*; one can argue that this equips her with a confidence in the genre of life-writing to express privately what her public persona could not articulate in the heydays of her professional life. To highlight the difference on how two female performers, both of them trailblazers as far their professions are concerned, represent their first step into the acting profession can be subjected to a contrapuntal reading. Binodini Dasi recalls her first experience on stage:

> …I simply cannot describe my condition and my extreme nervousness on the day I was actually to perform my part before the public. When I saw before me the rows of shining light, and the eager, excited gaze of a thousand eyes, my entire body became bathed in sweat, my heart began to beat dreadfully, my legs were actually trembling… Along with fear, anxiety and excitement, a certain eagerness too appeared to overwhelm me…For one, I was a little girl and then too, the daughter of poor people. I had never had occasion to perform or even appear before such a gathering…following the instructions I had received during the rehearsals, uttered the few words I had been trained to deliver with the appropriate gestures, and then came back to the wings. As I did so, the audience clapped loudly to show their appreciation. (67)

In *I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography*, another performer recounts her first experience:

> The Imperial Studio was located on Kennedy Bridge. We got there at seven o'clock in the evening. The shooting lasted all night. I had no idea what and how it was turning out. But I poured my heart into doing whatever I was asked to do…The studio was dank and revolting, full of dark corners and junk…They handed me a cheque of Rs 250. I returned home at dawn with it. I put it under my pillow ad fell fast asleep, almost lifeless with fatigue… *Farebi Jaal* means 'Web of Deceit'. When the film was released, I found myself trapped in that web…The Lauds and Khotes were highly esteemed families of the time and Mr. Bhavnani used that fact…The film opened at Majestic Cinema, located in a Maharashtrian neighborhood. It was my misfortune that the film turned out to be the very dregs, worthless in content and in production values. As a result, the Maharashtrian community tore me to shreds. (34-35)

She goes on to recount how it became impossible for her to leave her home after the release f her first movie *Farebi Jaal*, how both the Laud and Khote families shunned her for dishonoring

the family names. This raises the question of whether the Bengali public sphere was more receptive towards the female presence onstage/onscreen; documented theatre history shows that this is not the case. The relegation of the female actors to the category of 'fallen' women has already been discussed; for most of these women recruited into theatre, it was their only chance to redeem themselves from the prostitute quarters and destitution. There was another category of responses which were concerned with the moral implications of hiring these women for public theatre. Rimli Bhattacharya, in her Introduction, quotes a positive review in the *Hindu Paper*, a fortnightly run by the alumni of the Hindu College in Calcutta, published on 2 October 1835:

> These are native performances, by people entirely Hindus, after the English fashion, in the vernacular language of their country; and what elates us with joy, as it should do all the friends of Indian improvement, is that the fair sex of Bengal are always seen on the stage, as the female parts are almost exclusively performed by Hindu women. (qtd. 13)

On the other hand, there were intensely aggressive reviews in other newspapers and theatre journals, which expressed anxiety over the seemingly corrupt influence that these women would exert over the college-going middle-class young boys. It is also true that the female presence drew more people to the theatre mostly because of the novelty of seeing women from the 'anonymous' quarters perform in public without being slapped with the stigma of immorality, which would follow a visit to these 'anonymous' quarters. The translator-editor of Binodini Dasi's life-narratives makes a clear distinction between these first-generation theatre actresses from the 'anonymous' quarters and the professional class of *tawwaifs*. The latter term is used in a generic sense to refer to the courtesan singer-dancers of Bengal. Bhattacharya notes:

> Women singers in Bengal had earlier been *kirtaniyas*, *bhikarinis* and singers of *khemta* (this last considered to be obscene by the emerging middle-class); they performed in streets as well as in inner courtyards and temple precincts which gave to their activities a familial or community setting. Or, they derived from a more courtly tradition

> of the *baiji* or *tawwaif* and were performers who were usually heard in exclusive enclaves by the wealthy. The (future) actress might well have links with any of these occupational identities, but since she was usually recruited from the prostitute quarters, the terms prostitute-actress or *barangana-abhinetri* came to be used interchangeably. (13-14)

While Binodini Dasi played a significant role in popularizing Bengali public theatre of the nineteenth century, her life-narrative reveals a representation of self-effacement and self-denigration. When *My Story* ends, the author is apologetic:

> I have written for my own consolation, perhaps for some unfortunate woman who taken in by deception has stumbled on to the path of hell. Because I have no relations, I am despised. I am a prostitute, a social outcast; there is no one to listen or to read what I feel within! That is why I have let you know my story in pen and paper. Like my own tainted and polluted heart, I have tainted these pure white pages with writing. But what else could I do! A polluted being can do nothing other than pollute! (107)

Such sentiments are repeated throughout *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress* and calls into question not only the contested identity of the author/narrator but also the socio-cultural factors that influenced it.

Situating the Bengali self-referential writing by women is important in terms of understanding the socio-cultural factors that influenced Binodini Dasi to narrate her life while believing that her doing so is an inadequate and inappropriate exercise. Binodini's life-narratives emerge from a relational identity; her writings gain significance when read in juxtaposition with the writings of contemporary *bhadramahila* writers and the wide-ranging scholarship on the various institutions, practices and beliefs that shaped the lives and writings of these *bhadramahilas*. The mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century saw prolific publications in Bangla by women; these comprised articles in newspapers and journals, poems, pamphlets, tracts, novels, short

stories, autobiographies and memoirs (and other forms of life-narratives). These published women were mostly *bhadramahilas*; however, Rimli Bhattacharya reminds that this label "cannot erase differences of social locations, education and other affiliations of the writers, or suggest a commonality of purpose or target readership" (20). Binodini's life-narratives as well as her fictional work does stand on very different ground owing to the fact that she does not belong to the generic category *bhadramahila*.

Binodini Dasi was a public figure with a professional career and thus she was not a *bhadramahila*. She had very little formal education and was considered to have acquired her learning from her years in the theatre. By the time her works began to be published, there was more than half a century of women's writing in print. Periodicals such as the *Bamabodhini*, *Bangabandhu* and *Abalabandhu* were published exclusively for women. An anthology of the *bhadramahila* writings from these journals were compiled in 1872 and published as *Bamarachanabali*. Other journals which published such works in the later years include *Prabashi*, *Bharatvarsha*, *Basumati*, *Bangasree*, *Bangalakshmi*, *Uttara* as well as Bankimchandra's*Bangadarshan*. The contributors of these periodicals were mostly the wives, mothers and/or daughters of the urban propertied class. In Binodini's case, the difference is not just a matter of her class origins but also in her target readership – her writings were directed at the theatre-going public who were not always from among the propertied *bhadralok*. As mentioned earlier, Binodini's writings were published by the theatre magazines, unlike the bhadramahila writings, the latter mainly being didactic and exhortatory in nature. These magazines were run by the upper-class English educated reformists and the main intention behind promoting bhadramahila writings were reformist in nature. Though this was the beginning of a different trend of literature in Bangla, it took a new direction with the proliferation of theatre magazines in the first decades of the century and literary activity after this point in history was greatly shaped by the consumption patterns generated by these theatre publications. Bhattacharya notes that:

> The *Natya-mandir*, the theatre journal in which Binodini's autobiography was first serialized, had an elaborate

> subscription plan and was targeted both at the theatre-going audience as well as those who would be curious about theatre gossip, but might not necessarily be regular theatre-goers. The first editorial said that the journal wished to include pieces by actresses who were skilled in composition (*rachanakushaliabhinetri*). In reality, the journal became a public forum not so much for but about the actress. Most of the periodicals from this time appeared to be participating in a project of rehabilitation of the actress, and through her seeking to establish the legitimacy of theatre as an artistic, moral and educational 'temple' of society. (22)

An important historical fact that emerges from a close observation of the content published in these theatre journals, which claimed to legitimize the public theatre through legitimizing the actress, is that even when the articles carried the photographs of female theatre artists, there are numerous instances of fictitious first person narratives of women's lives written by male authors. These fictitious women and/accounts were mostly actress-like figures. An examination of the publication history of Binodini Dasi's life-narratives is a testament as to how the *abhinetrikahini* or the actress stories were used by the editors and publishers of theatre magazines to pique the curiosity of the general public. They were feeding on the general curiosity that the public always felt about the women from 'anonymous' quarters employed by the theatre companies. When *Natya-mandir* first decided to publish *My Story* in a serialized form, they ran a photograph of Binodini Dasi along with a mellifluous notice, which proclaimed her star value in the theatre. A similar strategy was adopted by the theatre magazine *Roop o Rang* which published My *Life as an Actress* in a serialized form. The serialized versions of both her autobiographies were terminated abruptly without any explanations offered to the readers--*My Story* after merely two issues and *My Life* after eleven issues. Rimli Bhattacharya notes with trepidation that by the time *Roop o Rang* published her second autobiography, as far as the genre of actress stories were concerned – the blurring of fact and fiction, the literary and

historical had already happened, rendering a critical reading of such life stories a complicated endeavor.

An overwhelming number of features throughout the two life-narratives would suggest that Binodini Dasi's writings fall into the stereotypes of the feminine modes of writing - the personal, the confessional, the lament and so on. An extract from My Story goes thus:

> This was the time when I fell into the direst of circumstances. Unfortunate and fallen women, prostitutes such as us, have always to endure changes of fortune but there is a limit even to such transitions – my Fate has always worked against me. I was an ignorant lowly woman, unfamiliar with the path of both good and evil. The path that we are destined to take is always condemned; but it seems to be a rule of our life that whenever we want to walk on the path of virtue, evil will inevitably appear to waylay us. People say that it is necessary always to defend oneself, but even our attempts to protect ourselves invite censure. There is no one to look upon us with affection or to help us in our times of difficulty. However, attend now to my story of pain. (84)

Both *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress* contain two kinds of narrations and there is constant friction between these dual registers. Excerpts like the one quoted above is written in a register of pain – the pain, humiliation and burden of being labeled as a social outcast coupled with a deep-rooted yearning for recognition for her hard work in her profession. There are other parts in the narrative which are imbued with excitement of being part of theatre and performance; for instance, in the chapter titled National Theatre she recounts:

> When I used to appear on stage, trained and instructed by Girish-babumahashoy, having benefited immensely from his many counsels, I did not feel I was any other person, but that I had become the very character I was representing. My trance-like involvement continued for as long as I was acting…During this period, while I played the roles of superior characters, my mind seemed to want to move

> towards higher things…Acting was the chief treasure, the mainstay of my life. It had become as if an inextricable part of my nature, to study my role, to envisage a scene according to my demands of the part, and imprinting it in my mind, to stand before a huge mirror internalizing the modes and gestures of each of those natural behavioral patterns…to watch these pictures of the mind with rapt attention. (79-80)

Sometimes these two registers of pain and pride appear so close to each other that the reader fails to draw a clear distinction as to where the pain ends and pride of profession begins. For instance, right after the above excerpt which is a stellar instance of the register of pride in the life-narrative, Binodini Dasi immediately turns apologetic about exploiting the affection of her colleagues and throwing tantrums during rehearsals. This is closely followed by an account of a traumatic nature – she narrates her experience as an *ashrita* of a rich young man who would let her be a professional actress and the strife that followed this prohibition.

Bangla literature has a respectable tradition of self-referential writing, generally referred to as the *charit-sahitya*; this tradition was heavily influenced by the Western autobiographical classics rather than the tradition of the *nama* available from Persian and Arabic sources, which would have been more easily accessible owing to the multitude of Muslim rulers who ruled Bengal and nearby provinces. One of the chief conventions followed by the *charit-sahitya* was the introduction of the author through *pitriparichoy* (patrilineal genealogy) and *kulaparichoy* (class/clan affiliations). Binodini's life-narrative stands apart from those of her *bhadralok* contemporaries – male and female – by virtue of the absence of this patriarchal insulation. The narrative is constructed around a series of male absences; as opposed to the constant references to Girishchandra Ghosh – her mentor, her father or his name is never invoked in her narrative. Moreover, her narrative seems to accrue a certain sense of abstractness because of the manner in which the male figures in her anecdotes are referred to in a nameless generic sense such as the 'rich

young man' who tried to restrain her from being a professional theatre artist. However, the women in her life are remembered with warmth and affection, especially in the anecdotes in *My Story* – her mother and grandmother, the kind neighbor near her childhood home, Gangabai – her first teacher, her senior colleague Rajkumari among others. The value of Binodini Dasi's life-narratives in reconstructing modern Indian femininity can be measured both by its distance from the continuity of the familiar (the bhadramahila writing) and by the extent to which the author of the life-narrative has internalized the norms of the bhadramahila writing. Because, unless she had internalized these norms, she would not constantly be lamenting about being a misfit in the long-standing tradition of *charit-sahitya*.

English theatre was introduced in India by the British in Bengal, the latter being the most important city of the British colonial empire in the Eastern hemisphere. The first Bengali theatre opened on 16th August 1873 with Dutt's *Sharmishtha*; this production was credited with being the first indigenous theatre production to engage women for female roles, which men had so far played. In chronicling the history of Bengali theatre, BrajendraNath Banerjee states that a storm of protest erupted, as the actresses were recruited from the 'anonymous' quarters and thus considered 'corrupting agents'. The protest was, however, short-lived and other companies followed suit. The building of permanent playhouses indicated a growth in theatre's popularity among the educated middle-class reflecting a significant change in the structure of the Bengali society. Theatre no longer thrived exclusively on the patronage of the rich; the public provided the money for its sustenance and hence the coinage public theatre.

Hence, during the time when women were being relegated to the private sphere as part of the nationalist Hindu chauvinism, Bengali public theatre transformed itself from a 'private' means of entertainment funded by the rich and elite for their entertainment into a public art form; a public art form which employed women. The nationalist resolution of the women's question was to confine women in the private sphere appointing them as the gatekeepers of the sanctity of traditional values and customs. The life of a

public theatre artist like Binodini Dasi gains much significance in this cultural matrix and opens a window to the formative stages of modern Indian femininity. Partha Chatterjee elaborates:

> The 'new' woman defined in this way was subjected to a new patriarchy. In fact, the social order connecting the home and the world in which nationalism placed the new woman was contrasted not only with that of modern western society; it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition…the new patriarchy was also sharply distinguished from the immediate social and cultural condition in which the majority of people lived, for the 'new' woman was quite the reverse of the 'common' woman who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males…It was precisely this degenerate condition of women which nationalism claimed it would reform, and it was through these contrasts that the new woman of nationalist ideology was accorded status of cultural superiority to the westernized women of the wealthy parvenu families spawned by the colonial connection as well as the common women of the lower classes. Attainment by her own efforts of a superior national culture was the mark of woman's newly acquired freedom. (244-245)

Binodini Dasi cannot be called the 'new' woman in the sense espoused by ParthaChatterjee, she can be envisaged as a step between the 'common' woman and the 'new' woman while at the same time redefining the boundaries of the latter concept.

It has always been a matter of intrigue as to why women writers from India have preferred to write poetry or fiction over drama or self-referential writings. It is still a debatable question as to why women hesitate to make better use of theatre's volatile space to highlight women's issues. The only rationale seems to lie in the requirement of drama to be performed before an audience. Theatre – in its various stages of production – necessitates the breaching of the private-public distinction that women have always hesitated to initiate in the colonial era. The first generation

of female public theatre artists in nineteenth-century Bengal initiated this breach and this is a path breaking moment in the evolution of a new 'modern' Indian femininity. As a representative and prima donna of this first generation of artists, Binodini Dasi's life-narratives contest the nationalist grand narrative of redefining Indian womanhood in Hindu chauvinist terms.

Nilambur Ayesha and Femininity in 'Modern' Kerala

Nilambur Ayesha, like Binodini Dasi, entered the word of theatre due to financial problems in the family. However, unlike Binodini, Ayesha had to face the stiff resistance in breaching the private-public divide from within her conservative Muslim community. Another notable difference, besides the temporal and geographical locations of the two artists, is the fact that in Kerala the evolution of theatre is closely linked to the rise of the Communist Party. It was usually unlikely that Malayalee theatre artists, who were contemporaries of Nilambur Ayesha, could disengage themselves from political indoctrination. In fact, Ayesha had such a close association with the Party that there are theatre historians and political scholars who wonder whether she truly belonged in the annals of the theatre history or political history. As far as life-writing scholarship is concerned, this theatre artist definitely holds a place in documenting Malayalee women's history – whether for her artistic contributions or for her role in popularizing the Communist propaganda is irrelevant. The re-view is based on the text published by Women's Imprint, which is an extended version of an anecdotal piece published in *Bhashaposhini* in September 2002.

Nilambur Ayesha's autobiography *Jeevithathinte Arangu* is a quick glance through the different phases in her life. It is an ordinary narration of the important events in her life; there is no profound philosophy of life as we see in other 'celebrated' autobiographies. But this seemingly ordinary narrative throws light on the shaping of a strong female personality and also on the response of a so- called educated society to the entry of a woman (from a minority community) into the public space of theatre. The

response was largely shaped by the kind of public discourse that was happening in Kerala in those times. The review will strive to understand the role played by early twentieth-century Malaylee discourse on femininity and the various socio-political factors that influenced it's evolution, on Ayesha's personal discourse/ narrative of her life.

Jeevithathinte Arangu is a more or less linear narrative; the first four chapters span the period from her childhood through adolescence till her stint in drama and cinema. The initial chapters are designed to throw some light on the background from which she hailed as well as the roots of her interest in the fascinating world of theatre. The narration starts at the bright phase of her life where she enjoyed all the luxuries incumbent on her family owing to her father's status in Nilambur, her hometown. Unlike Binodini Dasi's life-narrative, Ayesha identifies her patrilineal heritage right at the beginning of her life-narrative. Her narration in Malayalam can be translated thus:

> Nilambur is famous for its teak forests. The main purpose of the Shornoor-Nilambur railway was to transport teak timber from Nilambur. Initially only goods train services ran in this line; the ordinary travel services started later.
>
> In those times, if somebody from the Nilambur area approached the local police station for the resolution of any issue, the sub inspector would put forward a question to these petitioners: 'Have you approached Mukkatta Moothedathu Ahmadkutty with this problem?'. The implied meaning was that if it was a problem which he couldn't resolve, it couldn't be resolved in the police station as well; and if you haven't approached him yet, it will be better that you do so.
>
> I am the daughter of this Mukkatta Moothedathu Ahmadkutty who was given the *muthupatta* title from the Nilambur royal house and reigned in Nilambur as a prominent figure. (27)

Her father, MukkatttaMoothedathuAhmadkutty not only took great interest in the education of all his children (including

Ayesha) but also encouraged their enthusiasm in arts and related activities. Then the narration comes to the darker phases of her life, which run on till the end of the second chapter: her father's death which coincided with the slow deterioration of her family's prosperity, the struggle to earn a livelihood after dropping off from school, her mother's declining health and finally her marriage (which she later realized was a conspiracy). Ayesha claims that poverty was not the factor that decided Ayesha's future in theatre. Even after separating from her husband, Ayesha had the moral and financial support of her family. However, the imminent fear of destitution seems to have served as a crucial factor in her decision to enter the stage. Her father and mother were very much inclined to arts and music and this was ingrained into her psyche too, so that when the opportunity, in the person of Ayamoottikka, as she fondly remembers E. K. Ayamu, came knocking at her door she nodded her head in agreement.

The account of her career starts with the formation of the Nilambur Yuva Jana Kala Samithi under the leadership of Dr. Usmaan. The formation of the Samithi is closely intertwined with the growth of the Communist Party in Nilambur and all those associated with the Samithi, including Ayesha, were indoctrinated in the ideals of Communism. As a school drop-out from a middle class minority family, Ayesha says that it is as a party activist she acquired the confidence to face society and form a social consciousness. One thing of peculiar interest in these narratives is the fact that Ayesha regards herself as an activist first and then only as an actor.

Ayesha describes the incident during the performance of E. K. Ayamu's *Ijj Oru Manusanaavan Nokku*, which coincidentally led to her entry into the world of theatre:

> Women did not engage in any aspect of theatre production then. It was believed that it was inappropriate for women to appear onstage. No family allowed their daughters to be involved in theatre or acting. So men were forced to play female roles. P. T. Mohammedali played the role of Sabira and E. K. Ummar enacted Jameela's role in this production.

> During one production of this drama a certain incident happened during one of the intimate scenes. Mohammedali was playing coy by twirling the end of the *thattam*; the *thattam* came off during this time along with the rest of headgear. When the audience caught sight of his cropped head, they started howling and whistling.
>
> This troubled him and he became adamant about casting women to play female roles. He declared that no matter what, another production will not be staged till two women were found to play Sabira's and Jameela's roles. (42)

Ayamu's search culminated at Ayesha's house and led to her introduction to the world of theatre. It is interesting that a theatre enthusiast's adamancy on total acceptance of his production by the audience is what led to the path breaking decision to cast women to play female roles. After a successful yet stressful stint in theatre, Ayesha also did some meaty roles in films with eminent actors of the time. But when the fourth chapter ends, there is another dip in her fortunes which started with the disintegration of the Nilambur Yuva Jana Kala Samithi. The final chapters are a rather vague account of her life in Saudi Arabia and then her come back after 20 years to Kerala.

Jeevithathinte Arangu can be viewed as scriptotherapy also, i. e. the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment. Ayesha's traumatic experience was at two levels: the personal and the social. At the personal level, her marriage to a man much older to her and subsequently an unwanted pregnancy make her unresponsive to men in her later life. A re-view of her life-narrative charts the evolution of an unapologetic yet broken identity terribly influenced by the traumatic experiences of her life. Though narrated in a steady register and matter-of-fact manner, the conspiracy that led to her ill-fated marriage, its consequences and the harsh words spoken against her after her career choice, seem to have left an indelible mark on her femininity. Time and again, in her life story, Ayesha recounts how her earlier experiences turned her mind and body unresponsive to sexual advances or attractions. With her entry into theatre she had to confront the anger of

her society also. The society, especially the Muslim community, looked down upon her and she remembers many instances when even her life had been endangered during performances because of such protests.

Through her autobiography, what Ayesha does is, therefore, to 'reassess' her past experiences and "to reinterpret the inter textual codes inscribed on personal consciousness by culture and society" (Smith and Watson 32). The relevant point is how, as readers, we interpret these codes as "effective sources of counter hegemonic insights"(Gilmore 102). The focus is not on whether her autobiography effectively serves as the psycho analytic talking cure as envisaged by Sigmund Freud, but rather on the picture of the society and culture that emerges as a fragmented ego (a victim of psychosexual and social adversities), forced to the margins of hegemonic power structures, reconstructs itself.

The unrecorded and unacknowledged female presence in Kerala theatre history is a baffling one and recently there has been a revival of efforts to rediscover this lost presence. Many of the researchers and scholars who take up this work, however, find interesting reasons for this phenomenon. One obvious explanation would be historiography, the methodology of the discipline of history. It is due to the 'norms and terms' of recording of Malayalam Theatre history that an actress like Nilambur Ayesha and her contributions to the theatre and society went unnoticed. The fact that she belonged to a minority community and that she was a woman has undoubtedly contributed a great deal in history's 'delegitimization' of such an artist who played a pivotal role, along with her male counterparts, in social reformation of the Muslim community in the Malabar region and in popularizing the Communist ideals and principles among them. This monograph is an attempt to understand the extent to which her femininity has been an influence on this 'delegitimization' process not only by history but also by the party (of which she was a staunch follower) and by the Muslim community. Critics may come down hard on the literary value of such autobiographies but scholars working to fill the 'gaps' in history would acknowledge the importance of such works. Therefore, as stated earlier, while Ayesha engages

herself in the act of 'rememory' what evolves is not just a narrative on personal history but a narrative that can throw light on the social and cultural 'delegetimization' that women working in the field of theatre had to face in the 1940s and 50s and an illustration of how the 'womanly' become a burden on them.

Towards the end of the 1950s there were mainly three types of theatre groups playing on the Malayalam stage:

1. theatre groups owned and run by rich theatre enthusiasts, which were very few in number
2. groups run by people who saw drama as an effective medium for initiating social reformations and changes
3. amateur drama troupes started by young men from middle-class families who acquired education under the modern system

Nilambur Ayesha's theatre activities are mainly associated with the second kind of theatre group. But in order to understand the kind of ostracization that women in theatre faced, it is essential to understand the scenario preceding this. This will take us to the performances of the Tamil Drama troupes in Kerala. The menu these troupes had in waiting for the layman who came to the play grounds after one day of hard labor was wholesome: from song to cabaret dances to slapstick comedy it was non- stop entertainment right till the end. It is inappropriate to dismiss them as possessing no artistic or literary merit because the popularity of such plays throws light on the taste of the contemporary audience in Kerala. So it was inevitable that when indigenous drama troupes were started they had to imitate the trend set by the Tamil troupes for survival. But Malayalee women were unwilling to don the role of the Tamil cabaret dancers; it was something outside the purview of the socially acceptable behavior code in place in the Kerala society for women. So taking cue from the Shakespearean days, the roles were played by transvestites (male actors decked up in female attire).

It was not just because theatre was a taboo. The vulgar body language of the Tamil actress was unacceptable to the Malayalee woman (who was negotiating a new concept of a 'graceful public

place' as part of the changes in the society which in turn emerged as a result of discourses on the confrontation of the public and the private).

One undisputedly significant development of the late nineteenth century in Kerala was the emergence of an English educated class which began to review the existing social order, ideas and institutions in sharply critical terms. Vigorous debates and discussions were organized by the modern- educated men on issues of 'general interest'. The newly emergent domains of modern literature and drama belonged in large measure to this sphere of self- evaluation. These modern-educated youth, who were both the objects and the participants of this discourse, were bound together by one common factor: the formation of a new 'general' or 'public' domain. The existent domain rampant with class distinctions was unacceptable to their 'liberal' minds. All these sites of formation of public opinion formed a nascent 'public sphere' in Kerala. J. Devika, in her paper, says that it cannot be seen as a consequence of the conscious demands of the modern-educated groups: "it pre-supposes the prior transformation of social ties, their convergence to form new institutional arrangements, which reshaped the entire context of social communication" (21). But it was certainly the space in which new forces contended for hegemony in the late 19th century. Often, the challenge to the older order was made in terms of an image of society in which gender-difference figured as the fundamental principle of ordering human beings, as the alternative to the established social order that privileged birth and inherited status.

As a result debates on modern gender relations took center stage in these public discourses. Discussions within these arenas were focused on the ways and means of fostering the 'given' qualities of men and women so as to best benefit modern society. Women reflected on what was 'womanly', on education, duties, vocation and civil roles, an ongoing discussion, first influenced by reformism and later by nationalist and communist ideas, which remains alive today. As the newly educated elite, these women, posed an alternative, which J. Devika calls "the order of gender", an ideal form of social ordering projected into the future and

re-discovered in the imagined 'Golden Age' of Hindu society, "in which the only unsurpassable social division would be of gender" (19). This would be "sustained through the complementary exchange of gendered capacities, men as industrial producers in the political, economic and intellectual field and women as efficient and active overseers of the domestic domain". While first generation feminists like Pennammabhayi and K. Chinnamma actively promoted this new active domestic ideal for women, those like K. Lakshmi Amma, however, were forthright in arguing: "woman is not merely a child-producing machine… Is man's freedom merely a means of bolstering the slavery of woman?" (23). It is very important to pursue the delineation of the gendered space that the Malayalam public sphere of the late 19th and early 20th century promoted, in order to understand why female actors were looked down upon. This would give a vivid explanation of the delegetimization process as is witnessed in *Jeevithathinte Arangu*.

By the mid-nineteenth century the imperialist criticism of Indian domestic life had become quite commonly voiced in the modern educated circles in the Malayalee society. The 'decadent sexual morals' supposedly rampant within matrilineal familial and marital arrangements was also a common target; but equally important was the alleged lack of discipline and order in homes. The standard of evaluation was clearly recognized to be mid-Victorian ideals of domestic life. What followed this seems to be a replay of what happened in Mary Wollstonecraft's times in England and France. It does not mean that such an 'ordering of gender' took place with consent from all quarters. Voices like that of K. Lakshmi Amma's were heard now and then. Indeed if the active domestic ideal has been a remarkably persistent presence in Kerala, it is precisely because it co-existed with modified versions of itself: Woman's space could be widened out without compromising 'womanliness'. In the 1930s such an ingenious, if necessarily limited strategy was put into circulation about woman's presence and agency in the public domain. People began to justify the employment of women as teachers, inspectresses, nurses and administrators in municipalities in terms of the fact that these were jobs or positions which required womanly traits

like patience, gentle disposition, tact and resourcefulness. The justification for woman's entry into the public domain remained extendable to any institution, provided that it may be made to look like one that required 'gentle power', which employed the procedures of the modern government of individuals.

For the women of Kerala who molded their behaviour and body language from such intellectual discourses of the times, the body language and movements of the Tamil actors were equivalent to that of a whore. The intellectual discourse which endorsed the active domestic ideal thought that an exercise of the mind's energy would de-feminize the women. It is to be understood that it is from such a prejudice that women who later dared to enter the world of theatre and cinema were labeled with such expletives. There are recorded instances were women played male characters (e. g. T. C. Achutha Menon's *Sangeetha Naishadam* wherein his aunt Ikkavamma played a male character). It is against such a background that actors like Nilambur Ayesha entered the scene. Consequently it was inevitable that the so-called refined Malayalee society equated such dramas and artists with vulgarity and conveniently left them out from the pages of history. It is also against this setting that we should analyze the displeasure that Ayesha invoked in the society with her entry into theatre, should be viewed.

It is during the 1930s and 1940s that women made their foray onto the stage. Most of them were girls who had received modern education and entered the field out of their own interest and enthusiasm and not just obliged by a poverty- stricken miserable life. Ayesha enters the scene through the Yuva Jana Kala Samithi based at Nilambur. The Samithi had strong ties with the Communist Movement as well. Ayesha's debut play was E. K. Ayamu's *Jj Oru Manussanaavaan Nokk*, which as she says in her autobiography was a drama which had both political and social implications. It is not be deduced from these statements that Ayesha was the first woman to pull it off. The social reform movements and the increased political awareness among women resulted in many educated women like Akkamma Cherian and Parvati Ayyappan being active in the public space. The notion that women are to be confined to the private domain was slowly

yet steadily being challenged by educated women who began to contribute to the economy as well. So theatre also had begun to be viewed as another career option. But, while a section of the society was receptive to such changes and embraced the entry of Sulochana and Sudharma (actors in KPAC's production *Ningalenne Communistaakki*), a good size of the population still closed the doors of their mind to the winds of change as is evidenced by Ayesha's experiences enumerated in her *Jeevithathinte Arangu*.

Ayesha made her debut in theatre in 1953. The public discourse and the formation of the nascent public sphere had started as early as the late 19th century. But the fact to be kept in mind is that these discourses which took place in the colonial times were restricted in the sense that only the affluent who had the fortune to get a modern education could participate in these discourses. This explains why the locales at Nilambur and the surrounding regions protested against a woman acting in a drama. After all, they were even alien to the idea of extending the domain of the woman to the public spaces which did not require any kind of de-feminization. What were the reasons for adverse reactions invoked by Ayesha's theatre performances? This is the question that this monograph intended to enumerate. There could have been many reasons. Ayesha belonged to an orthodox minority community, Muslims in Malabar were progressive enough to educate their girls but not progressive enough to let her come out of the 'purdah'. But, even if Ayesha was not a Muslim she would have had the same reception. By the 1950s, circumstances and negotiations had extended the domain of action for women. They were allowed to come out of the *adukkala* to take up jobs which did not require them to sacrifice their femininity. But in Ayesha's times the *arangu* was still to come under the ambit of the public sphere in Kerala. The question remains whether it has come under the acceptable realms in these modern times in Kerala.

Performing the Self

The life-narratives of two theatre artists from two different eras in two different parts of India have been chosen, not

as a part of reconstructing the past in feminist terms, but to maintain them as point(s) of reference in an attempt to conduct a poststructuralist enquiry as to whether the Indian woman in the public sphere manipulates her subjectivity/selfhood, and if so how can the manipulated subjectivity be accounted for. Such an enquiry would require the understanding of selfhood as a concept that transcends categorical definitions. Defining selfhood, as an outworking of experience, in women's autobiographical discourse within the categorical definitions of gender and/or genre limits the scope of these works. A 'reading' that facilitates the understanding of the female selfhood beyond these boundaries is then quintessential for a better perspective on the female life-narrative discourse in the Indian public sphere. In so far as the act of self-referential writing involves an exhibition of one's lived life before the gaze of a reading public, paradigms of spectacle and performance may be more relevant to this informed reading of life-narratives by women, than models of authentic expressiveness. By applying the paradigms of performance to the act of life-writing, it is also presumed that the author/subject of the self-referential writing assumes more than one identity; she is assumed to possess a contested subjectivity. In the case of the two life-narrators studied here, on the one hand, there is the public identity of being a woman who broke conventions to earn a living and on the other hand, there is the identity as unraveled in the autobiography which may not have a one-on-one correspondence to the public identity. There is also the possibility of a private selfhood which might have been hidden from the generic specifications of the act of self-referential writing. Recognition of a given selfhood as essentially contested implies the acceptance of multiple significations of the subjectivity as not only logically possible but also of permanent potential critical value to the reader's interpretation of the selfhood in question.

While engaged in the act of narrating life, both Binodini and Ayesha confront two (if not more) significations of their selfhood. The signification which they have to manage/manipulate/perform is the self that others see: the socio-historical person with achievements, personal appearance and social relationships.

These are 'real' and 'external' attributes of a person living in the world. But there is also the self experienced only by that person, the signification of selfhood felt from the inside that the life-narrator can never get outside of. The selfhood, which is a product of life-narrative, can be located in the middle of the continuum between the external and internal significations of selfhood.

Unlike in the fictional genres of literature, life-narrators are obligated to anchor their narratives in their own temporal, geographical and cultural milieu. Hence, while the author narrates her selfhood, she does so by anchoring her 'self' – intentionally or otherwise – in the contemporary public sphere. The life-narrative undoubtedly becomes a true measure of the cultural influences on the subjective self. One effective way in which these influences can be understood is by measuring the distance between the self performed in the life-narrative and the internal and external significations of selfhood available to the discerning reader. In terms of discourse analysis, as far as the selected life-narratives are concerned, the exploration of an alternate self in the life-narrative can be traced back to the fetishization of the female by the Hindu nationalist movement, as espoused by Tanika Sarkar in her essay "Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in Nineteenth-Century Bengali Literature". While Sarkar is exclusively discussing the Bengali public sphere of Binodini Dasi's time, a continuum can be established between the nineteenth-century Bengali public sphere and the early twentieth-century Malayalee public sphere, in terms of the perception of femininity.

While this implies that *My Story*, *My Life as an Actress* and *Jeevithathinte Arangu* are being treated as historical documents – as a source of evidence for the analysis of a historical moment – it does not mean that the life-narratives would be understood 'only' as historical records. While life-narratives may contain factual historical data, which corroborates the grand narrative, they cannot be considered as factual history about a particular person, time or event – they offer subjective truth rather than fact. When life-narrators write to chronicle an event or explore a certain time period, they are 'making' history in accordance with their own perceptions and ideological domains. But in the process of

'making' history they are also 'performing' several rhetorical acts: justifying individual perceptions, upholding their reputation, disputing the accounts provided by others on their acts, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures among others. Any utterance in a self-referential writing, even if it is inaccurate or distorted, characterizes the selfhood of the author. Such complexities require reading practices that reflect on the narrative tropes, socio-cultural context, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts within the trajectory of the life-narrative.

Autobiographical claims such as date of birth can be verified or falsified by recourse to documentation of fact outside the text but the autobiographical truth, as envisaged by Western Enlightenment discourses, is an intersubjective exchange between the narrator and the reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of the author/narrator's life. The emphasis of life-narrative 'reading' shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding. Life-narrators 'selectively' enagage their lived experience through personal story telling. Anchored in specific temporal, geographical and cultural indices, the self of the writer is simultaneously in dialogue with the personal processes as well as the archives of memory and history. Contextualized thus, the self-referential writing may swerve from generic specifications even as it embraces the project of self-representation. These departures offer an opportunity to calibrate our attention to the range of demands imposed by the genre and the silencing or shaming effects they impose. Whether a life-narrative emerges as an authoritative discourse on reality or the grand-narrative of history, have less to do with the narrative's historical accuracy than with its apprehended fit into culturally prevalent discourses that shape the public sphere.

Within the volatility generated by this kind of representativeness, the 'private' becomes ambivalent and assumes multiple significations as it transforms into self-referential writing and subsequently public discourse. In the case of two actors – Binodini Dasi and Nilambur Ayesha – the public discourse can be considered as encompassing both the 'staged' self as well as the social self. It is essential to explore this

ambivalence in subjectivity/selfhood envisaging it as a product of manipulation prior to or in the act of self-reflexive writing; these manipulative practices as well as their causal factors can be used for understanding the formulation of femininity in the Indian public sphere. The objective is to closely examine the rhetorical/narrative strategies through which the life-narratives by Binodini Dasi and Nilambur Ayesha – self-narratives in times of change – had to negotiate between earlier and newer forms of subjectivity. The life-narratives also demonstrate some of the important ways in which new (female) identities were assumed in modern India. At the same time, an elusive lack of fit marks each of these stories of subjectivation; the value of these life-narratives as histories lies in their ability to extrapolate this misfit in the inhabitation of modernity by its subjects.

In reading life-narratives by women who have achieved popularity with audience and attention from the public space as artists and performers, a vexing contradiction has been theorized often. In both her life-narratives, Binodini Dasi constantly refers to her training as an actress which taught her to transcend her real 'self' and occupy the fictional selves of the characters onstage. Though Ayesha is not as articulate as Binodini in this regard, she has also mentioned moments of intense identification with her characters. So the question arises as to how does a performer who works with her 'self' as subject matter manage to confirm her legitimacy and coherence as an author of a life-narrative while exploring the complexities and fragmentation of her experiences. Women artists all over the world, have long struggled with this dilemma of negotiating between the idea of woman as an object of artistic representation and the woman as agent and author of her own work; in the case of life-narratives - the agent and author of her own subjectivity.

The history of public behavior and conduct of women have always had a direct link to questions of performance. However, there seems to have been a less severe judgment in the case of women who played roles over women who appeared as themselves onstage; the onstage persona offered the former insulation from the critique of the public sphere. In acting/performing as herself, it was believed that a woman crossed those boundaries of

conduct which always cast her in a prescribed role. Tanika Sarkar expostulates about this prescribed role of the Bengali women in the nineteenth-century Bengali public sphere in her analysis of the literature of the time:

> Traditional social ideology and practices were regarded by most shades of nationalists as the one domain that was unmediated by foreign rule, the one independent space. Women and peasant, the only people as yet unpolluted by western education, could preserve the purity of that domain. 'If our womanhood is made to lose direction, then the nation's defeat would be complete. If, like the so-called enlightened, westernized Indian man, the Indian woman also takes its western education and changes her own nature and religion then our subjection would be extended from outside to our innermost core'. The woman's body was the ultimate site of virtue, of stability, the last refuge of freedom…Very often, an implicit continuum is postulated between the hidden, innermost private space, chastity, almost the sanctity of the vagina, to political independence at state level: as if, through a steady process of regression, this independent self-hood has been folded back from the public domain to the interior space of the household, and then further pushed back into the hidden depths of an inviolate, chaste, pure female body. (2014)

The first-generation female artists in Bengali public theatre were in direct violation of this process of regression and thereby viewed as hastening the nation's surrender before the forces of Westernization. Various personal deceptions and traumatic experiences in her life, may have been the official reason why Binodini Dasi put an end to her acting career. The constant references, in the life-narratives to being a 'fallen' woman paves way for the speculation as to whether she was a 'victim' of a dominant male discourse which constantly sought to relegate the woman's presence into the private sphere. She later seeks her agency as an artist in her writings; however, the act of life-writing quite ironically puts her back in the breach-line between the public and the private where the author is performing her 'self' as opposed

to performing a role onstage. Being stripped of the insulation of mediating an unreal experience through acting, Binodini Dasi is forced by generic demands to put herself under the public gaze in the course of her mediating her own 'lived' experience in the act of self-referential writing. In her book, which studies the workings of theatre in colonial India, Lata Singh observes:

> Theatre was an important site of representation, the burgeoning middle class' search for cultural identity and respectability during the colonial period. The politics of social class, gendered ideologies, and nationalism permeating the theatre space came to construct the female performer/actress as the 'other' of the domesticated, 'pure', and 'spiritual' middle class women. For the actresses, despite their tremendous artistic talent, all evidences of respectability were ruled out. Their lives were indicative of the contradictions of a new world of middle class cultural production. (270)

The public discourse was rewired in such a manner that women who had greater access to the public space were considered as aberrations from the 'ideal'. While, on the one hand, the public theatre enjoyed growing popularity; there was also a counter movement which sought to render these 'public' women more invisible by envisioning them as commodities essential for the success of the larger enterprise – the public theatre. Binodini Dasi's life-narrative stands testament to this conceptualization of feminine aberrations as polluted forms of ideal femininity, through her constant efforts at self-effacement.

While the cultural indices of early twentieth century Kerala are different, the perception of the 'public' female was more or less the same. The hegemonic discourses prevalent in the Malayalee public sphere were riddled with tensions with regard to the women's question. Infusion of modernity did not prevent the Malayalee psyche from conceiving the home as a sacred site for women and there was a certain sense of stigma associated with the mobility of women. Writers like Lalithambika Antharjanam explore the injustices of a system which treated its men and women quite differently. In *Atmakathaku Oru Amukham*, translated into English

as *Preface to an Autobiography*, Lalithambika Antharjanam talks about her reluctance to enter the genre of autobiography in spite of being a celebrated novelist and writer of short stories. While examining the personal as the political in the context of early modernity in Kerala, Udaya Kumar makes observations about her life-narrative which will prove insightful in the understanding of the performance of her identity in the life-writing material. Kumar expostulates the author's dilemma when she was forced into the public sphere in the later years of her life:

> Her sense of self, even her desire for freedom, was forged not in an open, collectively shared space, but in the solitude of inner rooms. She recalls how, when she 'came of age', everybody at home cried, moved by the plight that awaited her. Her entry into adolescence signaled, to the external world, her death…Entry into the larger public arena as a new woman put into crisis the very sense of self that desired a wider world. Lalithambika's wayof coping with this new world was to use the protective veil of imagination, which enabled her to speak without speaking as herself… One could reveal things without revealing oneself… Lalithambika's response to this problem was to incorporate this difficulty into the very form of her autobiographical enterprise. Instead of an autobiography, she would write only a preface to an autobiography, whereby she adopted a fragmented form to speak about a difficulty. (441)

A careful study of Nilambur Ayesha's life-narrative would show a different mechanism of coping with the same difficulty that Lalithambika Antharjanam faced. As opposed to the latter, Ayesha's identity had already been marked by her presence onstage and her femininity thereby had been molded by contrapuntal socio-historic-cultural factors. This is the point where Binodini Dasi and Nilambur Ayesha might share the influencing factors of performing their selfhood. However, at no point in the life-narrative does Ayesha consider herself to be a 'fallen' woman. Armed with the equalizing ideology of the Communist Party, Ayesha has no doubts in her agency; her bid at writing her life is not aimed at reclaiming an oppressed selfhood but at claiming

a place for her identity in the grand narrative of the history of the Malayalee public sphere. In this regard, it is important to revisit her observations on female impersonations by male actors on stage. As opposed to Bengali public theatre, Malayalee public theatre had the tradition of rather vulgar female impersonations, owing to the public theatre's routes in the indigenous form of ballet theatre. Lata Singh's observations in foregrounding the actresses' question, find relevance in this context:

> The whole issue of masculinity and effeminacy also came into the nationalist discourse. Female impersonators appeared to threaten the construction of masculinity; bringing it into the limelight seemed to reinvigorate stereotypes of weakness and inferiority among the male population, a bitter legacy of colonial domination. Studies are highlighting how the late-nineteenth century Indian reformists responded to the British disdain for the Indian civilization and morality and the concomitant characterization of Indian women as effeminate, both by recasting womanhood in the image of Vedic purity and by reinventing a belligerent style of masculinity…One of the other apprehensions of female impersonation was the fear of homo-eroticism. It was seen as providing an opening of moral deterioration of not only the people associated with theatre but through them that of the entire society.

Whether it is the decision to hire female actors from the prostitute quarters in nineteenth-century Bengali public theatre or E. K. Ayamu's insistence on perfection in the representation of femininity on stage that led to him hiring female actors for his stage productions, it is clear that the advent of women into theatre space created an illusion of protecting masculinity. In a sense, this is in lieu with the ultimate nationalist iconography of the mother who sacrifices for the sons of the land. This ironic phenomenon of sacrificing the female for the protection of masculinity, exposing her to a wider public gaze, seem to be the undercurrent that works in shaping the selfhood in the life-narratives of Binodini Dasi and Nilambur Ayesha. In Binodini Dasi, ironically, these counter-forces find its expression in constant attempts at self-

effacement. On the other hand, in Nilambur Ayesha's reflexive writing, these contrapuntal forces find expression that defiantly claim agency in the face of trauma.

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