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Life Writing

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SAMYUKTA: A JOURNAL of GENDER AND CULTURE

Vol. 6 No.1 (Jan 2021):

CONTENTS

Self Writing. Writing History

M. Sridhar 01

Our Duty to Morality

Dr. Sarabjeet Dhody Natesan 14

Difficult Subjects: Conceptualising the Politics of Women's Lifewritings

Dr. Meenakshi Malhotra 21

Hupomnēmata vs. Historical Contextualization: (Re-)Reading the Memoirs of a Fallen Woman in Colonial Bengal

Hena Sarkar 32

Negotiating the Stage and the World: The Life Writings of Binodini Dasi.

Dr. Paromita Bose 45

Interpreting Human Life through the Non-Human: Study of select works of Artists and Writers on Writing Life

Sindhura Dutta 55

The Figuration of Art, History and Self: Art Spiegelman's Maus as a Palimpsest

Amrita Ajay 62

Memory and Memorialising in Graphic Life Narratives - The London Jungle Book (2004) and Drawing from the City (2012)	
Shikha Singh	74
Building the Future through the Past: Biopics and the Construction of a Queer History	
Mark DeStephano	85
Conditions and Limits of the Autobiographical Self in Joya Mitra's Prison Memoir Killing Days	
Shayantani Das	100
Re(discovering) the Self: Memory and Narrative in Gabriel Garcia Márquez' Living to Tell the Tale	
Chitra V R	110
Gendered Lives: A Study of Two Biographies of Indira Gandhi	
Preeti Kumar	120
The Cartographic Paradox: Investigating the Fragmented Truth of a Map in Adrift and 438 Days	
Vaibhav Dwived	128

Details of authors can be accessed at <https://samyuktajournal.in/contributors-2/>

Guest Editorial

This edition of *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture* comes at a crucial time in global history. The pandemic is a significant stakeholder in the lived and imagined realities of human and non-human participants everywhere. It will soon be well-nigh difficult to fashion a narrative outside of the impact it has had. Long days of lockdown, quarantines- mandated or self- imposed, the politics of vaccines and oxygen precarity, dialectics of homelessness, domestic migrants, narratives and perceptions of development, the questions of citizenship and participative governance are looming large over memory and history. These are sure to find expression in the times to come, thus changing the landscape of Life Writings in a rather metamorphic manner.

Life Writing refers to the ability to inscribe the personal with the script of history – to ensure that a certain time and experience does not pass without leaving a mark, without telling the story from a different angle. The experiential is as important as the political, cultural, spatial milieu that somehow will find their way in. The voice that narrates- the I or the third person- resonates on accounts of the tone or empathy, not just the levels of accuracy. That is ofcourse an aspect that has been oft debated upon in Life Writing- the question of accuracy. And is a person really obliged to tell us the truth about the most intimate, possible embarrassing moments of their life? Or if they choose to leave these segments out, then is that even a rounded, fair narrative of their life? And what did they actually set out to do? What separates a biography from a hagiography? When does a voice stop sounding rational and the finger-pointing start? And do those who get painted the villains in these stories ever get to make their clarifications? How does history treat them? what is a fictionalized biography? Is a fictionalized autobiography a genre of the novel?

There are these and many more questions that routinely get asked in the course of Life Writing studies. Despite these grey areas, Life Writing is an eminently saleable genre, with ‘tell -all’ books doing extremely well. The lives of the rich and famous, the doyens in various spheres of human achievement put their stories out there. The tendency to confess, that Foucault refers to, continues to this day. Perhaps, it’s the voyeur within us- perhaps, it is the need to feel in control by participating in the narrative that makes the author vulnerable, relatable- human- that makes Life writing such a popular genre.

Be it to inspire, to vilify, clarify, justify or to immortalize, Life Writing holds immense appeal.

I view Life Writing as an important segment of a philosophical conceptualisation of the world. It contributes greatly to the intuitive understanding (Bergson) that one needs in order to correlate elemental conversations that lie at the bottom of

the way we construct our societies, incorporate nuances of language and create stratified memories. The obsession with multidimensional Time and the visualisations of time travel that we see in contemporary culture could all be manifestations of this intense desire to actually see what it was like, to change the course of events and feel the thrill of relevance- in short, to live the lives that are being written about.

At this pivotal moment in our history, it is considered important to retain a memory of things as they were because, the vocabularies that we shall apply to ourselves, the yardsticks with which we measure time, lives, social dynamics is on the verge of change. The unpredictability of it all makes the past seem more stable than it actually was. In this aspect, Time is like cement. It sets and settles into epochs and eras and develops characteristics- a pre-calamitous- calamitous, post-calamitous continuum. Reading lives becomes as important as writing them. there is often a danger of anachronistic readings that are quick to judge and which seek revisionist redactions. There is a need to understand the instability and vulnerability of Time, Society and People. When written and read from this vantage point, Life Writing opens up spatial tunnels that run between the lines and outside the pages. Time becomes truly multidimensional and multinarrative. Polyphony, which is the purest form of both order and anarchy becomes emergent as a rhizomatic entity.

The current issue of *Samyukta* draws from life, art, film, experience- and curates a valuable archive of scholarship that looks into the relevance of these works, the arcs of narratives these lives have created. The world shaped by these lives and thoughts and vice-versa is worth remembering, studying and viewing with empathy.

Kukku Xavier

Guest Editor

Self Writing. Writing History

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Abstract: Using a couple of examples of Life Writing published in the 19th century Andhra country, this presentation will try to explore how different individuals inscribe their selves into history even as they become witness to history. I am picking up for detailed analysis two examples of life writing, Enugula Veeraswamy's *Kasiyatra Charitra* (1838), a journal or a travelogue (in Telugu), whichever way one prefers to see it, and an autobiography in English titled *The Life of Vennelacuntty Soob Row...* (1873). Both worked as translators and interpreters under the East India Company. Though Veeraswamy's travelogue was published earlier, and Soob Row's autobiography was published posthumously many years later, the period both the texts cover, is the first half of the 19th century.

Keywords: 19 Century Andhra, Soob Row, travelogues, Kasiyatra Charitra, The Life of Vennelacuntty Soob Row

Soob Row's autobiography is full of personal references not only to Soob Row but to many of his close relatives. It deals not only with his professional advancement to the highest position of Translator and Interpreter in the Company's service, but of the benefits he was able to get from the Company, of his success in getting several of his relatives employed according to their qualifications. Though Soob Row's autobiography deals with some religious places he visits and the rituals he performs to adhere to various customs and practices, it is by far secular in the sense that Soob Row does not present himself as a spiritual person, but much more as a worldly wise man.

On the contrary, Veeraswamy's Journal is much more spiritual. It shows him as one who is not only thinking of his own religion, but of the others too, such as the Muslim and the

Christian. He delves into the merits and demerits of various practices among these religions. Though written originally as a series of letters to his friend, Komaleswarapuram Srinivasa Pillai, and is termed a journal or a diary, the published text leaves no trace of the personal. Veeraswamy's pilgrimage by road on palanquin lasted from 1830 to 1831, over a year and three months. We understand that he made his pilgrimage to Kasi with a large contingent comprising as many as two hundred members of his family and friends. Surprisingly, the narrative voice is in the singular. It appears as if the generic traits of a journal or a diary too may have been smoothened out, because except for the sequential dates and the details of the journey mentioned, the text reads more like a long essay, with observations on specific cultural and religious aspects of the various places across the country, each of them reading like mini discourses. Veeraswamy comes out as a seasoned traveller with all the elaborate arrangements he had made of his long pilgrimage by road along with his retinue. He ensures that he has adequate supplies of all the food and other everyday necessities. He starts his journey from Madras and reaches Kasi via Tirupati, Srisailam, Hyderabad, Nagpur, Reema, Jabalpur, Allahabad. He returns to Madras via Patna, Calcutta, Cuttuck, Rajahmundry and Nellore. For the unfamiliar journey beyond Hyderabad towards Kasi, he makes sure to have a set of postal runners to help him by writing in advance to various officials requesting them to make necessary arrangements. He is meticulous when it comes to mentioning the details of the distances from place to place, even of the differences in measurements in each region, of the currency and its variations at different places etc.

The most remarkable thing about Veeraswamy's journal is its frank expression of his views on various subjects ranging from men and manners, astrology, astronomy, religion, *sthalapuranas*, rulers etc. Conscious of future travel to Kasi by others Veeraswamy makes it a point to mention precise details of the places, distances, the terrain, weather condition etc. A typical entry reads like this:

I reached Buggagudi on the 22nd [May 1830] morning. The path is easy. The distance is twelve miles. This is a holy place. Three eternal springs—as holy as the Ganges, the Yamuna and Saraswathi—ooze out from the nether regions of this shrine and join the river near the shrine.... The shrine is located at a place where there is neither a township nor any habitations. Pilgrims have to perforce purchase or obtain their victuals from a far-off place on the banks of the jungle stream, with adequate water facilities. I reached Puttur this night, by way of Nagari. (Sitapati and Purushottam 2)

Appreciative of the British for their administrative skills, Veeraswamy compares the difference in the administration of Hyderabad where the Nizam ruled and the Secunderabad area which was under the control of the British. He says: “The conditions in this city, and the state of rule in this kingdom are frightening to those who have enjoyed good government elsewhere” (Sitapati and Purushottam 27).

The districts of Cuddapah and Bellary have been ceded by the Nawab to the Company to meet the expenses of the subsidiary force [of army] located here [Hyderabad]” (Sitapati and Purushottam 28). Veeraswamy finds the entire kingdom frightened of the Company.

Not that Veeraswamy is unaware of British machinations. He says: “The English entered this [Nagpur] kingdom in the time of Buddoji and [are] dabbling and interfering in the war-politics of his children. Raghoji and others obtained some standing here. The East India Company started swallowing bits of this kingdom in the North and East, whenever they had some disagreement with Raghoji [elder Raghoji’s daughter’s son]” (Sitapati and Purushottam 45).”

A substantial portion of Veeraswamy’s journal deals with his discussions with various English officials he meets on his pilgrimage, on different customs and religious practices of the Hindus and Christians. Here is an excerpt that deals with his discussion with one Mr. Groeme about how good and evil coexist in the world:

The world is a mixture of virtue and vice. Virtue or merit is associated with Brahma’s active principle while sin is associated with artificial animation caused as a result of ‘Maya’. The world has been created with an admixture of both, with the result that evil co-exists with virtue. The illustrations for this are as follows:

Godliness is attributed to images among Hindus to enable children and the ignorant to concentrate on God and achieve Bhakti. However, such faith is injurious to matured minds. In opposition to this Christians however preach the manifestation of the Lordly One in such a way that the children and the ignorant cannot obtain a correct comprehension of the Father in Heaven. Hindus again do not permit second marriages to their women with the result that some of them suffer as child-widows, whereas the English permit women to remarry with the result that women who are naturally fickle minded are not loyal to their husbands; and husbands are killed sometimes deceptively to marry other men. (Sitapati and Purushottam 49)

Here then is a defence of Hindu idolatry. Veeraswamy is conscious of the ill effects of Hindus not permitting remarriage of widows. Nor is he unmindful of the advantage English women might derive. Of course, we cannot miss out on his attitude towards women as fickle minded!

Talking about how the women who came with him on the pilgrimage were very orthodox and would not want to eat in non-brahmin households, Veeraswamy says that when Brahmin habitations could no longer be found they were forced to accept it. He says: “Later they got used to such dining even in the view of others and actually delighted in it” (Sitapati and Purushottam

68). “It is therefore evident that restrictions or customs of this kind are only creations of the mind and obstacles to right thinking. Giving them up is in no way a calamity whatsoever without doubt” (Sitapati and Purushottam 68).

Veeraswamy has a discussion on religion with Mr. Nepean, member of a Finance Committee, who asked him if he believed that the rivers and shrines symbolized God. He says:

You have not seen Madras but if you are shown a map of India and Madras is pointed out to you, will that be Madras to you? When one has to teach the location of Madras to people, and it is not possible to take them personally and show it, it becomes necessary to show them on the map. Just as you draw maps and publicise unknown countries, Karmasthalams of this kind help in fixing the devotion of the ignorant on the Lord. These *swarupas* then help as symbols for worship by them ultimately leading to the true knowledge of God’.

He was then satisfied that I was a good Christian.” (Sitapati and Purushottam 95)

Note the last sentence where Veeraswamy seems to take the approval of the Christians for his having views similar to them.

Here is an instance where Veeraswamy is at pains to see the similarities between Protestantism, Visistadvaita philosophy, Muslim beliefs and those of the Roman Catholics:

The Protestants among Christians following the precepts of visista-advaita preach that the Creator has created the animate and inanimate world of life. Karmas and worship of that kind resulting in ‘Eswara Dristi’ on lowly materials is dangerous. Therefore Karma and rituals connected with karma should be avoided. The Lord should be worshipped in the mind. Even the Muslims are of a similar view that rituals arising out of Karma do not help in the ‘Nischalata’ or poise of the mind and therefore the Lord should be prayed to and one or two Karmas only followed. Roman Catholics also believe like the Muslims in abridged forms of Karma worship. Muslims and Catholics differ only in the karma worship they make and not in ‘tattva’.” (Sitapati and Purushottam 99)

Only Buddhism is isolated as being very different and even dangerous:

Buddhism was preaching the dangerous argument that the body or ‘*Deham*’ was ‘*Brahman*’ before the advent of Sankaracharya in this Karmabhoomi. This religion exists still in the country here and there. Just as milk is mistaken for ghee, the ‘*Sthula deha*’ or gross body is mistaken for *Brahman* and Eswara in this religion. (Sitapati and Purushottam 99)

Veeraswamy raises the question whether women, like other creatures of the world, are not eligible for “moksha” like men. After discussions with the sage Tiruvalluvar Ragnathacharya and others, and his own reflection, he comes to the conclusion that while women are physiologically different from men in that they have a gland in the lower part of the body that produces ova every month, men have a gland in the upper part of the body that helps them gain intellectual advancement. Therefore, he argues that women like other animals in the world are fit to give pleasure to men and that they would do well to confine themselves to household duties (Sitapati and Purushottam 99-100). Here is another instance of male attitude towards women manifesting itself in the justification of a social practice that confined women to the household.

Veeraswamy frequently refers to the caste system in the country. He says that the Brahmins of the North do not insult other castes, nor are they very unkind to them, with the result that the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries are negligible there. On the contrary, in the South, the Sudras, especially the “Chandalas” are insulted so much that even their sight is prohibited. Veeraswamy says that because of the insults inflicted on them, they have been converting to Christianity between Pedapalem and Mylapore in Madras.

Interestingly, Veeraswamy says that the Brahmins have to perform the karmas mentioned in the Sruthis and pray to the Lord for the welfare of the entire universe. They must respect the Kshatriyas; be friendly with the Vysyas who obtain merchandise (not available locally) by way of trade from different countries. Similarly, they should treat the Sudras who assist them and serve them very kindly. He says that it is nowhere mentioned that the Sudras who are really eligible to cook food for the Brahmins are not fit to be seen by Brahmins. An interesting observation indeed that expects the Brahmins to respect people of other castes, while cleverly defending the *varnashrama dharma*! Mark his justification of it by alluding to the Sruthis, the “revealed” wisdom of the Vedas.

Veeraswamy makes a distinction here between what the Mulasmruthis say and what the later ones say. He says that nowhere do the Mulasmruthis lay down or support the custom that the Sudras should not enter Brahmin streets. Only the new smruthis which give importance to Karma mention these unhappy disabilities, with the result that rituals and customs connected with karma have increased. In view of the insulting of the Sudras, the Sudras and others have taken to meat-eating etc. They also feel that instead of being insulted and suffering all these insults, it is better they join a religion which gives them equality. It is thus that they become amenable to the influence of Christians (Sitapati and Purushottam 108-9).

Going back to the issue of caste, Veeraswamy says:

The great chaos of intermixture of castes is the direct result of the misdeeds of the angry Brahmin community and God willed to punish them by force and hence the malignant Mohammedan community was brought into this land and thus punished the Brahmins enough.... The merciful God Almighty later, in order to preserve this traditional material world from extinction, gave this land as an easy gift to the English people who are known for the quality of goodness and who by virtue of their knowledge tamed the universe and studied the courses of the galaxy and thus traversed the great oceans and believed that the all pervading preserver of the universe is one and the same. (Sitapati and Purushottam 108-9)

We must note how Veeraswamy seizes the opportunity to insert a negative comment about Mohammedans to justify the British rule in India. While we appreciate his being so self-critical of the Brahmins, we cannot comprehend his prejudice against the Muslims. He goes on to say:

God created bestowed animated beings into different shapes with different sounds, different colours, and with different meanings. Till these beings attain the favoured look of God they resort to the worldly pranks of abusing others and praising self. Though the English do not profess that their Christianity is greater than the Hindus, they think that it is equal. The religion of the Hindus is just like an almond fruit with fibred outer skin and hard shell covering the sweet seed inside. Not knowing the secret of this religion the English try to convert the Hindus to Christianity in order to save them from the supposed doom. Otherwise the English are just, in their rule and by the grace of God they are gaining His favour day by day.” (Sitapati and Purushottam 185-186)

He makes the Upasmruthis responsible for the idol worship too. Upasmruthis of today have gone far away from the initial stand and are wasting their time by insisting on rituals alone. He says that temples also are being constructed with images and pictures which arouse desire. Such useless activities have displeased God who is manifested everywhere. According to him, this is the reason why the English have been preferred to the Hindus. With a view therefore to purify the customs and worship here, God has sent the truthful English rulers to this karma bhumi. He sees the English people as being “endowed with several virtues such as kindness, penitence, ability to weigh values, cleanliness, good taste, virtue, devotion to God etc. Therefore the Whites have become eligible to the grace of the Lord and have become emperors of this country to assist in one’s realization” (Sitapati and Purushottam 109).

The doctor at Gaya, John Davidson, asks Veeraswamy whether the four castes in India were God-made or man-made. After a long discussion, he convinces him that they were man-made. He has a discussion with Morris, the Judge, about “Sahagamanam” (Sati) which was banned by Lord Bentick. Veeraswamy says that there is no mention of Sati in the Moolasmruthis. Only the Upasmruthis mention it. The Varnashrama Dharma also had not

preceded creation, nor was it in the Lord's command. The Brahmins who came down South created several Upasmruthis in the name of Vyasa, Vasista, Narada etc. (Sitapati and Purushottam 126). He goes on to say:

This is a Karma Bhumi, where the '*Brahman*' can be realized through Karma following the path laid down by our ancient sages. Lord Visweswara has punished the people of India by making Mlecchas rule over them as a punishment for veering away from the path of virtue. The English now rule this country with the privileges of emperors. The kindness and the grace of the Lord alone can excuse the 'aparadhas' committed by us, so that the Karmas ordained originally by the Sruthis and the Smruthis and Brahmanusandhanam may be followed easily by one and all here for 'Siddhi' or realization. (Sitapati and Purushottam 128)

Note here that the word *mlecchas* which is usually employed for both the Muslims and the Christians is used by Veeraswamy to refer only to the Christians. Veeraswamy explains to Davidson at Gaya that the three crore gods Hindus worship are nothing but divine persons like the Christian saints: "Just as you believe and adore different saints, we adore three crore celestials and they are not the supreme rulers of the Universe Iswara. Iswara is one. That word Iswara alone can be translated as God" (Sitapati and Purushottam 148). Veeraswamy says, "I could explain this to him with very great difficulty" (Sitapati and Purushottam 148). He then goes on to ask: How can we expect patient enquiry into the inner truth of our religion from foreigners who come from a country 24000 miles away when Saivaites and Vaishnavaites start quarrelling among themselves?" (Sitapati and Purushottam 148)

The Mohammedans and Islam once again get a raw deal in *Kasiyatra Charitra* as in the following words:

The Mohammadan race entered Hindustan through Kabul and first destroyed the Somanatha Temple which was studded with nine diamonds, on the banks of the river Sindhu and plundered the jewels. When the local residents and Hindus living in the five river basin named Punjab totalling about one lakh resisted to be converted into Islam, they were beheaded..... In spite of the compulsions made by the Muslims not one in thousand adopted Islam as they adopted Christianity now through the clever tactics of the English. Hindus gradually avoided Muslims and renovated all the temples destroyed by them. That which is not possible by valour is possibly [achieved] by contrivance is the principle adopted by the British and they gradually took into their religion that section of the community which enjoyed the least status in society and preached the glories of Christianity to them who are ignorant of the intricate religious actions..." (Sitapati and Purushottam 186).

By making a distinction between the Sruthis (Heard/Revealed Texts) and Smruthis (Remembered/Realised Texts), between the Moolasmruthis (Foundational Smruthis) and the Upasmruthis (Subsidiary Smruthis), Veeraswami brings out a subtle distinction between different orders of Hindu epistemology. He also brings out a distinction between the relative value attached to the Spoken and Written-down texts in our knowledge system.

Compared to Veeraswamy's discursively rich journal, Vennelacunty Soob Row's autobiography (it is also termed as a journal in the first page of the book) seems very mundane. A typical rags to riches story of a person who rose to the rank of the Head Translator and Interpreter in the Sudr Court at Madras, *The Life of Vennelacunty Soob Row* comes out as a very personal account of the rise and growth of an individual.

How do we understand Veeraswamy's travelogue? Why is he so keen to win the support of each of the English officials he meets? One might understand Veeraswamy's attitude better if one understands that this period also sees the beginnings of organizations such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj, which are understood as attempts at the reform of Hinduism in the light of the Christian principles of one God and anti-idolatry on the one hand, and to stem the growth of Christian attempts at proselytization.

The very personal details of Soob Row range from the four marriages he has had during his life time, the various nuptial ceremonies performed, the details of his illnesses such as shortness of breath, incontinence of urine and kidney problem, the details of the salaries he has earned starting from 18 star pagodas per month to 95 pagodas by gradually incurring the favour of different English masters he had served during his long tenure of twenty six years, the number of houses he had built and property he had acquired etc. There are occasional descriptions of the places he visits during his professional career, such as the beauty of the Canara country, the customs and practices of the tribes there, his pilgrimages to Benares and Rameswerum etc. But what strikes us most in the autobiography is Soob Row's attempt to impress on his readers (which obviously includes the English ones, for it was written in English) the abundant confidence and trust the English officers reposed in him during his long career. Let us focus on some of the details pertaining to this aspect. One might begin to look at this aspect by taking note of the anglicized spelling of his name—Soob Row, instead of Subba Rao, as we do today.

Soob Row reproduces the first letter from Mr. Alexander Read, his employer at Onore to “convince my readers of the confidence placed in me by my employer in 1803” (9). He also mentions as to how he was employed as a private Moonshee by Mr. John McKerrelon on a salary of 12 star pagodas per month, how he taught him Telugu and of how having passed the examination in it, his master handsomely rewarded him with a reward of 1,000 pagodas.

Soob Row mentions his having assisted McKerrel in preparing his Canara Grammar. In this context he says:

So great was the confidence placed in me by my master that independent of his entrusting me with the management of all his private affairs, he...desired me to go on a trip and to collect all possible information on the subject [the real estate and the annual collection of each of the Districts] in the Mysore country. (Row 16)

He refers to his taking the oath of office in the Sudr Court as Translator and Interpreter at 40 pagodas per month on 6th April 1815 and of his clearing all the accumulated arrears of work (Row 34). Here too he reproduces a letter of 2nd January 1817 from R. Clarke, Deputy Register praising Soob Row's abilities as a Translator and the correct and idiomatic knowledge of English possessed by him:

While the Court thus record their high opinion of the zeal and ability of their Translator, they cannot but feel anxious that he should be rewarded in proportion to his merits" (Row 38) Recommend that his salary be raised to 80 pagodas per month. This sum "they consider as not more than an adequate compensation for the labors of a faithful and diligent Native competent to fill that respectable and important office. (Row 39)

He also talks about his having been appointed as Canarese and Maharatta Interpreter of the Supreme Court at an additional salary of 15 pagodas a month, the total salary amounting to 95 star pagodas a month (Row 45).

He mentions with justifiable pride of his having been nominated Member of the Madras School Book Society and of his having submitted a long letter to its Secretary detailing the deficient mode of education of the natives in the Telugu speaking areas of the Madras Presidency. At the end of this letter which had been later published as an Official Report, Soob Row refers to its reception by the Society:

This long report received the high approbation of the Members, both European and Native, of the Madras School Book Society; and was printed and published for the information of the public in the book entitled "The first Report of the Madras School Book Society for the year 1823" (vide page 43-C in the Appendix.) The following is a copy of a letter which I received from the Society giving me thanks for the information afforded by me on the deficient system of education among the Natives of South India in a subsequent Report of which I lost the copy. (Row 75)

Soob Row claims he had translated several useful books, some of which have been published, printed and sold for the use of students in schools (Row 76). He also mentions the

Madras School Book Society requesting him for more printed copies of his translations of his *Pleasing Tales* and suggesting that he improve the 2nd edition. He says that it does not require any revision, its having received universal approbation. (Row 88) A rare instance of his self-respect asserting itself!

Soob Row refers to a murder case when a judge sought his opinion on how a judgement had been passed (Row 86). George J. Casamajor, Register to the Sudr Court, says this of him: “Having served as Register to the Sudr Adaulut for nearly three years, I have not hesitation in stating that Vennelacunty Soobrow (the Head Translator to the Court) is the most efficient native public officer in his line that I have ever known; that it would be exceedingly difficult to replace his services...” (Row 88). He talks about how his application for pension has been favourably considered: “On mature consideration of the long and able services of this valuable public servant for a period of 26 years, the Judges are of opinion that he has the strongest claim to a pension of half his salary...” (Row 97). He is paid half of 80 pagodas, i.e., 140 rupees. Soob Row relinquished office in 1829.

Soob Row comes out as someone who is completely detached and non-emotional in his response to various events and incidents in his life. Nor was he affected by the winds of social reform. He refers to his being invited by all his friends “for dinners and suppers and *nautch*” (Row 46) and returning to Madras in 1821. A second reference to a *nautch* performance occurs during his pilgrimage to Rameswarum in 1825. Here too he makes a casual statement of it: “We were for 2 or 3 days invited by our friend and relation Ravepauty Ramaswamiah, Deputy Sheristadar and for a night supper and nautch by Biccaju Row, the Cash-keeper in the Collector’s Cutcherry” (Row 80). Even more striking is his reporting of an incidence of *Sati*. Before his pilgrimage to Benares, he refers to his having “visited the ceremony of the widow of Toomoo Paupiah who had just died burning herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband” (Row 52). The following sentence, “I went then to Rajahmundry through Ellore with my wife, and we lived there for five days with our relation...” (Row 52) as though nothing had happened. Shocking indeed! Nor is he affected by such historical events as the capture of Seringapatam in 1799 or of a violent storm in Ongole in 1800. (Row 5)

One progressive view he displays is in his adopting a girl when he had no children and of wishing to make her heir to his property, even as he entertains hope of having one of his own in future. He wishes that his wife Mahaletchmi take charge of his whole property in the event of his death and his son succeed him once he comes of age. No one else is to have any claim. He has a son later on, who then becomes his heir. Soob Row says that the birth of his son has “deprived his adopted daughter ...the presumptive right of her succeeding to any of his property...” according to the Hindoo Law (Row 104). He gets his adopted daughter married to his fourth wife’s brother who dies subsequently in 1838.

The most progressive of his views are in the field of education. It is rather unfortunate that his detailed report of English education has not received any attention till date considering that his letter to the Secretary of the Madras School Book Society, which is later published as an official report precedes the much talked about letter of Raja Rammohun Roy to Lord Amherst. After giving a detailed account of “the imperfect mode in which the natives are educated in schools” where rote learning is practised and teachers are paid low wages, Soob Row emphasizes on the teaching of grammar and morals in the study of Indian languages. He asks: “The study of the Grammar in every language would appear absolutely necessary for perfectness and while such very foundation is neglected, how is it possible that any correct knowledge of a language can be expected?” (Row 69) He has the following to say on the teaching of English:

I now proceed to state the manner in which the English language is taught among the Natives of this country. There is not any specific rule as to the age at which a man may begin to learn any other language after he once commenced on his own. I know persons in this country, who, anxious of studying English, began to learn it when they were above sixty years old. When a Native, therefore, enters into an English school in this country, he first learns the alphabet, of course from a printed spelling book, and then he receives a lesson from his master every morning in it; as also in a Vocabulary and a Dialogue prepared, I believe, on one occasion at Madras by the Old Native English masters for the use of the students. When the student has learnt about a hundred words and to write a tolerable hand, he enters into one of the public offices first as a volunteer, and then by degrees he obtains a small situation by the interest of his relations. (Row 72)

He goes on to say:

The only books known and read by the English students in the schools in the out-stations, are the Vocabulary, the Dialogue and the Arabian Nights. As to the Grammar, I believe, they have very little knowledge. The Vocabulary and Dialogue I spoke of are by no means correct or grammatical, nor are they sufficient lessons to enable a student to speak the language with any degree of correctness. The mode of instructing the English language at present not only in the schools at the out-stations but at the Presidency itself, would, therefore, appear obviously inconsistent with the just principles of affording education. Among the native English school-masters at Madras, there are, I believe, very few who have any knowledge of grammar. The income of the English school-masters was really very considerable some years ago at Madras, while there were no more than three or four schools. At present there are so many of them that the emoluments of each of the masters are hardly sufficient for his own maintenance. (Row 72-73)

As to the pronunciation of the English language it is out of the question that a native can ever be expected to speak it with any degree of fluency. It is therefore, to be supposed

that it would be quite sufficient for a native if he could write the language well and grammatically, for it must be admitted that no man can pronounce a foreign language to the fullest degree of fluency and perfection; for instance, there are more than fifty characters in the Sanscrit language, yet it is difficult for even a complete Sanscrit scholar to pronounce the English language correctly, notwithstanding there are only twenty-six characters in it. (Row 73)

He then goes on to make specific recommendations for the two sets of Schools:

FOR THE NATIVE SCHOOLS

1. Abridgments of the existing Telugu, Tamil, Canara and Mahratta Grammars written in prose and explained in the modern languages.
2. Tales extracted from different books composed chiefly of morals, written in the modern languages.
3. Arithmetic and Mathematics explained in prose in the modern tongues.

FOR THE ENGLISH SCHOOLS.

1. An abridgement of the English Grammar explained in all the vernacular languages.
2. The History of the World from its creation with translations into different languages.
3. Familiar dialogues in English with translations into the different languages.
4. Vocabularies in English and the country languages.
5. Some pleasing tales with translations. (Row 74)

Note here that the study of books of morals is recommended only for the “native” schools and not the English schools. There is an assumption here that the morals are automatically taken care of in the curricula of the English schools. Another assumption pertains to the study of the history of world which he considers unnecessary for the children who go to the “native” schools.

Here are two texts then that are so unlike each other written roughly around the same time period by two individuals who are related to each other and share similar backgrounds. What brings the texts together for me is their attitude towards the masters and the master-cultures they served. They both seem to be at great pains to justify their ways to the gods they serve.

How do we then understand these two examples of life-writing? How do we see them as autobiographies of the “self” when both of them are so heavily directed towards the “other”, the

English people they served? Or, do we read them as recorded histories of our colonized past? Or do we read them as instances of complex texts that defy easy categorizations of writing selves and writing history?

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Our Duty to Morality

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Abstract: Societal violence against children in general and sexual violence against the girl child are rising alarmingly. Seen as soft victims, neither multiple state legislations nor natural laws of morality have been able to keep them safe. The issue becomes contentious when violence is perpetrated along gender, class, and religious identities. The justice system is being co-opted to stand with the oppressors, intent on preventing the voice of support to the victims from rising, effectively shrinking and shutting down spaces for displaying solidarity and social dissent. A scene India witnessed in its horrific intent in 2018 in what came to be called the Kathua Rape Case.

Through the perspective of life writing, this paper will reflect on how an individual response to this heart-wrenching event developed into an organic community protest in a calm seaside town of South India, hundreds of miles removed from the mountains of Kashmir. When the State denied permission to assemble, fearing a larger discontent, the civil society demonstrated its resolve and coalesced to raise a silent voice against the violence and brutal molestation of an eight-year-old child. All this peacefully, without defying authority, and without breaking any rules.

Keywords: sexual crimes, child sexual abuse, justice system, failure, Kashmir, Kathua rape case.

The Case

On 17th January 2018 in the forests of Jammu, the body of an eight-year-old Muslim girl child was discovered, she had been subjected to extreme physical and sexual violence. Our lives have been so inundated with an information overreach that the resultant clutter has made us inured to our surroundings. After all, how much can we react to? The how much becomes too much and, in hardening our senses, it also hardens our mind. But there was something about this

child from Kathua that held me captive. Maybe her expressive eyes or her impish smile or the oversized tunic of purple with yellow flowers or her hair.

The deeper I explored the more I worried about her parents. I read she was an adopted child, the parents had lost two young girls the year before in an accident. The mother was despondent and the father, to bring some comfort to his wife, had adopted his brother-in-law's daughter. The semi-nomadic family rearing horses and sheep, moved from the mountains to the plains together and the child must have been loved and pampered by all around her. She ran like a 'deer' when the group travelled and looked after the herds. I thought of the birth mother and her pain. No one seemed to remember to share her grief.

And then the details of the case starting emerging. Revolting and soul-searing reports. The child had been reported missing on the 10th of January and from then till the time she was found, she had been kidnapped, sedated, and held captive.

She was held captive in a Hindu temple and sedated to prevent her from attempting an escape or to respond to sounds of her name being called out by her rescuers and the search parties formed to locate her. Ironically, her father looked everywhere for her didnot search for her in the temple, for he knew that it was a very sacred place. The sexual violence continued for nearly seven days before she was strangulated and bludgeoned to death with a large stone. A little child suffering so much pain; cold, hungry, terrified, and alone. What will-power she must have summoned to stay alive; in her drugged state and mind, how many times must she have called out to her mother, her father, her brothers? And waited for them to come and fetch her and save her.

It was in this sacred place that eight men, including two special police officers, held the eight-year-old child captive and abused her body until it went limp and bones broke. People from different walks of life banded together to protest. I was relieved when I read the headlines but my hope soon turned to despair. The article suggested that many groups had been formed to protest against the arrest and detention of the eight men. The state of Jammu and Kashmir and the entire country too, stood divided on religious identity. The crime itself had been committed to terrorize the ethnic nomadic Muslim Bakerwal tribe, from the mountains of Srinagar, to drive them away from the water sources and grasslands of Jammu (Sharma, 2020).

It disturbed me that, at a time of great shame and sorrow, there were people who were defending the perpetrators of this heinous crime. As a nation, when we should have come together to heal, we had somehow managed to divide ourselves even more, along sectarian lines. The blame game reached a crescendo when lawyers of the Jammu Bar association prevented the Crime Department police officers from entering the Courthouse to file the charge sheet . The lawyers offered to provide free legal aid to the accused.

I was in a commuter job in 2018. Travelling between two cities, Chennai and Mumbai. In addition to keeping up with the work and the travel schedules, I had to manage my Mumbai house as my husband had taken over running the Chennai one. In the coming and going of life, I kept up with the news only as much as the available time would allow. My two elder daughters had recently moved to the USA to pursue their graduate studies and I was worried about them and their safety all the time. My youngest daughter, in her first year of college, was at my home in Chennai. The state of my mind, missing my daughters thousands of miles away, amplified the pain. The news and the reactions, political and social, seemed like a body blow. I worried about my daughters. I also mourned the loss of this ‘little bird’ as the eight-year-old girl’s mother described her. I could neither eat nor sleep. I felt compelled to stand up for the ‘bird’ now, so that she and her mother would know that she was cared for.

Disregarding the guidelines protecting the identity of the victims of sexual crime, her name and photographs had been splattered all over town. I could see her face, and her eyes and her purple dress with yellow flowers, and it seared the soul. The dress defined her in life and identified her in her death. The eyes, when open and alive and happy, their gaze pure and trusting, spoke of innocence and hope. But the same eyes, open and glassy, were terrifying. They revealed the depth of depravity to which men could fall. And then the ignominy didn’t stop there, the family was denied under threat, the right to bury their child in a plot they owned and had to bury her in a cemetery about seven kilometers away from their surroundings. A child left lonely in her death.

#MyStreetMyProtest

A social revolution through social media

Away from her State, India reacted differently. The Kathua case turned out to be the catalyst of a social movement in India. India already saw the strength of social voice after the Nirbhaya Case (Ahmed et al, 2017). Social movements primarily take the form of non-institutionalised collective political action which strives for political and /or social change (Shah, 2004). India has witnessed many social movements over the last hundred years, from the peasant, tribal, students, independence, women’s, caste, labour, many social revolutions have helped in societal course correction and developing a more just society (Shah, 2004).

Amplifying the voice of anger now more than ever was the omnipresent social media. Comprising of internet-driven online platforms, like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, social media have caught the fancy of the young and the old alike. It has become an important medium available for content-sharing and reaching people beyond one’s networks (Asur and Huberman, 2010). Social media have recently played a significant role in social revolutions, specifically

those in Tunisia, Egypt, Iceland, Spain, and the global Occupy movement. Government control over pliant media can ensure a wily method of hidden censorship, such that views and opinions inimical to the authorities can be prevented from reaching the masses. Thereby, social media's role becomes very important in social revolutions. This is well illustrated in the statement, "The revolution will be tweeted", a rhetorically forceful phrase, to borrow a concept from the media sociologist Michael Schudson (1989). The phrase invokes Gil Scott-Heron's 1970 track "The Revolution will not be Televised" (Kidd and McIntosh, 2016).

Something similar happened in India too, the media's efforts to sanitize the whole issue with carefully released sound-bytes met with incredulity. The entire country erupted at this depraved violation and mind-numbing violence to which the child had been subjected. Online street protests were organized all over India under the hashtag #MyStreetMyProtest. Almost everyone wanted to do their bit, play their part. The purple dress with yellow flowers, the big brown eyes, child-like innocence in a gentle child-like smile shook the system out of its slumber. To me, struggling with my emotions and worries, this seemed like the path that I was trying to find.

Living in Chennai, one can not be detached from the sea and the sand. They are a part of Chennai's lifeline. As the summer heat sizzles, the vast expanse of water cools down the city. The beach attracts life forms of every kind, crabs, fish, mollusks, crows, dogs, cats. Horses are available for short rides. Small fairs are an integral part of the beach. It is a magnet, it attracts people, families, lovers, grandparents, children, uncles, aunts, office-goers. A sea of differences on a seashore, everyone trying to find an evening breeze to cool down. In a way, the beach is every Chennaite's 'my street'. The peaceful satyagraha by standing on the beach with a placard honouring the child from Kathua seemed the most natural thing to do.

I wanted to organize a peaceful vigil at the popular Besant Nagar Beach. I didn't know if others would join me, I was not going to ask anyone. Post the JalliKattu flare-up, public gatherings are banned on the many beaches of Chennai (Kalaiyarasan, 2017). And due to a large number of people out at the beach on a Sunday evening, I did not want anyone to take advantage of the situation and foment trouble. I approached the Besant Nagar Police Station and asked for permission to silently stand at the beach or off it. The first salvo came from the local police. I was asked if I was related to the girl, I was also asked if I was a Muslim. I was questioned about the numbers. All answers in negative, and I told them I want to stand alone. As I anticipated, even the permission was 'negative'. And I was directed to the Police Commissioner's Office.

An email to the Commissioner's office asking for an appointment received a quick reply, reiterating the state government's stand. It also informed that there was no need to visit the Commissioner's office. Gatherings at Bessie (Besant Nagar's beach's local name) will not be allowed but the venue of the vigil could be shifted to a place called Valluvar Kottam. I told the

officer that I did not want to shift there as the place is marked for political protests. I told them ‘I am just an anguished citizen. If I go there, It will get a political hue’. I was politely but firmly told that there will be no assembly at the beach. My response did not even register. The police were worried about containing the crowds if they decide to ‘gate crash’ my party of one, uninvited.

I was trying to organize a vigil, not a protest. To grieve the child from Kathua, the little life lost viciously and senselessly. A girl, stalked, drugged, trapped, brutalized, strangled with her scarf, and then bludgeoned to death. The sheer physical effort of explaining my intentions to the police functionaries exhausted me and I called off my imaginary program, as yet only worked out in my mind. If a gathering at the beach creates a problem as the Commissioner's office thought, then it is not going to work. I wanted to work within the ambit of the law. Justice has to be claimed through the laws of the country. It is the law that has to be strengthened. Creating lawlessness was not the aim.

The Sunday, 15th April 2018.

By Sunday afternoon, I had all but given up and was delving into the depths of despair when I received a phone call from my daughter. She had designed the poster for the vigil. To hold and stand asking for justice for the young girl. A simple red placard with the words #Justice for Kathua. It was sitting in my downloads folder, unprinted and waiting. A vigil that I had all but given up. She told me, no, she instructed me, to walk a hundred meters from our house to the local beach down the road. Stand on the side of the road away from the sand. Not to step on the sand. And hold the poster and just stand there. The poster was printed in a hurry, and I walked accompanied by my youngest daughter to the spot my eldest daughter had indicated, and the two of us stood there. And we waited under the hot sun holding our white, red and black posters.

Two of us. Just the two.

Chennai is a strange place, highly educated demographics, well advanced in technology, science, and learning. Religion and caste are dominant factors of life. One can not miss it, for no one hides it. The Brahminical symbols, the religious identities, the caste markers are all there. Everyone sticks to their identity. My twenty years of living in Chennai always found me an outsider. My house help still calls me Delhi Amma. Standing here, I was reinforcing my identity as an outsider.

But something unexpected happened. First hesitatingly, and then following others, in ones and two's and groups, everyone who passed by, stopped and joined us. They asked for posters to hold, to show their solidarity, to show their anger, and above all to show that they

cared. The religious identities, the caste divisions just melted into nothingness. I had to send word home to print more posters and send them across as quickly as possible. I had to send this message three times.

People on their way to the beach chose to stand with us. The numbers swelled and the lines grew magically. Started as two and on the way we met so many people who helped, supported, and made today possible. It quickly moved from me to we to us. In doing so, it demonstrated the power of decency and the power of community.

There were many who were not interested, questioning the need, use, and also the impact of this; how will it change, this is a rotten system, but after they questioned us, they too deferentially joined the lines, because hope triumphs over despair.

The local police also dropped by, but not a single person was standing on the sand, everyone was on the side of the road. Quietly and peacefully. No laws were broken, no lawlessness created. A peaceful gathering, remembering a young child with no other connection to the people gathered there, except for the one ingrained in humanity.

That day, standing with so many people; some known, most unknown; some friends, many who became friends, maids, drivers, fisherfolks, corporate big-wigs, academicians, doctors, IT professionals, college kids, young kids, babies, beach-walkers, dog walkers, grandparents, retired civil-servants; one thing became abundantly clear. No one can destroy the idea of India. They may try, they may temporarily succeed too, but we are much bigger than the sum of all our parts.

In a land by the sea, far away from her cold mountains and grassy plains, the little, wide-eyed girl from Kathua, managed to unite the country and remind us of our duty to morality.

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Difficult Subjects: Conceptualising the Politics of Women's Lifewritings

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Abstract: The paper seeks to enquire about a significant gap and absence in 19th and early 20th century literary history. While lifewritings as a genre was becoming increasingly popular among newly literate women, there is often a silence about the histories and life narratives of many recalcitrant, difficult subjects. Peculiarly and perhaps paradoxically, some of these subjects-often women- were well-known in their lifetime, but have later been relegated to anonymity and neglect.

This paper focuses on the autobiographical narrative of Sarala Debi Chaudhurani's (1872-1945) "Jibaner Jharapata," which could be translated to "Life's Scattered/ Fallen Leaves". As Rabindranath Tagore's niece, she aspired to India's freedom, and believed that the key to India's freedom and progress lay in developing a physical culture. She propounded the invention of traditions which propagated and put forward a culture of 'muscular nationalism'. In the course of her work, she came into conflict with Tagore whose ideas of nationalism were in stark contrast.

This paper glances at her ideological divide with Tagore, her interaction with Gandhi and wonders why her autobiography has been neglected for the better part of a century. Is it because her right wing views sat oddly with secular historians? Or is it because she was a difficult, recalcitrant subject whose story-and life narrative did not 'fit' in either with dominant trends in historiography or existing paradigms of women's autobiography?

Keywords: Women's Lifewritings, Jibaner Jharapata, Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, Sakhi Samiti

The paper seeks to enquire about a significant gap and absence in 19th and early 20th century literary history. While life writings as a genre was becoming increasingly popular among newly literate women, there is often a silence about the histories and life narratives of many recalcitrant, difficult subjects. Peculiarly and perhaps paradoxically, some of these subjects-often women- were well-known in their lifetime, but have later been relegated to anonymity and neglect.

This paper focuses on the autobiographical narrative of Sarala Debi Chaudhurani's (1872-1945) "*Jibaner Jharapata*," which could be translated to "Life's Scattered/ Fallen Leaves". As Rabindranath Tagore's niece, she aspired to India's freedom, and believed that the key to India's freedom and progress lay in developing a physical culture. She propounded the invention of traditions which propagated and put forward a culture of 'muscular nationalism'. In the course of her work, she came into conflict with Tagore whose ideas of nationalism were in stark contrast.

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Sarala Debi Chaudhurani was the daughter of Tagore's sister Swarnakumari Debi, a novelist and writer and J.N. Ghoshal who held important positions of the Congress party in the 1890s and in the first decade of the 20th century. Among the first beneficiaries of reformist activity that transformed Bengali and Indian women's lives of the upper and middle classes in the latter part of the 19th century, Sarala was academically bright and musically inclined. In her autobiography, she recounts the many musical notes that she shared with Tagore, and her many contributions to his music. Hardly a decade younger than Tagore, she was influenced by some of her uncles and aunts, as her formative years were spent in Jorashanko, the Tagore family house. Hungry for affection, she remembers any sign of affection that came her way. Some of her early memories are of the affection she received from unexpected quarters, for instance, her redoubtable and stubborn paternal grandfather. Of her mother, she recalls that she was handed over to a maid early in life, since her mother was preoccupied with her vocation of writing. She wistfully recalls the feeling of early neglect, brought on by a feeling of lack of nurture, as well as a feeling of being overlooked since she was the youngest child of her parents. However, growing up in the Tagore family house, she and her older siblings imbibed the rich cultural life of the Tagores. There are residual memories of several kinds, including memories of newly invented rituals like birthday parties (Chapter 8), instituted as a result of western influences. In her memoir, *Jibaner Jharapata*, (The Scattered Leaves of my Life) she remembers how the birthdays of her cousins, Suren and Bibi, the children of Satyendranath Tagore (India's first ICS officer and

the poet's second brother) and Gyanadanandini, his wife, were celebrated in a ritual popularized in the west and instituted by their mother in India, a practice that soon gained popularity among elite Indians.

Even as she recounts these early memories, including her younger sister's death after a fatal fall down a curving staircase, Sarala Debi's autobiography also traces her academic career. She studied at Bethune School and college (started around 1851 by John Drinkwater Bethune). She authored a book called 'Ahitagnika' for school students to generate awareness concerning the freedom struggle and launched an underground revolutionary group. Interested in Science much before it was included in the curriculum, she was the only woman student to study Science and Physics and had to be escorted by her brothers at the Science Association. She attended the classes of the noted physician Mahendralal Sarkar. Thereafter, she completed her graduation with Honours in English Literature at the age of 18 in 1890, becoming the highest scoring woman student to do so. For this achievement, she received the 'Padmini Swarnapadak', a gold medal awarded to the highest scoring student. At the age of 23, she stood fast in her decision to travel to Mysore to take up a job as an Assistant Superintendent of the Maharani Girls School. According to Uma Chakravarti, Sarala Debi's own description of her motives was a desire for independence, the desire "to escape and flee the cage or prison of home and establish her right to an independent livelihood." (Kumar, 1993:40) Her attempt at independence was cut short rather suddenly by the invasion of her room by an intruder. As a result, Sarala was forced to capitulate to her mother's demand to return to the family home at Calcutta. In Calcutta she was not only involved with the cultural life of the city like many other members of the educated elite, but also extended the sphere of her writings to writing for 'Bharati', the women's journal run by her mother and later, her sister, Hiranmoyee Debi. She also devoted herself to her music and to musical composition. Some of her musical exchanges, adventures and improvisations with Tagore are detailed in her autobiography. Her most seminal contribution to music was her setting to music the latter stanzas of Bankim's 'Bande Mataram' (trans. 'Hail Mother/land') which became the national song. In the Benaras session of the Congress in 1905, Gokhale requested Sarala to sing the song.

Sarala also started extending her sphere of interests and activities in the first decade of the 20th century. She focused particularly on improving the condition of women and challenging several existing gender stereotypes after returning from Mysore. First and foremost, she espoused political views which were hardly in consonance –rather radically dissonant– with that of Tagore and others. She started helping her mother with the work of the 'Sakhi Samiti' and the 'Mahila Shilpamela's' (ladies crafts fairs) and taking over the running and editing of "Bharati." By the late 1890s, she was an active participant in the nationalist movement and had come under the influence of Aurobindo Ghosh, whose idea of revolutionary terrorism resonated with her, putting her at odds with many of her family members. Stirred by his polemic against constitutional paths to independence, she threw herself into the activity of mobilizing young

men to revolt against British imperialism.(Kumar,1993:40) She was obviously a believer in the agitprop values of rites and symbols: when her calls for a cohesive group resulted in the formation of “Antaranga Dal”, she made all the members pledge their devotion and willingness to sacrifice themselves for the cause of independence, by making them lay their hand on the map of India(ibid) Moreover, she tied a ‘rakhi’ around their wrists as a token of the vow.

A proud and self-respecting person, Sarala was probably conscious of the slur/aspersion of effeminacy that the British had cast on the Bengali character. She felt the humiliation and indignity too keenly to accept such descriptions and attributions quietly. Her belief in developing a physical culture and strengthening the national character made her invoke certain traditions , re-invent rituals in order to paint a glorious version of India’s past. In doing so, she encouraged celebrations of “Birashtami”(to celebrate martial prowess, bravery and courage)and invoked and revived the braveheart Pratapditya, a landlord with questionable antecedents since he was also a parricide(guilty of killing his father).In elevating such a figure to a status of a nationalist war-hero, she elicited mixed responses. In 1903, she added his name to a list of mythic and historical figures, starting a ‘Birashtami brata’(ritual vow)which coincided with the second day of the Durga Puja celebrations, at which a vow was taken to commemorate bygone heroes.

Her ideas, however, appealed to the imagination of youth groups who started to celebrate Birashtami festivals and ‘Pratapditya’bratas(ritual vows).In 1904, the Mymensingh Suhrid Samiti’ started to take the ritual vows in 1904. (Chaudhurani, p51) In 1905, Sarala Debi presided over this collective performance of nationalism and as the historian Sumit Sarkar points out, “an attempt was made for the first time to use the words ‘Bande mataram’as a national call”.(Sarkar,1973:470-1)

Sarala’s actions shocked the orthodox sections of Bengali society and she was criticized for her initiative which was seen as unbecoming of a respectable woman. An article in ‘Rangalay’ in September 1903 described her actions as being “unworthy of a Hindu woman.” It went on to contrast her unfavorably with the wives and mothers of heroes in Sanskrit texts, complaining that the modern girl could only be satisfied by playing the hero herself.(Kumar,1993:40) By all accounts, reformists also would have questioned her revivalist approach, since it would have been at odds with their reformist programmes and agendas.

She continued with her political activism by starting the Bharat Mahila Mahamandal(1909), in Lahore, after her marriage. She was particularly enthused/motivated by the concept of uplifting the nation through encouraging the growth of a physical culture. A statement that resonates with her is the idea of national character and she quotes lines from the ‘Educationist’ :

Physical weakness is a crime-against yourself and those who depend on you. Weaklings are despised and a weakling nation is doomed. The decline of ancient Greece and Rome which fell rapidly from the pinnacle of supreme civilization was due to physical neglect and abuse of the inflexible laws of nature. A physically weak nation is drained out mentally, its feet are on the downward path and it will end upon the scrap-heap if it does not act before it is too late." She also quotes a proverb which pronounces that the *"battles of England are fought and won in the fields of Eton"*. ((Chapter 18,129) Her interest in and involvement with the politics of the freedom movement which had intensified in the 1890s continued till the early 1930s and she threw herself into the task of political mobilization and encouraging the growth of a physical culture in Bengal and later in the Punjab, where her work focused on the upliftment of women. Right from her childhood Sarala demonstrates a proclivity towards revivalist Hinduism or 'Sanatan Dharma'. Revivalism was of course part of the discourse of nation-building, of subjectivity and identity-construction in late 19th century, as evidenced in the teachings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and Swami Vivekananda, and in the writings of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. This revivalism is both a response and reaction, a backlash, to Reformist movements like the Brahmo Samaj. Revivalism became, in one sense, the discursive other of reform and it is an ideological tension that informs Sarala Debi's autobiography.

Sarala Debi's autobiography conveys her resentment against the "modern" practice of outsourcing of all parenting and nurturing tasks to others. Her tone and stance in this context, is reminiscent of Bankim's nostalgic tone in 'Bongodorshon' in writings like "Prachina o Nobina(1874)." (The Traditional Woman versus the New Woman) In another work "Samya" he had seemingly adopted J.S. Mill's ideas about equality between men and women, but withdrew them. This ambivalence about the 'new'-or the modern woman finds expression in several novels as well as his other writings. In his essay "Prachina o Nobina", he favours the traditional woman who pays due respect to the household gods, respects her elders and cares for and nurtures everyone. The nobina or new woman, by contrast, is focused only on herself and her pleasures. Reading novels is her favourite pastime. Considering the popularity of Bankim's novels among women, some of these biases seem almost paradoxical, if not ironical.

Rabindranath Tagore, among others, strongly objected to Sarala's invoking of the figure of a parricide as a martial hero. Such a figure could act as a dangerous precedent since it would seem to encourage untrammelled and uncontrolled aggression and blur moral boundaries and ethical codes. This blunting of all moral and ethical codes and boundaries, the danger lurking in a militant and violent nationalism is represented by Tagore in his novel, *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)* was written as a warning against extremism and militant nationalism. In the novel, the conflict between a rational civic and humanitarian nationalism which eschews violence is embodied by the idealized figure of Nikhil and the primordial reactionary chauvinistic version of nationalism which endorses violence by his 'friend', Sandip. Unscrupulous and self-serving, Sandip manages to dazzle his friend's impressionable wife,

Bimala, whose affection he then misuses to drive a wedge between the couple and then proceeds to extract money from her to fund his terrorist activities. In fact, Tagore's novel and his essays on 'Nationalism' could be viewed as his response, an extended debate and dialogue with an ideological viewpoint, diametrically different from his own, which was represented by his niece.

The increasing rift and estrangement between the two-Rabindranath and Sarala- might explain the wistfulness and occasionally melancholic and autumnal tone of *Jibaner Jharapata*, which stops short of discussing the second segment of Sarala Debi's life. Instead she ends the autobiography with her marriage in 1905, at the age of 33, with Rambhuj Datta Chaudhury, a politically active twice-widowed landlord from Punjab who was active in the Arya Samaj. This marriage too took place at her mother's behest and as a result, she acceded to her family's wishes, albeit reluctantly, after considerable persuasion. After her marriage, Sarala Debi moved to Lahore.

Section 2

The very opening description of Sarala Debi Chaudhurani's autobiography is premised on an idiom of loss, the loss of papers, of letters-and the effort backing it-in Punjab's political conflagration in 1919 and in the 1920s. At a time, when some of her acts of rebellion put her on the wrong side of British law and authority, her existence was conflict-ridden, to say the least. There is a point when she talks about how all her papers were burnt by a well-wisher in order to prevent them from falling into the hands of the authorities. This was done in her absence and without her permission or knowledge and although the intention was to 'save' her from jeopardy, the outcome was the destruction of her precious treasure-trove. These include her epistolary exchanges with Bankim, the Cambridge poet Manmohan Ghosh and others. Here, she likens her existence to that of a general whose every trace is obliterated once he has visited a place. He leaves a trail of fire. (Chapter 7, p51)

For an autobiography which is a record of a productive and well-lived life, such a note seems dissonant and out of place. The metaphor of loss appears in the text on several occasions: on the loss of her infant sister, on the loss of her independence during her stint at Mysore after an intruder breaks into her home and eventually the loss of independence when she agrees to a marriage to a twice-widowed, political leader called Rambhuj Dutta Chaudhuri. She however continued to lead a politically active life and it was in her house that Gandhi resided when he visited Lahore.

Jibaner Jharapata is not the only source of Sarala's life story, of course. Her presence in Rajmohan Gandhi's biography as Gandhi's "spiritual wife", because he saw in her a woman who possessed a combination of education and emotional strength. To Gandhi, she was a woman

whose love for the nation was equally strong although along different trajectories and followed different lines of development. His ideology eschewed violence, he would seem to embrace it or acknowledge it as necessary. Where the faintest agreement may have been there is in the belief in the importance of political action and mobilization. Actions and modes of agency might be different, but both of them presumably believed in the importance of individual views and viewpoints. A “merger with her might bring him closer to winning all of India to satyagraha” comments Rajmohan Gandhi in his definitive biography. (Gandhi, 2006:230) Martin Green, who had researched this relationship felt that: “He (Gandhi) and she (Sarala) together would certainly have made an extraordinary political combination” (ibid)

How then do we read her neglect, the relegation of her autobiography to silence? Given the events of the times she lived through, her location and extraordinary circumstances, the influence she wielded in her lifetime through her political activism, this silence is surprising. Is it orchestrated by a discomfort with her revivalist, rabid right wing views? Or is it that her story sits uncomfortably with the usual books on women in the national movement? Wherein lies the discomfort or discomfiture with her story—her version of nationalism or the fact that she was somehow viewed with hostility by people close to Kasturba who saw Sarala Debi as the other woman in Gandhi’s life?

Again, to identify her as Tagore’s niece only would be dismissive and diminishing her own considerable achievements as a political activist. Yet, stories and narratives by/about women who were related with great men like Gandhi and Tagore have had their lives and stories archived, narrated and circulated. Indira Debi, Maitreyee Debi, Madeleine Slade, Sister Nivedita and Manu Gandhi are all figures whose life events were irradiated by their contact with the ‘great men’ and a unique significance attached to their life stories. They become subjects or architects of ancillary life narratives which serve to focalise the lives of great religious/political/cultural figures. Whether in her own right or, given the unique nature of her relationship and linkage with both Tagore and Gandhi, one cannot help but speculate that the relative neglect and silence shrouding Sarala’s life and activities has more to it than meets the eye. Reading through her life narrative does elicit some surprise. So how can we theorise or explore this absence, neglect and silence? The autobiography does describe her contact with Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (Chapters 6 and 7) and the interaction with Swami Vivekananda, detailing her close relationship with him and the mutual respect with which they regarded each other. He recognized her fiery spirit and her proselytizing zeal and invited her to help him with his endeavours, what he saw as the spiritual task of nation-building.

A lot of the existing literature on women’s political participation makes the point that many women, albeit educated and from prominent families held political views that were in line with the political views held by the men in their families—be it fathers, husbands or sons. Thus while narrating the activities of the Theosophical society in Calcutta, their meetings set up and

organized by her mother, Sarala mentions that a lot of women held political views which emanated from the views of their male relatives. Many of the women joining these meetings, she narrates, were wives of men who were active in it. (62)

Coming in close contact with two towering personalities like Tagore and Gandhi, it is astonishing that Sarala's life and life writing eschewed their ideas and that her cultural imaginary was shaped on entirely different lines. She was fueled by the need to project a glorious-sometimes imaginary-past to reaffirm her faith in the country. Her version of the nation and nationalism seems to lean towards a primordial nationalism-one based on ties of ethnicity, religious conviction-akin to the blood, guts and gore that we witness in Sandip's speeches in "*The Home and the World*" and not the civic one.

Wherein lies the discomfort or discomfiture with her story-is it her version of nationalism? Or has she somehow fallen between the cracks of differing ideological viewpoints? It is tempting to chart her life –and life narrative in terms of her conflict with Tagore or proximity to Gandhi. But reading her narrative relationally-in terms of Gandhi's attraction to her is to fall into another trap, where the rubric of relationality determine the person's contribution to worth or his/her historical significance.

One of the issues and thematic concerns that we can glean from Sarala's life and life writing is the accommodation of Sarala Debi's aspirations to freedom and self-assertion within the boundaries of Hindu revivalism and right wing nationalistic ideologies. The harking back to a glorious past, the narrative of a wounded culture and hurt masculinities which was in need of rescuing, were all themes that had been fictionalized by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in his novels. In his novel *Anandamath*, he gives us a mythified and romanticized picture of Bengal's past.(for a full discussion, see Malhotra,2018:197) Elsewhere, in his historical fiction, we get a romanticized version of India's past as well. Some of his female characters like Debi Chaudhurani and Shanti are radicalized version of the ideal Hindu woman and wife, who seem to step outside the fold of domesticity when the situation demands and yet step back into it when the crisis blows over. Sarala's own story seems to have followed such a trajectory. Her marriage was turbulent, to say the least and sometime in 1923, she left Lahore and her husband to stay in an ashram, moving back when her husband fell seriously ill. She stayed with him and nursed him till his death in late 1923. Their only son, Dipak had been sent to stay at Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram and he later married into Gandhiji's family.

According to Radha Kumar in *The History of Doing*, there are parallels between some of Bankim's female protagonists and Sarala Debi: both their bids for personal independence get subsumed into the national independence. It was a coincidence that Sarala, after her marriage, came to be called Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, like Bankim's protagonist in his novel. Also, Bankim's reinterpretation of concepts like 'Dharma' give women like Sarala a space/scope to

acquire a traditional sanction for their revolutionary activities. This is evident in chapter seven, on Bankim and Tagore, when she thinks about the message of the Bhagavad Gita and its apparent justification for violence.

Autobiographies are marked by a dual time frame: simply put, a ‘then’ and ‘now’. Thus even the first part, the description of early childhood, is often from a specific political and ideological vantage point and from an adult perspective. Right from the beginning of *Jibaner Jharapata*, we observe that Sarala Debi’s view of some newly instituted Brahmo ideas is skeptical and interrogative. Deeply influenced by the west and Christianity, Brahmo reformist impulses were also seen as a challenge and counterpoint to Hindu tradition. Brahmo ideas were also seen as a product of modernity. Sarala is critical of modern ‘womanhood’, which discourages hands on mothering and the forming of affective bonds with children, and delegates the work and emotional labour of mothering entirely to maids and wet-nurses.

The other fascinating aspect of the story is her independent political views. Coming in close contact with two of the greatest men of her age-Tagore and Gandhi-it is a revelation that her right wing leanings are diametrically opposite to their views. On her radically independent political leanings is premised the question of whether there are emancipatory and liberatory spaces provided to Hindu women within right wing movements, a question on which the jury is still out(Butalia and Sarkar, 1995) Exploring the question of women’s emancipation within the ambit of the Hindu right is a series of essays edited by Sarkar and Butalia, one is aware of the tension between cultural nationalism and the discourse of human rights. The discourse of the Hindu right, according to Tanika Sarkar (Sarkar and Butalia:1995, Sarkar, 1999:163))and others, eschews the language of gender equality to focus on women’s role and function within a larger male-dominated context. Also the composite identity that emerges is that of the Hindu woman, who stands in for and represents the ‘Indian’ woman. In its choice of images of female empowerment, it often names the Shakti goddesses like ‘Durga’ and ‘Kali’, references that are exclusionary. As Flavia Agnes, the feminist lawyer and activist lawyer pointed out in a landmark speech, the women’s movement in India, for all its secular pretensions, was normatively Hindu in a nation of diverse religious allegiances and persuasions.(qtd in Ray,2003:7)

To an extent, Indian feminism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, somewhat akin to 19th and early 20th century nationalism, faces competing pressures from religious ideologies, historical discourses, and contemporary narratives as it seeks prototypes for and spaces in the postcolonial feminine(Malhotra,2018:198) The Hindu right’s political mobilization of women in the 1990s reveals the complexities involved in this project. Whether it is the search for an indigenous idiom of nationalism in early 20th century or an indigenous feminism in early 21st, the attempt remains exclusionary, conservative and mired in controversy. Sarala Debi’s version of nationalism can be described as muscular nationalism, wherein lies our discomfort with it. Histories- and herstories have shown up nationalism as a Janus-faced entity,

multilayered and palimpsestic. In its present day manifestations and alliances, it appears to be as much of a threat as it appeared to be a promise to Sarala Debi. Perhaps the last word lies with Nikhil, the idealized mouthpiece of Tagore in *The Home and the World*, who is skeptical about the spirit of ‘Bande Mataram’: *I am willing to serve my country, but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a God is to bring a curse upon it.*”(Tagore, 2016:221)

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Hupomnēmata vs. Historical Contextualization: (Re-)Reading the Memoirs of a Fallen Woman in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: While public records on the Indian colonial “fallen woman” are abundant and so are personal narratives catering to voyeuristic literary representations (such as works of Priyanath Mukhopadhyay and Panchanan Ghosal in Bengal), instances of self-writing by the self-proclaimed fallen woman are scarce. This historiographical lacuna often leads scholars to inevitably treat memoirs such as those of Binodini Dasi as telling accounts of socio-cultural circumstances and thereby contextualized, and often authentic, historical records pertaining to national cultural processes like theatre. I argue that this representational function contradicts what Foucault calls the “hupomnēmata” in self-writing; subjected to historical contextualization, the written self, as deconstructed and reconstructed in the memoir, is severely compromised. Explaining why it is crucial to assign the theory of hupomnēmata to marginalized voices in life writing, I propose to read Dasi’s *Amar Katha* (My Story) and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* (My Life as an Actress) as an exercise of self-care. In so doing, I explore how the textual performance of feminine subjectivity of a marginalized figure is subsumed within the historical context of and propagated by the memoirs. By navigating the development of the written self in Dasi’s memoirs published over 10 years apart, this paper renders them a site of negotiation between identity-(re)construction (or self-actualization) and national socio-cultural history-writing.

Keywords: Hupomnēmata, *Amar Abhinetri Jiban*, *Amar Katha*, Binodini Dasi

Acting was the chief treasure, the mainstay of my life. It had become as if an inextricable part of my nature [...] So much so, that every aspect of the movement—walking, sitting, lying down—had also become my own.
—Binodini Dasi, “My Story,” p. 80

I...found myself constructing Gayatri Spivaks who “represented” various historical and geographical cases. How to distinguish this from a request to speak of the singularity of one’s life?

—Gayatri Spivak, “Lives”

Introduction

I will begin this essay by first offering a reimagination of Foucault’s “hupomnēmata” (Foucault 209) in his *Ethics* and secondly determining why there is a need to situate Binodini’s “self writing” (Foucault 207) within its domains. I will proceed to elaborate on how Binodini’s memoirs, *My Story* (1912) and *My Life as an Actress* (1924–25), are a *performance* in themselves, much like that in her plays, and why it is essential that they be assigned this lens beside their documentary value. This can be achieved, as we shall see, without unfairly dichotomizing Binodini’s persona into an actress and writer or attempt the impossible task of isolating the person (woman) from the performer. The purpose of this work is not to disengage Binodini’s memoirs from her colossal role in molding Calcutta’s theatre but to reinforce a discourse on her self writing by reading her as the performer of her self, rather than the narrator of theatre history, and her memoirs as primarily a personal project (of the self, for the self). In doing so, I argue that persistent association of Binodini’s life story with that of theatre story without viewing it in terms of a feminist autobiographical discourse and the transgressive work of an emancipated “fallen woman” serves to subsume a very crucial nuanced interpretation of her performed subjectivity. Attempts would be made therefore to resist the temptation to study her context citing “facts” from the notorious and thriving theatre circles of colonial Calcutta and instead explore the fierce workings of her femininity that traversed personal and socio-cultural shackles and allowed her to etch the (or a) self onto the paper for the scathing gaze of the largely bhadralok readership.

Reimagining Foucault’s Hupomnēmata

Referring to the Greco–Roman culture and the works of Seneca, Plutarch, and Aurelius, Foucault, in his essay titled “Self Writing,” terms hupomnēmata as “account books, public registers, or individual notebooks serving as memory aids” (209). While self writing facilitates the “training of the self by oneself” (Foucault 208), hupomnēmata, a type of self writing aimed toward the care of the self, are works that preserve narrations which have been thought, heard, or read, for the self to revisit not simply for the sake of recollection. Apart from containing a material record of events and experiences, their functionality extends to being what Foucault calls “books of life” or “accumulated treasure” for “subsequent rereading and meditation” (209). The hupomnēmata are the site of interplay of the experiences and constitution of the self. Notably, it is through the hupomnēmata that the self is not constructed but *constituted* on paper.

The hupomnēmata therefore renders the self a continuous process rather than a unified entity that could be the result of the writer's *knowing* themselves. Addressing Cartesian concerns of the knowledge of the self, whether this self is the *real* self of the writer is irrelevant in this context. Calling the written self the "subject-on-the-page," Allen emphasizes that the subject is constituted in self writing rather than reflected/constructed in so far as the two are differentiated based on agency—"constructed" focuses on the writer whereas "constituted" emphasizes the "process of subjection" or the methods employed to construct the written self (Allen 368).

The crux of hupomnēmata seems to lie in the collection of quotations in a notebook in order to revisit it and use it as a guidebook. In the Hellenistic system, the concept of hupomnēmata, and self writing for that matter, was generally restricted to a certain class of individuals (the phallogocentric class of the *learned men*). This work proposes a reimagination of the concept of hupomnēmata which is necessary to allow it to cater to various categories of experiences and expressions. One may accuse this of appropriation and argue that an attempt at universalization may result in decontextualization. However, this could be countered keeping in mind the medium and objective of hupomnēmata, which are writing and self-care, respectively. I would quote what Foucault himself says with respect to the purpose of the hupomnēmata, which is "nothing less than the shaping of the self" (Foucault 211). Going beyond the "technical sense" (Foucault 209) of the hupomnēmata and reading it as the apotheosis of caring for the self through writing, I propose that a reimagination of the hupomnēmata as self-care would allow the positing of Binodini's memoirs as not simply a historical record of her observations of the Calcutta theatre and her own life but also the performed reproduction of such incidents which constitutes the feminine subject of her memoirs, subjectivity being the cornerstone of feminist inquiry. It therefore enables one to privilege the written self in the memoirs and focus on how Binodini *performs* this self for the self, which is essentially disengaged from its historical context. This is an act meant for the readers (audience), but it is also through this act that the self is constructed and sustained; the act and the written self make each other possible (Culler 502) and are then dependent on each other for survival. Self writing as a reenactment of the theatrical performance then is concerned with actions adopted for the sole purpose of self-cultivation. Performance of the self helps sustain the self rather than construct or confess it. In other words, as Binodini performs the self, it is not a new self that she creates but an already existing self that she attempts to sustain. This echoes what Foucault says regarding one of the features of the hupomnēmata: "the intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read" (210–211).

This necessitates debunking of all myths regarding the association between the written self and the *real* self. In his essay "Technologies of the Self," Foucault differentiates between "Know yourself" and "Take care of yourself," stating how the former has obscured the latter courtesy of Christianity (Foucault 228). Discussing the relationship between Foucault's self writing and Cixous' *écriture féminine* in understanding the educational constitution of the self,

Galea notes that autobiographies may mislead readers into thinking that one knows oneself. However, to determine whether a writer *knows* herself is an irrelevant, not to mention impossible, task. Galea notes how Cixous' "write thyself" agrees with the Foucauldian writing of the self on the rejection of the notion of the true self and the "impossibilities of writing the self as definite and unified" (Galea 141). However, writing the self gives rise to a writer's "possibilities of becoming someone else" (Galea 150). It is important to acknowledge this before reading Binodini's memoirs as a performance of the (or a) self. For Binodini then, this performance is in turn self-care as it helps cultivate and reconstruct the self that desires care. Allen reaffirms this when she surmises, "self writing is not simply the process of figuring out what I already know, who I already am. Rather, care of the self, which involves multiple practices that shape the self, makes possible knowledge of one's self" (368–369).

Self Writing as Performance—the Case of Binodini Dasi

To view Binodini's memoirs in the light of the *hupomnēmata*, one needs to consider how convincingly Binodini emphasizes her dexterity in the art of controlling her *bhava* in the composition of her ethos. It is in such functions that her performance in writing of the self can be situated as a sort of role-playing. As will be discussed, her flexibility with the *bhava* percolates into her writing, where yet again the actress fuses into the writer.

From its very outset, Binodini's memoirs have been used as material for social as well as theatre history. As Rimli Bhattacharya writes in her introduction to Dasi's memoirs, her work has been widely considered as filling the lacunae in the existing records of the late 19th-century Bengali stage instead of her own stories or social texts (Dasi ix). Due to her extensive involvement with the theatre and her dedication to her profession, perhaps writing the history of the Bengali stage in the course of representing her "*katha*" or story was inevitable. However, academic interest and scholarship have mostly tended to overlook Binodini's other (literary) performance in their examination of the theatre history. Alongside her identity as a prominent colonial-era stage actress and a founder of Kolkata's Star Theatre—the latter identity, as she reveals, being denied to her—she was one of the first women writers and primary feminist icons of South Asia, actively asserting, negotiating with, and recreating her socio-cultural status as a "fallen woman."

Propelled into theatre by her grandmother as a means to tackle poverty, Binodini joined the Great National Theatre at the age of nine in the minor role of Draupadi's handmaid in Haralal Ray's *Shatru-Sanhar* (Destruction of the Enemy). Curiously, her fear of being on the stage amidst the public gaze for the first time is very similar to her discomfort with her own writing. Describing her "extreme nervousness" on the first day on the stage, she writes:

When I saw before me the rows of shining lights, 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 and it seemed to me that the dazzling scene

was clouding over before my eyes. Backstage, my teachers tried to reassure me. Along with fear, anxiety and excitement, a certain eagerness too appeared to overwhelm me. How shall I describe this feeling? 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. In my childhood I had often heard my mother say, “Call on Hari when you are frightened.” (Dasi 67).

This uneasiness is somewhat reenacted when, concerning her writing, she says, “I have tainted these pure white pages with writing. But what else could I do! A polluted being can do nothing other than pollute” (Dasi 107). The focus must be directed to how this constant self-denigration could be a conscious exercise of her expertise with the bhava. She writes that to “experience as many bhavas as possible, [she] kept [her] mind constantly occupied, living in the world of imagination.” She further says that she could “surrender” herself to imagination, stating, “I forgot my own self: the joys and sorrows of the character I played were mine and I was always surprised to find that I was only acting out these emotions.” The oscillations between different forms of the bhava become evident in her own assertions. Before turning to the other bhavas (the lamentation being primary) that she performs in text, the extent to which she is devoted to each of these must be taken into account. For instance, most of both “My Story” and “My Life as an Actress” contain her declarations of her own faith in her acting. In the former, when narrating her new association with the Bengal Theatre shortly after the Great National was shut down, she recalls how she had become “skillful and powerful as an actress” even though she was “still a little girl” (Dasi 70). Later, she writes how, under the disciplined tutelage of “Girish-babu” (Girishchandra Ghosh, her theatre-guru), she would “become the very character [she] was representing,” while her “trance-like involvement continued for as long as [she] was acting” (Dasi 79). It is this expert control over her expressions which she is able to both evoke and sustain through her performance of the self in her memoirs. She presents a self that already exists in public knowledge and enacts (writes) what she knows the audience (readership) wishes to see (read).

Uncommon in the profession and owing to her skills, the second role that she was offered was that of the lead actress Hemlata of the play of the same name; she would go on to commit 12 years of her life to the stage. The subjectivity that is often evoked in writing is that of an actress to whom acting is not simply a *sadhana* (meditation) but a way of being. In *My Life as an Actress*, she writes, “I cannot quite explain why, but as for myself, I thought only of when the carriage would come to fetch me and when I would find myself in the theatre. I wanted to see how the others conducted themselves on the stage. I forgot almost to sleep or eat in my excitement” (Dasi 138).

As theatre actresses were recruited mostly from prostitute quarters, Binodini was designated the social identity of the “fallen woman” right from the start; however, she was not quite the antithesis of the bhadramahila, simply because her self-assertion tends to cast her as an

entity totally liberated from binarized social systems. By constantly asserting herself as a “despised prostitute” instead of a bhadramahila (even though the very act of writing may situate her as one and even though she says she has been living as a bhadramahila in the *andarmahal*), Binodini is also able to challenge binary systems of thought where the masculine is privileged and the feminine is rendered passive. A bhadramahila is the passive position that is assigned as the counterpart in a hierarchical social order and establishes a balance for discourses surrounding the active bhadralok. However, a “fallen woman,” on account of being beyond the periphery of the bhadra society (which is a redundancy as the very term “society” [translated from the Bengali *shamāj*] implies normative understandings of co-living), even though bound in its oppositional association with the bhadramahila, is exempt from a direct dynamic with woman–man binary structures. The fallen woman instead dismantles all essentializations of woman (versus man) and makes writing possible through literary emancipation, while rendering it a “political motivation to constitute one’s self as subject” (Galea 149).

In stark contrast to the portrayal of the obstinate actress, the other bhava is of the lamenting wronged woman. Describing her memoirs as “bedonagatha” (narrative of pain), Binodini goes to a great extent to legitimize her personal story and privileges her pain in this representation. In fact, her usage of “facts” throughout the memoirs which makes it possible to historically contextualize them in the first place would serve to only enhance the credibility of her performance when she narrates the self. Bhattacharya in her introduction notes how it would be foolish on our part to consider the assertion of her “artlessness” of her own writing (and, I would add, the exaggeration of her lamentations) as anything other than an extension of her mastery of bhava and therefore a manifestation of “self-conscious craftsmanship” (Dasi 235).

My Story conveys her lamentation in an exalted manner (using it primarily as a ploy for sympathy), whereby parts of her narration appear to be confessional accounts of a wronged woman who claims that she deserves the wrongs on account of her being a sinner. However, not once does she stop questioning this notion of cosmic justice; she continuously engages the notion of “Fate,” often entering into an accusatory dialogue with it:

Then why did He snatch her [Binodini’s deceased daughter] away from me? I had been told that the gift of the gods is never exhausted! Is this the proof? Or is this the fate of an unfortunate woman? Alas! if Fate be so powerful, why is He called Patitpaban, the Redeemer of sinners? If I am not ill-fated, then why do I yearn, why should I have to weep so much? He who has faith and devotion takes by force. Prahlad, Dhruba and so many other devotees have after all taken what is due to them by force.¹⁰ If a lowly creature such as myself is to go to everlasting hell bearing the burden of eternal pain, then how is his name as the Redeemer of the sinful to be honoured? (Dasi 57)

The concept of *stultitia* must be evoked here. Referring to Seneca, Foucault defines it as “mental agitation, distraction, change of opinions and wishes, and consequently weakness” (211). Hupomnēmata, through a unification of the constituency of the soul, enables the writer to overcome this *stultitia*, thereby forming a unified narrative in writing. The hupomnēmata therefore makes possible a “turning back” (212) toward the past and thereby constituting it in writing. Contrary to similar representations in contemporary women autobiographies (such as Rassundari Dasi’s 1876 work *Amar Jiban* or *My Life*), there is also a certain rage that surfaces in Binodini’s writings where she expresses her disillusionment with universal categories like god and repentance. Ironically calling herself an “unbeliever since childhood” (Dasi 59), she writes:

As to repentance! My entire life has been wasted in repentance [...] But has repentance borne anything? Even now I am swept along like a bit of grass overwhelmed by the current. I do not then know, what you mean by repentance. Why do I not receive mercy when I lie at His vast doors, my heart burdened with pain? [...] where indeed is Hari? (Dasi 57–58)

Comparable to a soliloquy, she often uses her bhava to indulge in a monologue where reading the exchange seems like eavesdropping. She first accuses herself, reflecting on her “sins,” then recalls that she was pampered despite her shortcomings, and finally returns to self-accusatory ruminations, which only allow her to be “in character.” However, a more pertinent connection can be drawn between her self-accusations and what Cixous calls the tradition of “self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallocentrism” (879) that has dominated all writing practices. By not adhering to a linear, coherent narrative of the self and instead revealing it in its fragmentations and contradictions, Binodini perhaps pioneers a new feminine writing which is dissociated from phallogentric obsessions with a unified understanding of the self.

Self-Writing Versus Historical Contextualization?

Binodini’s writing of the self is constantly negotiated with historical contextualization. One cannot disavow the historical aspect in their project of examining the self, as how the self remembers and whom it remembers are historically specific (Smith and Watson 17). In fact, Binodini persistently entangles her personal narrative with national discourses. For instance, her repeated evocation of “Hari” (Krishna) and her devotion to Ramakrishna reflect the popularity of the contemporary Bhakti wave, while her citing of plays like *Sati ki Kalankini* and *Apurba Sati*, as Bhattacharya notes, can be associated with the national obsession with *sattitva* (chastity), which would find relief in actual sati representations on stage (Dasi 168). However, viewing the writing of the self in juxtaposition with the documentary-ness of the text serves to shift focus from her subjectivity (which may very well be intended, given the historical period) and instead turn the gaze toward the records posited, perhaps not all consciously intended by her. Following Barthes’ advice and overlooking the intent of the author to extract several interpretations, it becomes possible to note that ossifying her identity as an actress, her evaluation of and response to the theatre, and her role in the molding of Calcutta’s theatre, recording the injustices that she

faced both at the theatre and the society at large, and making a case for the *patita* women of her time are some of her primary preoccupations in her self writing. The first of this, which is actualizing her role as an actress in her own words, she achieves not only by offering the trajectory of her life events but also by delving deep into the processes of the plays and the nuances of her performance, as is seen in her verbose description of her part in *Chaitanya-Lila*, from the night of “intense apprehension” before the play to the dialogues that she remembers verbatim to her own response at the enthusiasm among her fellow actors as well as the spectators (Dasi 93–94).

Focusing on the negotiations of self-care associated with self-writing, this work maintains that autobiographies/memoirs must always be read in dialogue with contemporary cultural and social formations. While Binodini narrates facts and anecdotes which would constitute significant evidence in theatre and cultural studies some decades later, she constantly retains herself as the referential subject. In other words, she is perfectly aware of narratives which relate to her and those which relate to the theatre, as she consciously flits between the two (“...although they [anecdotes from her tours at Lucknow, Delhi, and Lahore] are not about *me*, they are of interest nevertheless” [Dasi 68] / “I shall say a few things before I conclude *my account of Bengal Theatre*” [Dasi 73]; my emphases). Therefore, the fragments in her narrative that are cited in theatre studies are conscious digressions on her part; she inevitably and narcissistically returns to her own experiences and thought processes. These digressions are of course not distinguished in *My Life as an Actress* which contains both reiterations and elaborations of her performances and the theatre history that was already narrated in *My Story*. She seemed to have written *My Life as an Actress* (which was left unfinished) keeping the criticism of her theatre-guru in mind; as Bhattacharya notes, Girishchandra had accused *My Story* of being “too personal” (Dasi 18).

Yet, Binodini cannot help venting her artistic and literary abilities in this memoir as evident from the introduction. Indeed, her words seem more flamboyant, her ideas more expansive. The beginning of the preface may corroborate this statement: “After the furious travels of a lifetime, when it is now time to take leave of this guest-house known as the world, why do I drag my old and withered body away from the horizons of death; why do I try and polish back to their original brightness the rusty memories of those old days?” Calling the theatre an “addiction,” she writes, “I remember before anything else all those days which are still as sweet to me as honeyed dreams, the power and scent of whose intoxication I cannot yet forget, which will remain perhaps my closest companion to the last days of my life. Perhaps that is why the desire to speak of my life as an actress” (Dasi 129; my emphasis). The primary purpose of this memoir is asserted in no uncertain terms: it is to fulfil her longing for the stage and “properly” recall her memories (the “simple truths”) of her days at the theatre, memories which are turning increasingly “blurred and confusing.” However, her secondary purpose is to communicate to the “readers and spectators of today” the contributions of the theatre founders in

molding the “mud lying in the bottom of the ponds” into “living, speaking dolls” who would various audiences (129).

In both her memoirs, her memories become the primary archival source which she substantiates using “verifiable” details surrounding the theatre of colonial Bengal, thereby inducing further credibility in the self-referential subject as the observer/conveyor. I argue that both the history writing and historical contextualization of her memoirs serve to persuade the audience of the self’s act of remembering that she sustains throughout, through “assertion, justification, judgment, conviction, and interrogation” (Smith and Watson 6). In other words, Binodini’s making of history on paper can be equated with her portrayal of a character on stage; this history writing, which is part of the rhetoric acts she performs, is inevitably entangled with a reading that privileges the self because the self feeds on this historical contextualization. Autobiographical acts such as “justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing the accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures among others” (Smith and Watson 10) write history by making the self the subject within that subjective narration and trajectory. Therefore, as mentioned in the beginning of this section, self-writing is not posited against historical contextualization but becomes a process facilitated and enhanced with its negotiations with the latter.

For Binodini, the act of remembering, which is part of and necessary for the performance of the self, is therapeutical. She engages it for her own self, to care for the self that is constituted on paper. Remembering therefore triggers her writing of the self. she speaks of the “old days” because “when the heart is wounded by grief and afflicted by blows,” the mortal seeks “sympathy” by remembering “those who had once treated [them] with warmth.” Recalling one’s dear ones in times of distress therefore is an act of self-care, one she actualizes by immortalizing the thoughts on paper. Indeed, as the following passage suggests, it is for her self that she writes and to finally derive solace from the repositories of her memory:

The talented, the wise and the learned write in order to educate people, to do good to others. I have written for my own consolation, perhaps for some unfortunate woman who taken in by deception has stumbled on to the path to hell. 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. (Dasi 107)

Subjectivizing the Self

Binodini uses the epistolary style throughout her first memoir, *My Story*, addressing each of the chapters to her theatre-guru “Girish-babu” whom she calls “Mahashoy” (Sir). This I argue helps her recreate her written self as a subject in the memoir while allowing her greater literary freedom. Considering the feminine as a cultural signifier, one can deduce why the epistolary form, as a flexible and non-teleological structure, would correspond with women’s experiences and their sociologically formed “dependent, accommodating roles” (Martens 182). Martens also

states that the epistolary form in interrogating the woman question appears as a “foundation” for “uninhibited confession of intimate feelings and for an unmediated expression of thoughts” (79). Hogan writes that the epistolary style allows the narrative to be “open, non-linear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented” (100). This style also allows Binodini to negotiate the written self and the imagined reader, whereby the lines between the two are no longer distinguished, since both the addressee and the addresser are bound within the text. This can be derived from Hogan’s own statement where she writes that the epistolary form “crosses the boundaries between self and other” and “between author and reader” (100). Moreover, the letter form also does not conform to linear narrative conventions, which also aligns it with our reading of her texts as *hupomnēmata* which is necessarily fragmented. However, it is perhaps what Singer writes about realism and the epistolary form that is the most pertinent in this context. Singer links both immediacy and undecidedness to the epistolary form, which he terms “to the moment,” which succeeds in convincing the reader that they are participants of the writing process, thus actively allowing them to partake in the emotions of the writer (79). One can easily see a performer on stage resorting to similar maneuvers—alternatively engaging in dialogue with another character and with oneself—to engage a captivated audience.

Even though Binodini dramatically deprecates her writing abilities, the very preface of her autobiography *My Story* (translated from the Bengali *Amar Katha*) sets the stage for a bold reclamation of space. This further strengthens my argument that her self-deprecation is a conscious reenactment of her tremendous acting expertise. When she says “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” (Dasi 49), she negates every possibility of an outsider, an *other*, associating her with the term. By calling herself a “fallen woman” (as well as “social outcast” and “despicable prostitute” [Dasi 49]) in an extended lamentation right at the beginning of her autobiography, she usurps the authority of the *bhadra* community, radically turning the imposed socio-cultural identity to a self assertion, thereby monopolizing agency. While her repeatedly calling herself a “despised prostitute” and a “sinner” is commonly construed as an exercise of self-deprecation, one might also note that asserting the socially transgressive aspects of one’s identity is an act of autonomy over the self. In other words, she weaponizes the slurs that are hurled at her feminine identity by embracing the terms which, to fit her narrative, explain the consequential continuum of events caused by “fate.”

Binodini uses another mode to turn the self into a subject. For instance, the dedication of her memoir to a man—whose co-wife she had become after leaving the stage and her gratefulness for whom is upheld persistently throughout—denotes her recognition of herself as a giving being, an autonomous subject with something to offer. A worshipper–lord relationship is evoked with regard to her association with said man, whom she variously refers to as *pranomoydebata* or *hridoydebata* (lord of her life or heart). However, that she considers her autobiography (boldly titled *Amar Katha* [My Story; my emphasis]) worth offering to her “god”

suggests her positing of herself as an individualized entity capable of fulfilling her part of the transaction and therefore an equal, a counterpart.

Performance and Self-Care

While there have been many discussions attempting to dichotomize Binodini as a performer and a writer, I propose that Binodini remains a performer throughout her life, both while she was an actress and when she turned writer. Only the medium of her performance changed from the stage to the paper. Stephen Spender suggests how the life writer confront two lives (116). One is that observed by the external world—as a social and historical figure with a certain appearance, accomplishments, failures, and relationships. The other is the inner self constituted by what Smith and Watson call the “personally experienced” history (5)—in other words, a history of self-observation. The self that Binodini sustains in her memoirs could be a juxtaposition of these two possible selves proposed by Spender. However, since she never sheds this self’s character—that of an actress but also a social outcast—and this work illustrated how devoutly she maintained her role, this dichotomous idea of the self is problematized. This is less so in *My Life as an Actress*, where, true to its title, Binodini arrests her identity as an actress and a narrator of theatre history (rather than a *patita* figure of colonial Bengal with her personhood as the site of various sociocultural operations). However, and a tad ironically, it is the incompleteness of *My Life as an Actress* that could be symbolical of Binodini’s own lack of closure with the stage and as her self-identity as an actress. In fact, it could be this lack of closure which leads to the act of remembering and writing in the first place, along with the necessity to perform a self that, post retirement, cannot be performed other than in writing.

Therefore, viewing the memoirs with the lens of the *hupomnēmata* and self-care, facilitates a reading that privileges the self as the performer of its own subjectivity before the narrator of (subjective) history. In the light of her abrupt retirement from the stage, it is the actress whom we see performing in the memoirs, resplendent in the interplay of multiple *bhavas* that cannot be reconciled, constituting a self that is aesthetically unified but that, on close scrutiny, leaves the reader with more questions than answers about the “real” Binodini.

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Negotiating the Stage and the World: The Life Writings of Binodini Dasi.

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Abstract: At a time when it was not ‘respectable’ for women to act on a public stage, Binodini Dasi’s performances created quite a stir. Not only was she of the first actors on the Bengali stage, she was also one of the finest. Her autobiographies, *Amar Katha (My Story)* and *Amar Abhinetri Jibon (My Life as an Actress)* were published in 1910 and 1924/25 respectively. The necessity for her to chronicle her life, arose out of her need for acceptance, wherein she constantly judged herself against a prevalent societal value system. Dasi was born into a house of prostitutes and her identity had always haunted her, even in the public sphere, in spite of her success. Her autobiographies have an overarching tone of self-pity. Her desire to fit in, into a society that had set norms of “propriety”, in fact, pushes her to look for redemption, which comes through, with the intervention of an almost saint like figure, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, who redeems her of all her sins. She ceases to be a ‘*patita*’, or the fallen one. However, one cannot ignore the fact that, Binodini writes her autobiographies because she is famous. The foreknowledge of the fact that her autobiographies will be accepted went hand in hand with her popularity, and she negotiates the power of this popularity alongside, the society’s strict value system, to write an account of her life, located amidst the politics of class, gender, identity, the public and the private, purity/propriety and the ‘home’ and the ‘world’. This paper will attempt to read/analyse these negotiations, within the larger context of writing an autobiography.

Keywords: Autobiography, Stage, Theatre in Bengal, Women on stage

After the relocation of courtesans across the Northern and Eastern parts of the country, post the siege of Lucknow, it became increasingly difficult for them to look for employment opportunities. While the prolific performers catered to the elite, by entertaining them and residing in their *bagan baris* (garden houses), some others associated themselves with the Cantonments. A select few were also, now being employed as theatre artists in Bengal, as it was

still disrespectful for the “chaste” women of the household to perform in the public arena. The most significant ones were Binodini Dasi, alongside Golap/Sukumari Devi and Teenkori. Not only was Binodini one of the first actors on the Bengali stage, she was also one of the finest. Her autobiographies, *Amar Katha (My Story)* and *Amar Abhinetri Jibon (My Life as an Actress)* were published in 1910 and 1924/25 respectively. The necessity for her to chronicle her life, arose out of her need for acceptance, wherein she constantly judged herself against a prevalent societal value system. Her autobiographies have an overarching tone of self-pity. Her desire to fit in, into a society that had set norms of “propriety”, in fact, pushes her to look for redemption. However, one cannot ignore the fact that, Binodini writes her autobiographies because she is famous. The foreknowledge of the fact that her autobiographies will be accepted went hand in hand with her popularity, and she negotiates the power of this popularity alongside, the society’s strict value system, to write an account of her life, located amidst the politics of class, gender, identity, the public and the private, purity/propriety and the ‘home’ and the ‘world’. This paper will attempt to read/analyse these negotiations, within the larger context of writing an autobiography and peruse, the woman’s question in terms of the Nationalist discourse, of which these “public” women never formed a part.

The origins of the public theatre in Calcutta can be traced back to the eighteenth century as an impact of the theatrical activities of the British in Calcutta. Mrs. Emma Bristow, the wife of a wealthy British merchant, opened a theatre in her own house and appeared in her own production in 1789. By the nineteenth century there was a sizeable number of theatre houses in Calcutta. In 1795, Garasim Lebdeff, a Russian entrepreneur, tried to produce a play in Bengali, with women playing the female roles, for an Indian audience. Though this was a brave start, his enterprise was cut short, when the Dharmatala Theatre, where he had staged the play, was burnt down. Further accounts of theatre activities by Indians can be found only in the 1850s, that too under the patronage of the landed gentry, the Tagores and the Paikpara Rajas.

The Bengal Theatre was established 1873 by Saratchandra Ghosh and Biharilal Chatterjee. The inclusion of women actresses on stage was discussed by the advisory committee of Bengal Theatre, which included the likes of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. While Dutt supported the idea of allowing courtesans and prostitutes to act on stage, Vidyasagar, who had spearheaded a movement against child marriage and sati, resigned from his post at this prospect. Four women, Golapsundari, Jagatarini, Elokeshi and Shyama, were brought from the red-light areas to act in Dutt’s play *Sharmishtha*. There were mixed reactions from the public and press. Women often took part in *jatras* and theatre was considered superior to *jatra*. With the inclusion of women who were “social outcasts and immoral”, the press accused the theatre of stooping down to the level of the *jatrawallahs*. The play though turned out to be a huge success. The British newspaper, *The Englishman*, too, like the *Hindu Patriot* and the *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, disapproved of the inclusion of these women in the theatre circuit.

People like Girish Ghosh criticised this stand and attitude of disapproval about the inclusion of women into the theatre arena. Ghosh drew parallels with the European theatres where women performed ballet on stage. He criticised the babus, who kept mistresses and were regularly entertained by them, but pointed a finger at these very courtesans when they performed on stage. Sudipto Chatterjee in his book *The Colonial Staged* mentions: “Casting women in female roles served another important function, it nullified the homophobic anxiety of having boys pass for women, thereby heterosexualising the stage and escaping the unspeakable horrors of homoerotic desires” (182). The issue of courtesans performing on stage was even more complex than this. Most of the actors on stage were “bhadraloks” or respectable men, and the very fact that the courtesans now acted on stage made it very clear that these respectable people would have to share physical space with them, which was quite unacceptable. The theatre, which till then was seen as a means of spreading social message and moral instruction was now getting “tarnished” with the inclusion of social outcasts who shared space with noble men. For the prostitutes, this served as a means to attain social acceptability. They moved out of close quarters to public domain. This domain did make them “available” women but in some cases like that of Golap, who was married to a well-born, educated actor, and called herself Sukumari Dutta after that, gave them a social standing, recognition and family.

Binodini Dasi’s *Amar Katha (My Story)* was published in 1910 and *My Life as an Actress* in 1924/25. Her first act on stage was in 1874, where she played the role of the handmaid of Draupadi. In the very next play she was offered the main role of the heroine. Her life and acting career were both exemplary. She was born into a family of prostitutes and took to theatre to sustain her family. She began her training under Ganga Baiji, a renowned courtesan, who lived as a tenant in their house. Her earliest stint was with the Bengal Theatre, after which she moved to the National Theatre and then to the Star Theatre. She played the lead role in almost all the plays staged during that time. Much of the advice that she received during her career was from her mentor Girish Chandra Ghosh. He made her watch a lot of European Theatre to train her, apart from making her understand the fact that one has to live the character to master portraying it. Most of Ghosh’s plays were successful because she acted in them.

Binodini Dasi was born into a house of prostitutes. Her identity always haunted her, even in the public sphere, though she was immensely successful. She performed at a time when respectable women did not act on stage. But she could never reconcile herself to her identity. It is fairly interesting to note here that she through history she was referred to as Nati Binodini, wherein her profession is deeply embedded into her name, and thereby part of her identity, (Nati in Bangla would mean courtesan/prostitute in the early twentieth century). The connotations of the word however, changes through the late twentieth century, to stand for someone who is thespian/theatre actor.

Dasi's autobiography puts across succinctly her deep admiration and commitment for the stage. There is no denying that her writing throws light onto the workings of early theatre in Bengal. She was also, part of the first set of women who were being trained in a novel medium, facing a crowd who till now had never seen women on stage. "Her writings are a record of an unusually fine mind responding at multiple levels to the experiential world of theatre." (ix) Her autobiographies are replete with incidents from both her interactions with fellow workers and her relationships. It deals with the death of loved ones, including a daughter, and her mentor Girish Ghosh. The text is essentially personal, and confessional, which also addresses pain and loss. But it is definitely her stage persona that comes through more vividly in the texts. She is absolutely passionate about theatre. She talks about being trapped in the *maya* of theatre. In an instance, her colleagues asked her to have a relationship with a wealthy non-Bengali merchant so that they could get enough money to build a new theatre. She even agreed to this, and asked her benefactor to build her a theatre, which he did. This new theatre was supposed to be named after Binodini. That of course did not happen. The theatre was instead called The Star. Much of it had to do with her identity as a prostitute, as people thought that naming a theatre after a prostitute would bring in ill repute. Since then, she became extremely cautious about her personal life, so much so that she does not even mention the name of her husband in her autobiographies. Her autobiographies have an overarching tone of self-pity, whereby she constantly judges herself against a prevalent value system. "These are only 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 should 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." (Bhattacharya My Story 50) She fails miserably and then this self-pity becomes her only redemptive tool. By justifying her actions, she falls into the trap whereby she accepts the societal norms as correct and 'proper'. Binodini is a *patita*, a fallen woman and needs redemption. "Utterly despicable and degraded is our status in society...A prostitute's life is certainly tainted and despicable." (Bhattacharya 104-105) This redemption comes in the form of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, who visits her during the performance of Chaitanya Lila, and blesses her, thereby sanitizing her and the theatre.

And it was during the performance of Chaitanya Lila that is to say, not only this performance, but the incident around it which became the source of greatest pride in all my life, that I, a sinner, was granted grace by the Paramhansadev Sri Ramakrishna mahashoy.... The most divine of beings granted me refuge at his feet...he would place his hands on my head and cleansing with his touch my sinful body, he blessed me, Ma, may you have Chaitanya! Poignant indeed was the sight of his gentle and compassionate image before an inferior creature such as myself (Bhattacharya 95)

He redeems her of all her sins, and she ceases to be a '*patita*', or the fallen one. This in a certain fashion co-opts her into the societal system. She has the blessings from a mahapurush and after this incident she starts distancing herself from the stage and finally retires after the death of Ramakrishna in 1886. It is interesting to note here that there have been several plays staged on just this incident from the life of Binodini, thereby insisting on the need for redemption.

Binodini writes her autobiography because she is famous. This is a way for her to find recognition, outside of stage, as a human being, albeit, one with follies. She also, writes it because she has financial independence, she had a professional career. She therefore is a working woman writing her story. The foreknowledge of the fact that her autobiography will be accepted went hand in hand with her popularity. Hence, she had internalised the power of her popularity, but at the same time used the tone of self-pity to negotiate her identity and position in a society which was strict. She faced a lot of betrayals, both at the personal and professional level. Her autobiography is of significance also, because in it, she tells her story, as opposed to others narrating her story. It also, becomes representative of the subaltern writing, and in this case, she definitely is three times as marginalised, by the colonisers, patriarchy, and a moral code. Her mentor, Girish Ghosh, for whom she had the highest regard was dismissive of her writing her autobiography. However, in a note titled "Srimati Binodini and the Bengali Stage", he mentions in a positive note:

Reading this autobiography will destroy the pride of the zealous devotee, the righteous will embrace humility and the sinner will be given new hope. Those who are unfortunate as Binodini and having no option take up a disgusting path for livelihood, those who have been seduced by the honeyed words of the licentious, they too, will be hopeful that if like Binodini they too can commit themselves to the theatre with body and soul, they can expend their despicable birth into the service of society. (Bhattacharya "Benediction"28)

The understanding was so, that, it was *karma* or action and not birth that made a human being. These theatre actresses went through rigorous training, and through *tyaag* (sacrifice) and *sadhana* (dedication) attained *siddhi* (achievement). Perhaps, this is what Ghosh meant when he wrote the foreword, to the autobiography. Binodini Dasi praises her mentor Girish Ghosh by giving him the full credit for training her, as she was "semi- or uneducated" (Chatterjee 190). However, he is often accused of not writing or creating powerful roles for actresses. Chatterjee observed that this happened because Ghosh at some level felt that "[t]he uneducated actresses of the period were simply not capable of rendering subtle impersonations" (189). Most of his women characters were historical heroines or mythic goddesses. The ones whom he placed in today's day and age were martyred daughters/mothers, vamps or temptresses. His women characters lacked shades of grey and were generally flat. Much of this had to do with the fact that the actresses were prostitutes and the audience consisted of babus and bhadraloks. And the identification of the actresses to the roles that they played on stage would be potentially dangerous. The audience would not accept the actresses playing characters that they identified

with. The prostitute was the home breaker and hence no identification with the character portrayed was possible as far as the domestic women were concerned. But at the same time the fact that domestic women were jealous of these actresses cannot be denied. The actresses represented the most public form of life, they were also people who lured their husbands away, and hence served as an enigma for every wife. Sudipto Chatterjee in his book *The Colonial Staged* mentions, "...the prostitute could even represent Mother Nation (as in the case of the nationalist pantomimes commonplace in the public theatres) but not the mother or mother to be, at home. It was unspeakably dangerous to allow the 'home breaker' prostitute actress, whose social role was to entertain the babus and lure them out of their homes, to portray the 'home maker' on stage" (Chatterjee 198).

As Sudipto Chatterjee observes, the idea of the nation as mother was part of the nationalist discourse--both in the literary and the political rhetoric. It drew heavily from Hindu mythology. The prostitute actress on stage brought the scope of actually, physically locating a space where the discourse could be deliberated upon. There could now be a physical representation of "Mother Nation". The prostitutes who were marginalised outcasts were now put in an exalted position. Someone who absolutely had no agency could represent the entire nation. As Chatterjee puts it,

These actresses were the ones who paraded on the exalted female figures for the audience to gaze at. After all, to see Mother India was to believe in her. As a logical corollary, then it was the very same staged Motherhood that was denying them the motherhood they were biologically capable of; that had in the manner of speaking rendered difficult, nay impossible. So much so that the best playwrights, all of them male, would not dare write roles for them in which they replicate their real life counterparts. These women could be gazed upon but not identified with. (206)

It can be safely concluded that these marginalised women playing the roles of Mother Nation, goddesses and saints was accepted, only because of a historical and mythological "romance" that surrounded these roles, whereby one could watch them, but never identify with them. So though prostitutes and courtesans were employed on stage to provide them with social acceptance, the roles that were given or written for them, denigrated them and put them back in the vicious circle of unacceptability, rendering them as "available women", none of whom could have a "normal and pure life" after and during theatre. They did win accolades but their status in society in terms of acceptability did not improve much. As Chatterjee goes on to say:

The perfunctory service implicit in the false exaltation of the female figure in nationalist discourse, especially in Bengali Theatre, is harshly contested by the life stories of the numerous actresses who appeared on the Bengali stage, especially Binodini Dasi, the distinguished actress. Ostensibly raised from the depths of fate's severity to social recognition, from prostitute to performer, a number of these actresses were rewarded with

the same ignominy, exploitation and neglect that their former profession offered them. This points out, once again, the failure of the nationalist agenda to reconcile itself with the reality of the social condition of the “nation”. (265-266)

Partha Chatterjee talks about a binary between the ‘home’ and the ‘world’, and further creates a binary for women in terms of the “private” and the “public” --the wife and the mistress. They could co-exist at the extreme end of a babu’s life but there was no interface between the two. Prostitutes, if allowed to enter the mainstream socio-cultural activity from the margins of the bourgeois society, could damage the social cohesion. This had already happened as the courtesans and prostitutes were performing on stage alongside babus. But they could not be allowed to enter the inner sanctorum of a household and neither could they be allowed to perform the roles which the babus could identify with. The prostitute playing the role of a wife on stage mimetically gave rise to another possibility, that of the wife becoming the prostitute. The public and the private had to be kept separately. In his essay titled “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonised Women: The Contest in India”, Partha Chatterjee elucidates on the relevance of the woman’s question within the nationalist framework:

The nationalist response was to construct a reformed tradition and defend it on the grounds of modernity. In the process, it created the image of a new woman who was superior to the Western women, traditional Indian women and low class women. This new patriarchy invested women with the dubious honour of representing a distinctively modern national culture... An analogous set of distinctions would mark out the "low class" or "common" woman from the "normal". They would be brazen, irreligious, sexually promiscuous, etc. The nationalist male thinks of his own wife/sister/daughter as "normal" precisely because she is not a "sex object" while those could be seen as "sex objects" are not "normal". (622-630)

The nationalist movement essentially catered to a certain section of society, which did not include the old traditional strata or the low-class people. It essentially was a middle-class phenomenon: “Nationalism located its own subjectivity in the spiritual domain of culture, where it considered itself superior to the West and hence undominated and sovereign” (Chatterjee 631). Since, we were far superior in terms of spirituality, and colonisation so far had not been able to destroy the superior, inner sanctity, the agenda of the nationalists was to imbibe what the West was superior in, that is ‘modern sciences and arts of the material world’ and overthrow the power. The figure of the nautch girl, or the prostitute essentially would not fit into this paradigm and hence, was conveniently left out: “The nationalist discourse we have heard so far is a discourse about women; women do not speak here. It is a discourse which assigns to women a place, a sign, an objectified value; women here are not subjects with a will and consciousness” (Chatterjee 632).

The figure of the courtesan/prostitute was a subaltern one where her existence was acknowledged but her problems were never foregrounded. She was given no agency. They almost suffered a triple marginalisation, in terms of colonialism, patriarchy and the propriety of the then society. The courtesans/prostitutes tried to look out for alternate professions (by becoming the first actresses of the public stage), thereby looking forward to social acceptability, which all of them desired. But as theatre actresses as well, they were stigmatised:

The sympathetic liberal--minded bhadralok (like 19th century Bengali theatre directors and actors, and few Brahmo social reformers) did, indeed, acknowledge the talents of the actresses who came from the red-light areas. But while trying to appreciate their art, or attempting their 'rehabilitation' (either by giving them away in marriage, or by taking them under their protection as mistresses), they tended to fix their female identity as that of submissive domestic creatures, to be trained under benevolent and civilized male patronage. They failed to recognize the strivings for an independent status that some among these women might have been fighting for. (Banerjee, S. 187)

The prostitute was seen as the "other" who was not supposed to be emulated. She was flippant and ignorant as opposed to the image of the "new" woman that was being created. She represented the world outside, which the new emerging women was not expected to represent. The prostitute was abhorred and attempts were made to regulate her functioning in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries, but the profession survived, because of "the sheer tenacity of self-preservation" (Banerjee, S. 182). It is within these parameters of purity, and ideas of a new emerging woman that Binodini Dasi assesses herself and is unable to reconcile with. She calls herself, "fallen (*patita*), unfortunate (*abhagini*), despised and despicable, a sinner (*papi*) and a lowly woman, and repeatedly refers to herself as a prostitute" (37) While both these could easily have been autobiographies or life stories of one of the first professional women actors on stage in Bengal and indeed of a "new" idea of womanhood, which at the centre of it, had economic independence, these instead, become the tales of a woman, steeped in self-pity, trying to redeem herself and find acceptability and a respectable reputation in society.

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Interpreting Human Life through the Non-Human: Study of select works of Artists and Writers on Writing Life

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Abstract: Human interpretation of life had become so anthropocentric by the end of modernism that an eco-centric interpretation of the same was inevitable which led to proliferating works of non-human narratives to understand human life. Artists and writers like Woolf, Gogh and Frost were philosophers who took to interpreting image of insects, each having different essences of its own. For example Van Gogh's Giant Peacock Moth is part of the butterfly series and so the moth cannot be interpreted individually but as a collective dissection of the winged insects that wholly symbolize transformations of human beings. Whereas Virginia Woolf's *The Death of the Moth* philosophize the inevitability of life and death in which the moth acts as a tool to understand ontological significance of being a human. They are essentially writing about the significance of human life through the life of an insect but at the same time critically placing us into the crux of knowledge about human ontology that forms a design of life as Robert Frost writes in his poem *Design*. Their writing of life is the constant "deconstruction" or an influx of the socially constructed idea of the human and non-human; stepping beyond the margins of anthropocentrism.

Keywords: Human, Non-Human, Van Gogh, Virginia Woolf, Robert Frost, Anthropocentrism

Writing about life of one's own and others or life in totality as in "being", placed in the universe and the knowledge about our existence through nonhuman symbolism post an obsessive anthropocentric epoch of literary and artistic narratives where man couldn't consider himself as having similar fate to the nonhuman, let alone an insect is definitely a commendable attempt. Life writing studies traditionally involves reading into journals, autobiographies and diaries to understand the position of its writer in relation to their immediate existing socio-cultural or political atmosphere however this article involves something beyond the text to interpret the true

nature of reality and human life in relation to the nonhuman world. Nonhuman life is not beyond comprehension so as to lack capacity to provide meaning to human life. As a matter of fact all life under the sun is governed by the same fundamental rule and human life can thrive only when we share a meaningful symbiotic relationship with the nonhuman world around us. If one was to set out on a quest to question the nature of reality they would find ties between all entities known as ontological dependence. An object whether concrete or abstract cannot exist in singularity but is dependent on another entity for meaning. Such as life is not without death and light is not without darkness and the above analogy is particularly relevant to understand the ontological interpretation of “life”. Similarly life is also not exclusive to human but is also true for the nonhuman. Looking beyond human world to justify the insignificance of man in a universe with its array of supernova, black holes, and gravity, man is indeed a petty being born to die and be cut short at the pleasure of the benevolent. At the turn of the modern age Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* published in 1915 changed the way man looked at himself. Changing a man into an insect overnight and the consequent downfall and disrespect that followed shocked man’s anthropocentric arrogance and at once writers started looking towards the metaphorical meaning of the moth’s or the fly’s fragility to be the same as man’s insignificance. Appreciating the nonhuman life form or at least frequenting the reference of nonhuman life in order to understand human life form better was the new turn at the approach of modern age. Artists and writers were taking to the natural world and the nonhuman life to reflect on their own lives. Anthropocentric approach of everything, literally everything was squeezing out the true meaning of being in this world and so when writers and artists took to the nonhuman world for inspiration it was their treading into the new world with an eco-critical approach to life. Writing or painting about this new world which had been for generations deemed to be inferior wasn’t much different from human life and as a matter of fact we were really like flies to be killed for sport in which neither the human nor the nonhuman could escape death. So when Vincent Van Gogh, Virginia Woolf or Robert Frost took to the nonhuman world to write or paint they were quintessentially writing not only about their lives but all of us. Their writing of life meant breaking of the socially constructed ideas of the human and non-human that enabled them to step beyond the margins of anthropocentrism after which no predetermined notion about the nonhuman could be assigned leading to deconstruction of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman.

Van Gogh’s *Green Peacock Moth* painted in 1889 was a later version of what he had seen at the garden of the clinic at Saint-Rémy, an emperor moth which Van Gogh believed to be a death-head moth at the time. At first he drew it on a paper with chalk and emboldened the outline of the moth with brown ink which enhanced the beautiful structure of the moth but he didn’t colour at first because “To paint it I would have had to kill it, and that would have been a shame since the animal was so beautiful” (Van Gogh Museum). This painting which is commonly referred to as *Green Peacock Moth* or *Giant Peacock Moth* is part of his butterfly series the whole of which was made between 1889 and 1890. His array of works on butterflies contains *Garden with Butterflies* (1889), *Grass and Butterflies* (1889) and *Poppies and Butterflies* (1890),

The Green Peacock Moth being his only painting on a moth which he self titled as Death's Head Moth. Van Gogh was confined within the compounds of his asylum as Saint-Rémy when he painted this series because of his mental instability. The scenic events of the above mentioned paintings were largely a part of the untamed, overgrown garden of the asylum which one day happened to be visited by the moth which eventually became the subject of his *Green Peacock Moth*. Behind the moth are Lords and Ladies a flower native to Europe that belongs to the same family as Peace Lilies. The idea of a butterfly or a moth is not without the idea of metamorphosis and it is exactly what caught Van Gogh's interest. To become a moth entails the becoming of a caterpillar at first which isn't attractive but shows the inner meaning of having to wait to become something great. The ability of the winged insects to transform its form from something hideous to something as beautiful as the butterfly is the true meaning of transformation and although their essential work is to pollinate plants and flowers, symbolically they will always represent the metamorphosis of their bodily form. The flowers in his paintings as Gogh himself describes in a letter are licks of colour which are exactly as they are in nature but would appear ugly to a spectator who would want to view each stroke used to paint the whole painting separately (qtd. in Grant 104). Similarly the butterfly or the moth represent in the Butterfly series transformation as a symbolic meaning that cannot be comprehended separately but as something that the insects entail as a whole. Curtis Farmwald writes in his poem *The Existential Butterfly* about Van Gogh's *Poppies and Butterflies* (1890) about his want to recreate the same based on the similar poppy field scene around him. Farmwald sees kindred field filled with red poppies around him, it is summer and it is the similar wildness of these poppies which have grown just by the road. His expectation from the scene is to live beyond the trouble of the soul to exist in ease as Van Gogh had done in his painting *Poppies and Butterflies*. Van Gogh's painting cannot be thought without the madness he was living with at the time and the beautiful field of poppies studded with the butterflies must have eased him off the trouble both in his mind and soul which led him to create the masterpiece that *Poppies and Butterflies* is. The title *The Existential Butterfly* and Farmwald's want of seeking survival against his "troubled soul" is his flight to exist which the butterfly represents. The butterfly represents more than a winged insect to both Van Gogh and Curtis Farmwald. This butterfly is the escaping of a troubled soul, a transformation that humans await in midst of all fundamental existential crisis. It is rather amusing that Van Gogh painted the most colourful paintings during his years at the asylum which were subjected by the green landscape and the winged insects outside the hospital.

Robert Frost writes on the unseen unknowability of the "design of darkness" that has been set loose on all things living whether human or nonhuman since the creation of universe and our planet Earth. The design that dominates the process of creation and destruction is as Frost writes in "Design" a dark one; dark because this poem essentially discusses energies of death. The dimpled spider that sits on a white coloured heal-all holds the moth like piece of satin cloth. Having killed the moth that was probably resting on heal-all like Van Gogh's moth on the Lords and Ladies the spider represents everything that is associated with "death and blight". Although

the spider has killed the moth resting on the flower innocently is it by its own rights correct because even this dimpled spider the symbol of death has to survive. In “Design” the ending stanza poses the fundamental questions related to the nature of being in this case the nature of being of whatever scene Frost describes in the first stanza. Why is the flower white or why are the spider and the moth both at the same place? These questions are answers in themselves of the nature of being or of reality. The poem doesn’t challenge the ontological positioning of things around us but rather supports the nature of being such as death is not beyond ontological manifestation of everything that is around us. Ontology as Martin Heidegger assumes consists of humanly pre-ontological understanding of being that determines how we experience everything around us. M. R Ayers finds in his understanding of Descartes or Locke that “the perception of things as having colours, tastes, etc., is to be attributed to the sense modality proper to each quality, i.e. to the manner in which the perceived object affects us” (406). The matter of death and the nature of being of things like the white heal-all or the white moth around us is eventually a carrying out of the plan organized by the “design of darkness”. The inescapability of the design is the ultimate destiny of human life and also of the non-human life. Frost’s “Design” and its predestined provision of what becomes of life on earth reminds me of the related theme of death and inability to escape what Gods have stored for us in Katherine Mansfield’s *The Fly* and William Shakespeare’s famous lines that appears in his *King Lear* “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport.” (Shakespeare 4.1.1099). Mansfield and Shakespeare’s motif portrayed through their work is of similar kind which shows the fly-like inability to escape death. In both case the fly as a representative of the nonhuman speaks louder about the nothingness of human life than any other possible form of life. Although human life’s nothingness is not the be all and end all but only a part of the existential dread we all come across more than once in our lives. Part of treading into the nonhuman world to find appropriate conveyance of what it is to be human is what we call ontological anthropology. The difference in different world views and the possibility that separate worlds exists simultaneously and neither of each is untrue is the ontological turn in anthropology which makes us think beyond the existing worldview as the nature of culture or epistemology as the predetermined given. Ontological anthropology marks our entering into a world which is different from what we already know within the givenness of things as in entering into spaces where meaning is given in reference to the interaction between the human and the nonhuman world.

Surely a creator who will “smother” unaware animals and human beings in their lairs for being “absent-spirited” is neither benign nor even involved. He is to be feared. There seem to be only two choices: a designer who appalls or no designer at all. (Fagan 85)

Frost lived a disturbing childhood and had a family with history of mental illness. His mother was spiritual but had bouts of depression and his sister was admitted to a mental hospital where she died in 1929. His son committed suicide in 1940 and his daughter was sent to a mental hospital in 1947. It is not surprising that Frost himself was disturbed majorly by the mental

illness that affected his family along with the deaths and financial crisis which shadowed him most of his life. The unnoticed appeal of Frost's darker poems and his venture into worlds which speak of the unknown comes from his deep insight about the true meaning of life. His was indeed a life as frail as the moth in the eternal design of the omnipotent. Therefore "Design" appeals itself by the notorious grip that the design of darkness has on life. Life is not and cannot be beyond this design and the design's synchronicity which brought the "kindred spider to that height" and then "steered the white moth" at the same place is the ontological meaning of life.

Both Vincent Van Gogh and Virginia Woolf were sufferers of mental illness. Van Gogh had chronic manic depression and Woolf was suspected to have bipolar disorder; both of whom committed suicide. Although highly saddening their relatedness through mental disorder and consequent suicide reflects largely on what they perceived of life through their works which have come to be greatly celebrated today. Woolf's *The Death of the Moth* (1942) also takes to observing the nonhuman which discloses to her the meaning of life and death. The moth which flutters around from one square of the windowpane to the other eventually embraces death and its death reveals to Woolf the truth of being human whose ultimate end is with death. Death again becomes the inescapable dark energy that governs all like Frost writes in his poem. Moth is particularly an interesting choice among the insects because of its neutral unattractiveness. These creatures of night with their inadequateness in beauty compared to butterflies also represent transformation of life, having emerged out of their cocoon formerly being a caterpillar. During May of 1889 Van Gogh wrote to his brother in a letter describing the moth which he found outside in the garden of his asylum. What attracted Van Gogh the most about the moth was as he described in his letter "its coloration astonishingly distinguished: black, grey, white, shaded, and with glints of carmine or vaguely tending towards olive green; it's very big". Van Gogh was admitted to the small asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence while he painted his Butterfly series therefore the winged creatures in asylum's wildly grown garden as subject of his Butterfly series represented his fine sense of beauty that he found in nature. The winged insects represented not only their literal and symbolic capability of transformation but also Van Gogh's unconscious appreciation of something greater and beyond as he wrote in his letter to his brother Theo. These nonhuman life fundamentally represented his wish to transform, to appreciate beauty in life as it is although he was mentally unstable particularly at Saint-Rémy during a time when asylum's weren't sure what to do with mentally instable patients because of absence of knowledge regarding mental illness during late 1800s. While Van Gogh's interpretation of the nonhuman life was full of life Woolf's interpretation of the same taught her about the implacability of death. More than so Woolf's *The Death of the Moth* came out in 1942 fifty three years after Van Gogh had painted *Giant Peacock Moth* however she suffered from mental illness which was not treated during her lifetime. Her discernment of the moth that fluttered to death at the window of her room had to greatly influence her idea about true nature of life but the problem with Woolf's life in the social circumstance she was living in was her being a woman in a society which still perceived mental illness as taboo.

Moths come out at night and as Woolf says are well suited to be the creature of the dark. The moth that fluttered at her window trying to escape the confines of the glass was not as attractive as one would expect of a night moth. Its wings were a pale yellow, seemingly content with life although such contentment with life is relatable to human life as well till the moment prior to death. Life beyond Woolf's window was steady on an autumn day. The farmers ploughed the field for readying new yield and this activity that was going on opposite to her window marked certain "vigour" also within the rooks and the horses and this energy which without doubt resembled life reflected back within the moth itself at this side of the window. Because the initial time when Woolf finds the moth inside her room and everything outside her window at daytime, the energy that lingers in them is white, full of life. This life without any touch of the dark or death marks human life in their prime, like Frost's narrative background in "Design" where we must at once imagine that the white snow drop spider has not killed the moth yet, the white heal-all is in full bloom and there is a moth also white and full of life fluttering through the wayside yet to be preyed on by the spider. The constant vigorous fluttering of the moth at Woolf's window is its try to escape so that it doesn't have to die within the confine of this unknown room where it has suddenly landed. The moth keeps flying from compartment to compartment resembling what Woolf imagines "He was little or nothing but life" (4) but eventually stops for a moment when its body is drained out of energy from all that fluttering and dancing. The "queer spectacle being at an end" (5) is the spectacle of the moth's movement which is the reason why Woolf finds it interesting and would be true for anyone of us—movement is the mark of life. The moth eventually dies by the end of the day from the constant fluttering and exhaustion with which his struggle to survive ends too. Because Woolf's works were characteristic of the stream of consciousness method of writing this work too reveals the inner most thought of her mind that the moth's survival instinct ignites. Stream of consciousness narrative texts are without the probability of modification meaning these were sentences true to its origin of thought. The moth's instinct to survive and eventual death is the life map of all human life. Death is viewed by Virginia Woolf as a relief, an aid by which the struggle that the living world entails is cut short and death is stronger than all forces combined. The reality of being for Van Gogh, Woolf and Frost is essentially tied to the reality of life that is again dependent on life and death and because death is the ultimate truth, their ready acceptance of it liberates them from the illusionary burden that causes existential dread in human beings. More than so Van Gogh's attempt at painting the emperor moth in *Green Peacock Moth* is his desire to transform. This also leads him to mistake the moth to be death-head moth after which he names his work as *Death's Head Moth* hinting towards his appreciation of the moth's beauty and the capacity of death to transform an anguished soul to evolve beyond the pettiness of life and death.

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The Figuration of Art, History and Self: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as a Palimpsest

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Abstract: The winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1991, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is an iconic work of world art. Seldom does one come across a work that challenges the parameters of its own creation in such a radical way. A graphic novel that is both biographical and autobiographical, history and fiction, memoir and comic art, pushing generic integrities to collapse upon themselves, *Maus* has deserved the critical and popular success it has garnered worldwide.

A testimonial to the never-ending horrors of the Holocaust, *Maus* has popularly been read as an attempt at exorcism of the author's demons, and perhaps with him of a race caught in the warps of history and time. As the narrator tries to tell the story of his life, through the story of his father's experiences in Nazi Poland, he creates theriomorphic creatures to define the parameters of human existence in the sub-human dimensions of unspeakable nightmares of history. Disney's beloved Mickey Mouse and the cat and mouse chase of children's stories assume Kafkaesque grotesqueness in the mice, cats, pigs and sundry animals that 'people' this authorial world divided across religious and political affiliations. Through the passive aggressive narrative of the Oedipal struggle between the father and the son emerges the story of lives caught in the whirlpool of timespans, continents, memories and generations.

My paper seeks to explore the complexity of the visual-autobiographical articulations of selfhood through the intersections of genre, history and language. The layers of remove that frame this novel can be understood as the constructive aesthetic of Spiegelman's effort in illustrating and writing *Maus*. The ironical self-distancing of the author and characters make this work of self-writing-illustrating unique beyond the pale of mere self-reflexivity. It is not simple a book about the writing of a book that encapsulates a piece of history. It goes a step ahead to talk about identity as fraught in the process of remembering, writing, re-writing and reading. Spiegelman's narrator Art is a mouse on account of his Jewish roots that cannot be shaken off,

but assumes the mask of one, too, because the task of writing and publishing need one to make a mask out of one's most personal sentiments. My paper further argues that the remembered history in *Maus* can only ever be constructed one, which complicates the understanding of the text as a testimonial/memoir/history. By exploring the visual and verbal language along with the paratextual elements of the novel, I will finally posit that *Maus* is a text that writes and re-writes itself across a range of selfhoods, meaning-making and search for closure that is perpetually deferred and thus unreachable.

Keywords: *Maus*, Art Spiegelman, palimpsest, graphic narrative

Since its first publication, Art Spiegelman's pathbreaking graphic novel, *Maus*, has continued to engage the imagination of readers and academia alike. Notwithstanding its cult status today, critics, illustrators and readers, in addition to the author himself, have never quite been able to say *enough* about this book. This enduring popularity stems from the layered narrative that engages deeply with debates about aesthetics, history and politics, in a complex personal tale of individual creativity and historical trauma.

Maus first appeared in the early 1980s as chapters in Spiegelman's comic magazine, RAW, and, subsequently, as a two-part book series published in 1986 and 1991, respectively. In its nearly four-decade-long legacy, punctuated by several awards (including the Pulitzer Prize in 1992), *Maus* has been credited for the newfound respectability of graphic novels/comics at the turn of the century. In many ways, *Maus* has paved the way for the profusion of graphic memoirs of the nineties with writers like Marjane Satrapi and Alison Bechdel expanding the possibilities of the comic book medium to tell distinctly non-comic life stories.

While it is fascinating to explore the poetics of self-writing published serially in fragments of magazine chapters over several years, it is to be noted that *Maus* garnered the kind of blockbuster success it did only after it appeared in book form. While raising questions about the structural and chronological unity of life writing, this also draws attention to the 'constructed' nature of a testimonial about the unspeakable and un-representable horror that is the Holocaust. The sensitivity and acute self-reflexivity of the narrative has led some commentators to conclude that *Maus* is a suitable response to Theodor Adorno's famous statement about the barbarism of writing poetry after the Holocaust. The triumph of this postmodern narrative lies in its breaking *into* the meaning of 'art' in the post-World-War world, while gaining its representational legitimacy from the perspective of a second-generation survivor.

This paper concerns itself not so much with what is said *about* the Holocaust and its impact on survivors' lives, but much more with *how* it is said through the medium of the comic/graphic narrative. Despite the representational distance, is it possible to narrate an essential experience through an aestheticization of the Holocaust? Can one dare to do it? And even if one articulates that fragmentary experience, as capably as Spiegelman does, is it still not a mediated and belated narrative anyway? How can we discursively talk about selfhood and meaning when it is ensnared in such troubled historical waters that are deceptively easy to access in the comic-book mode? Through a deployment of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction" (5) in postmodern literature, I argue that *Maus* engages with many levels of visual and verbal storytelling in a palimpsestic text that writes and un-writes itself to create new frontiers for the genre of life-writing.

What is a Genre?: Holocaust Comix

Perhaps a good starting point to think about these issues would be to consider the essential question about generic definitions. The primary disjunction between the comic mode and the extremely tenuous, controversial subject of the Holocaust, on which the narrator Artie's relationship with his father is staged, led to the rejection of *Maus* by all the leading publication houses of America in the eighties. Besides subverting generic expectations, Spiegelman went a step ahead to anthropomorphize the Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, Poles as pigs and Americans as dogs, deliberately overplaying racist stereotypes. While using animal metaphors satirically has had a potent legacy in the twentieth-century from Kafka to Orwell, Spiegelman's metaphors are also to be seen in relation to the American underground comix movement of the sixties that was already radically subverting the animal figures of children's comics by transposing them onto very adult themes (Huyssen 125). As a stalwart of the movement, Spiegelman favoured the genre of the 'comixx', which is essentially a graphic autobiography, to undertake this ambitious creative project (Bosmajian 26). Through these animal metaphors, the discomfort of the subject of genocide is intensified by not allowing the reader comfortable access into history or the lives of survivors through narrative realism. The comix mode makes irony the definitive entry point into the text.

However, owing to its rising global popularity through translations into nearly 30 languages, *Maus* made way into school textbooks and college courses on life writing, literature, history, the Holocaust and even psychotherapy. As early as 1986, it was even nominated for the National Book Circle Award in the category of biography (Witek 4). Pushing generic limitations was clearly part of Spiegelman's architecture of this text which has variously been called history, testimonial, graphic memoir, autobiography and image-text (Chaney 4). Not only is *Maus* metafictional in the typically postmodern sense, but it also combines metatextuality and metavisuality, as I will later show.

Two notable anecdotes about *Maus*'s history require attention in this regard. First, as Marianne Hirsch has observed, Spiegelman's avowed ambition in his early years as a comic artist was to write the "Great American Comic Book Novel," which eventually culminated in the hybrid auto-/biographical *Maus* (24). Second, when the *New York Times* Book Review listed *Maus* in its 'Bestseller Fiction' category, Spiegelman immediately shot off a letter to the editor claiming that such nomenclature falsifies the testimonial angle of his work and the thirteen painstaking years of research that went into its making. He cheekily wrote,

I know that by delineating people with animal heads I've raised problems of taxonomy for you. Could you consider adding a special "nonfiction/mice" category to your list? (*MetaMaus* 150)

While Spiegelman's reaction promptly shifted *Maus* into the non-fiction list, this is precisely the kind of problem that lies at the heart of the conception and reception of this text. It is clear that the 'truth-telling' of the auto-/biographical mode will not suffice in the comic medium that is trying to grapple with a historically specific yet intensely personal subject for Spiegelman.

This problem is amplified by the fact that *Maus* is not simply Art's father, Vladek's biography ensconced within the son's own auto-biographical comix (what Bosmajian has called a 'double autobiography' (2)). It is also a book *about* the writing-illustrating of a biography and auto-biography combined in one. According to Kathleen Ashley et al.,

The mark of autobiography is a discursive effect, an effect of reading in relation to certain discourses, defined through the simultaneous assembling and disassembling of other discourses and genres... it is also, to be sure, a crisis in the hierarchy of autobiographical identities, for it is the autobiographer who becomes the site of meaning in this activity as producer of meaning and organizer of knowledge. (8)

In this specific sense, *Maus* is both a meta-biography and a meta-autobiography. Commenting on this ambiguity of genres, Paul John Eakin says,

Spiegelman wants us to see him seeing, to see him transforming himself into the equivalent of an eyewitness who would have *seen* – and hence could draw in graphic images – what his father relates. (15)

However, Spiegelman does not stop at being the witness. He ironizes his own vision and truth-claim by adding layers of remove into the text that subvert any final meaning one might try to cull from it. In many ways, then, the comic medium itself becomes part of the message: the cartoon about the Holocaust gets respectability from the Holocaust, but the intergenerational trauma it begets also becomes accessible only through the comic book medium.

The Figuring of Meaning

The problem of representation clearly lies at the heart of Spiegelman's work, as it does with many subsequent postmodern graphic narratives. The obsession with historical detailing and 'getting everything right' is evident right from the beginning of the text. Artie is shown visiting his aging father and interviewing him about his experiences in Nazi Poland, despite the latter's insufferable, overbearing personality. Artie's insistence on chronological narration and probing for the smallest detail stands in direct contrast with his abandonment of realism when it comes to the actual representation of the characters. One can read the text separately as prose without even realising that all the characters illustrated in the book are animals with human bodies. As Andreas Huyssen has noted,

...Maus acknowledges the inescapable inauthenticity of Holocaust representation in the "realistic" mode, but it achieves a new and unique form of authentication and effect on the reader precisely by way of its complex layering of historical facts, their oral retelling, and their transformation into image-text. (131)

This effort to explore the fault lines of combining historical veracity and artistic license, while attempting justice towards each, is what makes *Maus* unique. The first part of the text is titled 'My Father Bleeds History'. As much as the experiential history runs in Vladek's blood, and continues to bleed (figuratively) into Artie's life and his ink, the real artistic labour lies in using that personal history to 'colour' the narrative. In Spiegelman's own words, "...history was far too important to leave solely to historians" (*MetaMaus* 100). Commenting on the discourse of historical veracity, Hutcheon observes:

Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. And it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that effects both aims: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the "world" and literature. The textual incorporation of these intertextual past(s) as a constitutive structural element of postmodernist fiction functions as a formal marking of historicity - both literary and "worldly." (4)

The raw material for *Maus* derives from a series of conversations that Spiegelman had with his father in 1972. The book opens with an epigraphic comic which shows young Artie crying before his father after being ridiculed by his friends. Instead of pacifying the child, we see Vladek questioning the basis of friendship and emotion by referring to his own experience of the Holocaust, thereby dismissing the child's suffering. The opening serves to problematize the idea of personal suffering and guides the reader into the text with a firm scepticism and ironic distance.

The role of the metanarrative in *Maus* is, therefore, central to understanding its aesthetic intent. Narratives tend to structure experience in the form of stories related within a linguistic frame. In *Maus*, this frame draws attention to itself as the only, if limited, means of accessing any truth about the survivors' experience and about the historical experience of the *Shoah*. Autobiography, as Leigh Gilmore has noted,

...draws its authority less from its resemblance to real life than from its proximity to discourses of truth and identity, less from reference or mimesis than from the cultural power of truth telling (qtd in Chaney 3).

In his nested narrative, Spiegelman does not allow any one point of view to stabilize long enough to make the reader comfortable. Each panel of each page of the book has its own narrative grammar of words and image. Right on the cover page of the first chapter, Vladek is shown prying himself away from a woman helplessly tugging at his feet. The story begins with Artie asking Vladek about how he met his wife Anja. Vladek begins an account of his early life, his enterprising spirit, his casual affair with Lucia, before finally meeting Anja and marrying her. He seemingly controls the narrative despite Artie's effort to give it a starting point and a perspective through his abandonment of Lucia. However, once Vladek tells the story, he asks Artie not to include his affair and abandonment of Lucia in his book because it was not directly related to Hitler and "isn't so proper, so respectful" (25). The last panel shows Artie promising not to do so. Narrative authority has clearly been wrestled back out of Vladek's hands and seems to privilege faithfulness to none.

The Oedipal tussle between the father and son metonymically defines the larger structure of the text, too. In every chapter, Vladek's character develops admirable qualities of resourcefulness, love for his family, presence of mind, and sheer luck, which is then subverted by his miserliness, lack of empathy for his son or second wife, Mala, and his essential narcissism. This works not just in relation to Vladek but to other characters, too. Vladek's views on Mala's greed and carelessness are contrasted immediately with Mala's constant mistreatment and suffering in marriage with Vladek (132). Artie himself comes across as an indifferent son who only needs his father's story for his personal agenda, albeit with occasional pangs of guilt. No character or point of view is allowed to stabilize, and suffering neither elicits pity nor ennobles anyone.

There are also other moments in the text when the discursive limits of narration become evident. Vladek's story seamlessly follows a sequence that is sometimes too perfect for a real life situation. All the betrayers of the Jews end up dead or in the camps at Auschwitz; there is an inordinate amount of luck in all of Vladek's near escapes from death; the role of the dream, fortune-telling and numerical mysticism - all make the figurative nature of the plot evident. While Spiegelman testifies to the authenticity of each of these events related by his father, he

cannot help admitting that the comic medium has its own architectonics that shapes a narrative. He admits that “each page is a visual paragraph” (*MetaMaus* 166) and despite his obsession with detailing, many “things had to be suppressed, pulled forward and shaped to make the narrative” (29).

In her psychoanalytic reading of *Maus*, Hamida Bosmajian claims that Vladek’s story is the master narrative of this autobiography which marginalizes Artie’s constant struggle for acknowledgement. The real subject of this work is ‘the orphaned voice’, she claims. Such a reading tends to ignore the battles over narrative authority that are being fought out in the text. The point of *Maus* is not to locate meaning in any one source but to recognise that the structures of truth-telling and hearing/reading are mere constructs. In effect, when the story ends, Vladek comes to no new realization, nor does Artie gain any more insight into his own self through his autobiography. Yet the relating of the story remains important.

Another significant dimension to a survivor's testimonial is that of time and memory. The task of memorializing, innate to life-writing, gets intensified in the comic when a single page can have several panels in multiple time zones, any of which can be observed and compared to each other in one instant. For example, the panel showing Jewish rebels at Auschwitz hanging from a nearby tree in the foreground, as Artie and Francoise return from the supermarket in their car with Vladek, tends to collapse timelines (239). Marianne Hirsch’s famous essay on the connection between memory and post-memory in the context of trauma and generational distance in *Maus*, highlights the performative element in Spiegelman’s craft. Spiegelman himself admits, “remembering those who remembered the death camp is a hard act to follow” (*MetaMaus* 13), and it is a much harder task to represent that memory in language.

Maus uses the trope of the memorial effectively, by juxtaposing both Vladek’s and Art’s memories together, as both constitutive as well as delimited when the personal-political are concerned. In chapter two of *Maus II*, Artie is seated on a pile of human corpses and working on his comic even as he is surrounded by the distressing signs of the popularity of his first book, *Maus I* (201). The guilt of using Vladek’s story to exorcise his own demons as a second-generation American Jew has also led to a reinforcement of the same identity crisis that he sought to escape.

This tension is worked into *Maus* through other competing counter-memories that do not let Vladek’s version monopolize the Holocaust experience. Mala’s experience of the trials in Srodula, as well as the psychoanalyst Pavel’s, throw light on other modes of existence in Nazi Europe. Having survived the Holocaust themselves, these two characters do not exhibit the same kind of miserliness or radiate the same “claustrophobia” as Vladek (182). Even the reference to Anja’s destroyed diaries and Artie’s search for his mother’s voice are woven into the narrative very effectively (160). The (silenced) voice of Anja serves as another counter-testimonial to Vladek’s self-affirmative story related by Artie.

This disjunction is also evident at the level of the visual narrative. Artie's son, Richieu's, misbehaviour at the table and the orchestra scene are much discussed in this context. Even the wearing of a pig mask over his mouse face by Vladek when trying to pass off as Polish, or the mouse mask by Artie and Pavel over their human faces, are cases in point. The detail that Pavel keeps a framed picture of his cat on his table makes Artie wonder – "Can I mention this, or does it completely louse up my metaphor?" (203). He, of course, is not talking of self-consciousness as much as drawing attention to his craftsmanship. As Jeanne Ewert says, the graphic elements and pictorial sub-narratives in *Maus* help readers "to read against the grain of the verbal text" (188). What is told to us in words is not always replicated by the drawings in the panels. In the beginning of *Maus II*, we are shown Artie sitting under a tree and drawing rough sketches of different animals, ranging from a moose, a frog and a rabbit, to represent his French wife, Francoise, who is of different ethnicity than the Americans, Nazis or Jews. In the next panel she appears as a mouse and asks him to draw her as one since she has converted to Judaism in order to marry Artie (171). In another instance, we are shown a prisoner in Auschwitz complaining and resisting his maltreatment because he is a German being mistaken for a Jew. The consecutive panels show him as a mouse and then as a cat, in the same striped prison uniform, again playing up the visual animal-metaphor (210).

Such self-reflexive moments abound in the text. It is perhaps nowhere more conspicuous than in the separate inclusion of the comic titled 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History' right in the middle of Vladek's story. This comic about his mother's death, which Spiegelman had published in an underground magazine in his youth, resurfaces like the repressed into the frame-narrator Artie's present (and also the reader's). It is another nested narrative within the frame that obliquely comments on the visual-verbal tensions. Bosmajian sees this as an instance of Artie's horror at his mother's death and 'a way of compensating for his exclusion from the facticity of the *Shoah* as a historical event' (18). Hirsch and Huyssen, on the other hand, see it as breaking the framework of the testimonial by miming and challenging the terrors of memory and post-memory (129). The distinctly different expressionist style of the 'comic-within-the-comic' obviously comments on the larger mediations in the text, but more importantly, it draws attention to the text itself as a prison of simulacra. The frame immediately preceding the actual comic shows Artie holding the comic in which a hand is seen holding Anja and Artie's photograph (101). The photograph is the frame of the comic which is framed by Artie's hand and further framed by the reader's at a triple remove. This meta-textual awareness is not simply to ironize the creative process but the entire project of seeking meaning on the part of a reader/outsider who invariably becomes indicted in the process of textual construction.

Self-making and Art-making

Beyond the aesthetic underpinnings of this unique text, one sees evidence of Spiegelman's personal struggle with 'making sense' of his own life and his relationship with his father, which is counterposed against his meticulous labour in researching historical details of the

Holocaust that add to the story's veracity. His repeated attempts to have *Maus* published in book form add further nuance to this tussle between personal expression and public validation. His claim that he wanted to refrain from sentimentalising and moralising the genocide as some kind of "Holokitsch", yet not escaping the guilt of *Maus*, is evident not only at the level of the text but also in other works surrounding it (*MetaMaus* 70).

In 1977, Spiegelman had published a book called *Breakdowns* which included the original idea for *Maus* in a compressed, three-page comic. It had several self-referential panels that explored ideas of subjectivity across a range of themes. One of the strips showed the artist drinking from a bottle of ink. The artist writes and creates *on* and *of* himself in the graphic mode. *Breakdowns* went relatively unnoticed, but Spiegelman did not abandon the comix mode and went on to work intensively on *Maus* anyway, which eventually gave him the critical and popular acknowledgement he sought.

However, the exorcism that *Maus* should have affected did not stop Spiegelman from exploring the autobiographical mode further. In 2008, a new version of *Breakdowns* was released, with some additions, under the title *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!*. This re-packaged version reflects the same anxiety about selfhood that preoccupies the artistic vision. Erin McGlothlin calls this constant return to the autobiographical mode:

...one iteration in an ongoing autobiographical project... the latest in a series of autobiographical performances that loop back to previously explored experience not in order to *revise* this material but instead to *re-vision* it. (47)

The point to be noted here is not Spiegelman's preoccupation with artistic self-articulation so much as how these paratexts reflect on a work like *Maus* and its construction. The interplay of practical considerations of marketing and publication are closely woven with 'true' life narratives, which bring attention to the architectonics of *Maus*, repeatedly.

To go one step further, in 2011, Spiegelman gave a set of interviews to Hillary Chute, the graphic novel expert, about *Maus* and everything related to its creation. This book (somewhat predictably) titled *MetaMaus*, has a range of extensive answers by Spiegelman on the choice of subject, medium and mode of construction of *Maus*, along with family photographs, transcripts of recorded conversations with Vladek, research data, interviews with Spiegelman's family and even a CD-ROM that contains all the raw material of this book. Twenty years after the last instalment of *Maus*, somehow it continued to be necessary to explain and answer those questions that hound Spiegelman, despite numerous interviews he himself has given about it, and a host of secondary literature occasioned by the novel. The need for publication of *MetaMaus* reiterates the same argument about the construction of *Maus* and the failed project of looking for generic, narrative, biographical, or other literary answers in it.

What we have, then, are texts that deliberately create multiple levels of mediations between the Holocaust and the self of Vladek/Artie/Spiegelman that should lie at the core of an auto-/biography. In the introduction to *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman says, “it was hard to revisit *Maus*, the book that both made me and has haunted me ever since” – and yet he does return to it - repeatedly.

As the title of this paper suggests, *Maus* is to be seen as a palimpsest – a text that writes and rewrites itself, interminably, even as the reader approaches it in the hope of finding a crux of meaning. The mediations distance the search for truth from the truth itself, thereby making a palimpsest even out of Artie, who does not really exist as a unified self within his own auto-/biography. He is merely one of the many mediations we come across in the text, and is only another element in the process of narrativization. The figurations in the text are a response to the tensions occasioned by historical metafiction within the genre of life writing. The story of the Holocaust and survival, which we witness as insiders, outsiders and as the intermediate narrator, thus, raises more questions than it answers. The careful figurations of the text, history and the self illustrate *Maus*’s technical brilliance as well as evasiveness.

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Memory and Memorialising in Graphic Life Narratives - *The London Jungle Book* (2004) and *Drawing from the City* (2012)

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Abstract: The paper focusses on graphic narratives - *The London Jungle Book* (2004) by Bhajju Shyam and *Drawing from the City* (2012) by Teju Behan, produced by Tara Books, an artists' collective and publisher of graphic literature, based in Chennai, India, which lie at the threshold between adult picturebooks and artists' books. These works emphasise the embodied landscape and the performative art traditions of the Pardhan-Gond and Jogi art traditions respectively. The transformation of the personal through the collective art practice and memorialisation of the collective practice through the personal experience enables the artists to articulate a different kind of cultural politics, that questions the conventional frameworks of reception of non-elite vernacular and popular art forms in the contemporary art world. The paper employs the concept of "autographics" as proposed by Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti, which suggests a form of engagement with the modes and materiality of representation, the techniques of production, the colours, styles and textures in the art form as necessary means of signification of the self in graphic life writings. The paper attempts to show how these graphic works resist reading and translation into a single medium and instead divert our attention towards the sensorial experience of engaging with graphic life narratives.

Keywords: Graphic Life Writing, Autographics, Folk Art, Memory, Graphic Narrative

Tara Books is an artist's collective and publisher of graphic fiction and non-fiction, based in the coastal city of Chennai, in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. They are known for their experimental and innovative ways of storytelling, deploying not just the synergy between the word and pictures, but also by exploring the material qualities of the book object itself. Based on

the ideas of equal representation of cultural workers involved in the production of the book, whether it is the graphic designer or the illustrator or the professionals involved in the printing and book binding, the collective has been offering its alternative conception of publishing as an artistic process, and the book as a cultural artefact, not limited to its role as a container of text (Wolf “For Tara Books”). Gita Wolf, the founder of the publishing house and the artists’ collective has insisted that the books produced by them must and should be seen in totality as a work of art (Wolf “Tara Books” 80). By bringing into effect, high values of production, fine-printing techniques, book-binding craftsmanship and paratextual devices that indicate the uniqueness and innovativeness of the work, the collective has been able to situate itself within the field of cultural production, that constitutes contemporary art world. The books produced by the collective have been discussed both in terms of popular culture as well as in terms of high-art production (see Parsons “Publishing for Social Change” and Byspalko “The Book as Democratic Art Object”). The ambiguity concerning the genre and the intended readership – of some of the graphic works produced by the collective - whether the concerned books should be read as crossover children’s picturebooks or as artists’ books that are deceptively simple-looking but intended for mature audience adds to the transformational potential of these works. Books like *The London Jungle Book* and *Drawing from the City*, cleverly juxtapose the popular and the fine art, the child reader and the adult reader, the artefact and art as such. In one of the works published by the collective, the founders of the collective proposed that the pages of the book be seen as the walls of the museum – the book as a picture gallery (Wolf et al. “Beginnings” 15)– enabling diverse modes of engagement with the art, made possible due to the multimodal and sensorial process of touching, viewing and reading a book.

The Memory Work of the Artists

Through their collaboration with museums and other institutions for public display of art, the collective aims to intervene into the contemporary politics of display and exhibition of works of non-elite artists and cultural work produced by professionals such as designers, illustrators and graphic artists. The collective interprets their publishing practice as inherently political in its involvement in the production of graphic literature employing works of under-represented artists, contextualising the production of the art work, offering alternative frameworks to the readers for experiencing the artists’ work and questioning the values and meanings embedded in the mainstream art discourse regarding the categories and value-judgments to which such works are usually subjected. While, the materiality of the media and the mediation of the art in the works produced by Tara Books will fall outside the scope of the present article, I shall focus on the process of memorialising, especially the practice of “memory work,” as outlined in one of their brief monograph, *Between Memory and Museum: A Dialogue with Folk and Tribal Artists* (2016), on how the non-elite or folk, tribal and popular artists themselves engage with the institutions and frameworks of display that in turn shape their own cultural identity, artistic practice and means of sustenance. Though written from the perspective of the research

undertaken by the collective to gain insights into the artists' own understanding of the cultural institution of the museum, the concept of "memory work" also resonates with the nature of the art work in graphic life narratives produced by the collective. In the paper, I shall argue that the framework of memory work and memorialising provides an opportunity to study the embodied landscape that the art represents, but also the means through which the agency and identity of the artists are created and negotiated. The emphasis on memory, in the context of the tribal and folk artists, also brings to fore how the artists situate themselves within the community and their allegiances to the art tradition they seem to identify with. More importantly, the framework brings to attention the processes of mediation and creative reconstruction through the memory work of the artists, which is in some senses central to understanding some of these art forms. In the book, *Between Memory and Museum*, Gita Wolf, Arun Wolf and V. Geetha write:

The process involved what we could call "memory work" a way of reconstructing communal memory. This kind of recall of the past is generally associated with oral storytelling, which repeats well-known narratives but updates them for contemporary listener. Memory work through art is unusual. The viewer needs to bring very different associations to work: it requires an exercise of imagination, and often does not have verbal equivalents. The link with past is through traditional elements of style, but the themes the images explore are entirely new. The memory work the artists were engaged in was radical in another sense: it was anchored in a lived sense of community and culture, but was actively looking forward. (9)

The emphasis on community arts and past tradition in the context of tribal and folk artists is not new. Scholars working in the field of the emergent urban graphic literature, especially the ones produced in collaboration with tribal and folk artists have struggled with the idea of balancing the traditional aspect of the artistic form and the individuality of the artist reflected in the form of innovations and creative self-expressions in the art form (see Menozzi "Woven into a Song", Nayar "Literature (Now) Contains Graphic Language", etc.). The difference between the oral storytelling performance and the textual performance within a print based graphic media which present new problems of hybridisation, adaptation and mediation make it difficult to conceptualise the artistic practice of the artists. Roma Chatterji, who has written at length on the artistic practice of tribal and folk artists, especially in the contemporary times of transnational production of art, mediations and adaptations through the use of new emerging technologies and presence of novel opportunities for performances, writes, that "a middle ground" is required between the two positions - "neither rendering folk [and tribal] artists as mute vessels incapable of self-reflexivity or conceptual thought, nor treating them as coterminous with art practitioners in the modern art world" ("Repetition, Improvisation, Tradition" 100). Rather than situating the artistic practice firmly within the community tradition or celebrating the work of the artist as an individual genius, she offers "a notion of artistic agency that is multiple and synthetic rather than autonomous and subjective, conceptualized through an elaboration of the work process which

allows us to think of artists as embodied through their practices rather than their finished artworks” (100). Following on the heels of Gilles Deleuze, she outlines a framework where the agency, novelty and individuality of the artist emerges not as a result of the individual creative disposition but through a series of embodied practices that bring into play the past memories, the skills acquired through repetitive work, the present contextual conditions and; the mode and medium selected for the work. In another sense, rather than focussing on the art work, and the various spheres of values and meanings attributed to the art object, she directs our attention towards the artistic process, as a coming together of diverse practices, forces, effects and situations, through which the artistic subjectivity of the individual is also filtered. The role of triggered memory as such is a crucial element in the instantiation of artistic process. Through recent works on memory studies, it has been made amply clear that memory is not a fixed entity, it is an “activity” and is distributed over “several different [human] capacities” (Foster 23). Further, scholars have emphasised on the reconstructive nature of memory, which implies that the recollection of past events are related to the present contextual conditions of the individual along with his or her implied intention in recalling the memory (Bartlett *Remembering*). There is both a subjective element to the practice of remembering, as much as there are limitations imposed on account of the material conditions and context of remembering. Memory work then encapsulates the processual, contingent, mediated and contextual nature of the artistic practice, that in certain senses describe the nature of the work produced in the graphic narratives by some of the tribal and folk artists. It aligns with the conceptual framework formulised by Chatterji, in taking a middle ground, that is neither completely devoted to a communal or tradition-based reading of the art form, nor does it securely find itself within the individuality of the practitioner, but is rather located somewhere between the two extremes. Moreover, the emphasis on the term “work” shifts the attention away from the cultural artefact or the reified commodity of the art object or even the abstract notion of the text to focus on the “embodied practice” of creating the art.

Further, in the context of the works dealt with in the present paper, *The London Jungle Book* by Bhajju Shyam and *Drawing from the City* by Tejubehan memory figures as a recurrent theme in the narratives. Similar to the observations made by Hillary Chute with respect to the underground-scene of graphic narratives produced by women in the last few decades in US, the graphic narrative by Bhajju Shyam and Tejubehan “revisit their pasts, retrace events, and literally repicture them” (Chute 2). They insist on the duality within the act of looking, where the figure of the artists appear “as both an object of looking and a creator of looking and sight” (Chute 2). Even though, the works included in the study are collaborative projects and not produced by a single auteur as was the case of the graphic narratives studied by Chute, and they radically differ in terms of the role, status and reception accorded to the graphic narratives by women artists in US, the work by Bhajju Shyam and Tejubehan is aimed at exploring “the inbuilt duality of the form—its word and image cross-discursivity—to stage dialogues among versions of self, underscoring the importance of an ongoing, unclosed project of self-representation and

self-narration” (Chute 5). Both the artists make use of the tropes of movement, embodied spaces and history in their narrative as outlined by Michel de Certeau in order to problematise the location of the self in the narrative but also the relationship between the self and the place called home (117-18). As noted in the case of Tejubehan’s work by Roma Chatterji, and which can similarly be applied to Shyam’s book that it is not a matter of coincidence that artists from tribal and folk communities choose to represent their urban experiences, focussing on modern means of transportation, high rise buildings and the urban lifestyles of the citizenry (Chatterji “Dotting the Paper, the Town”). The recurrent allusion of the city and the city life is deployed in order to mark their own “contemporaneity,” but also reflect on the pivotal role played by the urban spaces, markets and buyers in promoting and providing opportunities to the artists (Chatterji “Dotting the Paper, the Town”). Often the city narratives of the artists get translated into a contrastive study of two different worlds – the rural and the urban. Both Bhajju Shyam and Tejubehan’s works debunk such assumptions.

Shyam’s travelogue describes his experience of visiting London for the first time, for a commissioned work. The narrative not only describes the nostalgia and longing of the artist for his home, but also the humorous and absurd situations the artist found himself in. As a member of the Pardhan-Gond community, from the village of Patangarh and a practicing Pardhan-Gond artist located in Bhopal, in the state of Madhya Pradesh in India, Shyam brings a diverse range of metaphors, symbols, icons and ornamental stylisations into his art work to interpret his own experience of the vast unfamiliar metropolis. There is an attempt at exaggeration and fabrication by the artist to provide a very focalised view of the city, where the Pardhan-Gond icons, idioms, narratives and modes of stylisation are synthesised with the architectural sites, art works, popular modes of transport, important city icons, etc related to the city of London. The result of the “thought-images” (“How London became a Jungle”) as Shyam calls his art in the book, is not to further emphasise on the differences in the cultural identity of the artist and the citizens with whom he interacts, rather it disturbs and dislocates the boundaries between the self and the other. Similarly, Tejubehan’s graphic life narrative recounts the changing circumstances of the artist’s family that leads to their migration to the city, the artist’s marriage, the chance encounter with the Baroda artist and activist Haku Shah, and the limitless potential that the artist envisages for herself through her art. Tejubehan belongs to the Jogi community which is classified as “Other Backward Caste” in the state of Rajasthan, and like the Pardhan-Gonds of Patangarh, the community to which Shyam belongs, were traditional itinerant singers, storytellers and performers.² Though there are wide differences in how the two communities were situated in the past and the circumstances under which the art tradition emerged (see Vajpeyi “Jangarh Kalam”). The dislocation and movement of the artist not just spatially but also metaphorically from the traditional domestic sphere to the public sphere where along with her husband she came to be recognised as a practicing artist and laying the foundation of an art tradition which is now practiced by other members of the family, indicates the different hybrid subjectivities of the artist as a woman, as a woman and homemaker from an underprivileged background and belonging to

a patriarchal community to an independent self-taught artist of repute and published author. The textual narrative in the book while supplements the art work, they in no way interfere with the viewing experience or anchor the picture in the traditional sense of the term. Instead, as explained in another context by the members of the collective, the book is “set in the form of a dialogue among three voices: an image, the artist’s commentary, and our [editors’] narrative” (Wolf et al. “Beginnings” 14). It is suggested that there are multiple entries into the graphic narrative, with the different voices working together in the form of a musical composition (Wolf et al. “Beginnings” 14). The statement also points at the different approaches used by the collective in the production of the art work and in framing the identity and authorship of the artists. As noted by Roma Chatterji regarding both the “mode of presentation” and “mode of representation” in *Drawing from the City*, the high value of production, the layout and the arrangement of words and images, and the dialogic exchange between the two modes of communication in itself becomes “a part of a larger political discourse” (Chatterji “Dotting the Paper, the Town”). In the case of *Drawing from the City*, the publication of the book went into two different editions – the handmade edition and the riso print edition. The handmade series of books produced by Tara Books are one of a kind. The books are printed, assembled and bound manually through a time-taking and resource intensive process. The screen-printing technique used for the handmade series, requires the application of single colour on the sheet, one at a time, manually for every colour on a single page (Ramanathan “The Making of a Book by Hand” 21). This results in vibrant prints, with a tactile-embossed quality of the images, which are not only beautiful to behold but also create a sensory experience for the reader who is able to touch and feel the art on the pages of the book. The technique also heightens the detailed nature of the work done by the artist using the minute patterns, motifs and designs almost resembling the delicate filigree work done on gold and silver ornaments. On the other hand, the layout and arrangement of the words and images in Shyam’s *The London Jungle Book* mirrors the pattern of Shyam’s storytelling “short pithy tales and anecdotes held together by the larger narrative of Shyam’s journey” (Ramanathan “Folk Author” 135). Rathna Ramanathan, the graphic designer for Shyam’s book explains: “the images did not function as editorial illustration but more as authorial illustration, having their own individual voice and a sense of authorship. Therefore, it seemed fitting to envision the book as a conceptual gallery space, with the pages framing the images and captions” (Ramanathan “Folk Author” 139). Ramanathan in fact, devotes a considerable amount of time to elaborate on the concept of “authorial illustration” and why it should be seen as different from other modes of illustration.

Furthermore, the paratextual devices in the two books such as the epilogue, blurb, jacket cover, biographical notes, etc accord cultural capital, bestow recognition and value on the works of the authors, while at the same time legitimise the cultural identity and authority of the artist in representing her or his cultural heritage and the alternative perspectives that they bring about to the mainstream society (Daozhi 380). Hence, not just the mode of the narrative but also the form of presentation, the discourse and the paratextual devices surrounding the graphic narratives aim

to materialize the memories of the artists. Thus, I have retained the term “graphic life narrative” for these set of works because in spite of the collaborative mode of production where the art was provided by the artists and the text was sourced by the editors from the translation of oral commentaries by the artists, the texts strategically emphasise on the “memory work” done by the artists, whether it is mediated and adapted into another media or filtered through the different stages of publishing, printing and circulation.

By the Hand of the Artist

So far, we have not touched upon the actual art works included in the narrative or talked about the different techniques, strategies, figurations and representations of the self in the graphic narrative. Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti, noted in the introductory essay of the special issue on graphic life narratives of the journal *Biography* that the material signification of the self in a narrative can take diverse forms and complex representations across available modes and media (“Self-Regarding Art”). As such, scholars working in the field of life writing and life narrative need to be well versed with textual, graphic, aural, oral and material representations of the self, but they also need to be aware of the various ways in which these modes of communication interact and intersect to signify the self (Whitlock and Poletti vi). Any act of signification employs not just the material conditions of its articulation but also an active participation and engagement of the reader in reading the sign as a representation of the authorial self. Whether it is the grain in the voice of the playback singer or the heavy brush strokes and specific choice of colour variations in the painting, or the selection of certain words and references in the text, or even the deliberate attempt at recording the irregularities and errors in a DIY project – the signs that constitute the figure of the authorial self are present everywhere. These signs are in another sense, left as traces of the changing and evanescent identity of the subject, preserving a moment in the transition of the self from the past to a future self. The notion of “autographics” thus offered by Whitlock and Poletti offer to understand the material practices and reading strategies under which the sign of the self is sustained (Whitlock and Poletti v). The term captures the process of signification, which is neither complete nor fixed, as it changes depending on the reading strategies and translation of the signs from one mode into another.

Both the graphic works undertaken for the study attempt to emphasise on the artistic practice of the artists. *The London Jungle Book* in fact, on various instances discusses the author’s choice of visual metaphors, the technique of representation, the use of certain motifs and the visual vocabulary of the artist. There are enlarged sections of the art work in the book which provide a close-up of the outlines, borders, shading techniques, brush strokes, choice of colours and intricate details of the artist. The reader can almost trace the hand movement of the artist, notice the breaks or joints in the outlines, observe the spilling of colour outside the border and even point at the places where the hand of the artist trembled or hesitated while working on the art. In the case of *Drawing from the City*, the title of the book refers both to the drawings made by the artist as well as to the act of obtaining, extracting or drawing out from the city - the

inspiration for the work. Tejubehan uses black pen drawings with dense patterning, stippling, hatching and elaborate details in her art. The time-consuming technique provides a sense of texture and optical illusion in her art. It also makes her canvas pulsate and acquire a sensation of movement and activity. She populates the entire canvas with figures of men and women, buildings, trees, vehicles, fields, streams, etc with virtually no area of the canvas left blank. There is a childlike simplicity to her drawing style, though the simplicity often masks the profundity of the meaning behind the images. As was the case with Shyam, there is no use of perspective, or light and shade or any attempt at realism; rather the fabulous nature of the representations creates a surrealistic, out-of-the-world experience. Ordinary things are imbued with fantastical properties and the most commonplace object assume an extraordinary luminosity. The reader cannot leave the book without noticing the sheer amount of effort, time and resources involved in the production of the art work by the artists. The high production quality of the books further underscores the dexterous labour behind every stroke or line in the work. In his analysis, of the work Filippo Menozzi comments: “Drawing is presented by Teju herself as a kind of ‘magic,’ which is opposed to all forms of labour and occupation she had known before.... Drawing is different because it is still a form of labour – she has to draw for a living – but it is, at the same time, a kind of work with extraordinary potentialities” (Menozzi “Graphics of the Multitude” 11). Menozzi seems to opine that Tejubehan’s art should not be reduced to a biographical fact or an instance of commercialization of the work of a non-elite artist from the Third World, rather one should conceive of the art in its transformative potential for articulating a new kind of politics of the multitude. In my reading of the text, the autobiographical, the commercial, the political and the transformational aspect of the text are not distinct but rather they transgress the different spheres of meaning and valuation. The effort of the publishers in articulating the concept of the memory work, the creative labour of the artist and the signifying practices that assembled under the aegis of graphic life narrative supplement my argument that it is not the art as such but the artistic practice of the artists that hold a potential for transformation of how the identity, memory and work of the artists is conceived and evaluated.

Conclusion

The paper attempted to delineate a framework for engaging with the work of non-elite artists, especially folk and tribal artist who seem to have discovered a new readership and novel sites of performance within the emergent field of cultural production of graphic literature. The concept of “memory work” as articulated by the members of the collective at Tara Books seem to capture the traditional-skill based practice of community arts as well as the innovations made by the individual artists who find themselves experimenting with new media and techniques. The contemporary debates and discussions on the works of these artists often seem to ground their discourse on the art object, whether it is seen as a commercial object, cultural artefact or unique work of art. The paper argues that the by taking into account the memory work of the artist, one

can instead focus on the artistic process rather than the art object as such, which provides further opportunities for the researcher to study the modes of engagement, mediations, negotiations and signifying practices through which the identity and work of the artists emerges. The signifying practice of reading the self in the work of the art cannot be separated from its material practices of production of the sign and the reading strategies that engage with the signs to create a narrative of the authorial self. The emphasis on the work and the artistic practice, the paper argues, provides an opportunity to renew our engagement with the changing conditions of the production of art and the values and meanings ascribed to the different genres of the art work.

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Building the Future through the Past: Biopics and the Construction of a Queer History

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Abstract: The paper examines four biopics: “Markova,” “Piñero,” “Before Night Falls,” and “Beautiful Boxer,” which reconstruct the lives of four influential yet controversial individuals in the gay community: Walter Dempster, Jr. (Philippines), Miguel Piñero (Puerto Rico), Reinaldo Arenas (Cuba), and Parinya Charoenphol (Thailand). Each participated in important events in the history of the gay community, and the filmic representations of their lives contribute to the elaboration of a filmic timeline of gay history. They include Dempster’s exploitation as a “comfort gay” by Japanese soldiers during World War II, Piñero’s odyssey as a gay Neorican pimp, prisoner, and poet, Arenas’s gay adventures in a notorious Castro prison and his exploits as a gay outlaw, novelist, and AIDS patient, and Charoenphol’s struggle in becoming the first Thai transgender athlete to attain superstar status both nationally and internationally. My paper studies, from an international perspective, four contributions to the construction of a filmic history of the experiences of gay men in four periods and four nations that resist the notion that “queers” do not figure prominently in history. As I will show, each man resists the “chrononormativity” described by Elizabeth Freeman on various levels, first by being gay, then by “betraying” the “respectable” career paths marked out for them by society. These “betrayals,” however, will lead to each man making singular contributions to his local culture as well as to universal queer cultural history.

Keywords: Queer History, Biopics, *Markova*, *Piñero*, *Before Night Falls*, *Beautiful Boxer*

It is axiomatic that human beings create communities by establishing bonds based upon common experience and mutual understanding. Isolation produces a sense of marginality,

whereas recognition that one shares feelings, desires, events, joys, and/or struggles with others creates an awareness of similitude, a continuity, and, thus, a history. Scholarship has gradually been constructing histories of the gay community through the gathering and use of oral and written histories, memoirs, and correspondence, which have been made available in the form of articles and books, as well as through the collection of historical artifacts. With the increasing turn away from print and towards visual media—especially film—LGBTQI scholarship is now faced with the additional challenge of documenting gay history on celluloid or digitally. While the media employed may differ from print, source materials remain the same but now require the intermediaries of the producer, the screenwriter, the product -- the screenplay --, and the director. Nonetheless, the process of constructing the history of the gay community remains the same.

This study will consider four “biopics” (i.e., “biographical motion pictures”) that have contributed to a filmic history of the experiences of men in four periods and four nations, all of which resist the notion that “queers” do not figure prominently in history: *Markova: Comfort Gay* (Philippines, Directed by Gil M. Portes, 2000), *Before Night Falls* (United States, Directed by Julian Schnabel, 2000), *Beautiful Boxer* (Thailand, Directed by Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2003), and *Piñero* (United States, Directed by Leon Ichaso, 2001). The films seek to reconstruct the lives of four influential yet controversial individuals in the gay community: Walter Dempster, Jr. (Philippines), Reinaldo Arenas (Cuba), Parinya Charoenphol (Thailand), and Miguel Piñero (Puerto Rico/United States). Each man participated in important events in the history of the gay community, and the filmic representations of their lives contribute to the elaboration of a filmic timeline of gay history to include the study of Dempster’s exploitation as a “comfort gay” by Japanese soldiers during World War II, Arenas’s gay adventures in a notorious Castro prison and his exploits as a gay outlaw, novelist, and AIDS patient from 1959 until his death in 1992, Charoenphol’s struggle in becoming the first Thai transgender athlete to attain superstar status both nationally and internationally, especially during the late 1980s, and Piñero’s odyssey as a gay Neorican poet, prisoner, and playwright from the 1960s to the 1990s. It is interesting to note that all four films were released within three years of each other (2000-2003), attesting to the growing interest within the film industry in the creation of gay historical works on film. For such as mission, the “biopic” was particularly appropriate, as it not only focused on a story of “human interest” but also required the incorporation of historical details to give meaning to those human lives.

The Demonization of Homosexuals: Driven Underground

It was not until the coining of the neologism “homosexuality” by Karl Maria Benkert in 1869 that a rigid distinction began to be drawn between sexual acts performed by members of the same sex and the categorization of individuals according to their perceived sexual preferences (C. White 4). With this, the inception of a systematic opposition between the heteronormative

and those acts and individuals which were now perceived in the Christian West not only as morally repugnant but also as deviant, diseased, and politically subversive, a true barrier was raised that was meant to snuff out any attempt to legitimate the homonormative (Spencer 10). If, before the establishment of this seemingly impassible chasm, those who had harbored same-sex desires had dreamt of a refuge of acceptance, they had generally not dared to express their wishes except in highly-encoded images. Although it is as old as humanity itself, homosexuality and its long history have often been rejected or ignored by majority populations in an attempt to delegitimize the LGBTQI community.

The absence until recently of written histories of the gay experience has been interpreted by some as “proof” that no such phenomenon exists. Yet, as Benedict Anderson noted in the case of nations, and as can be posited of LGBTQI individuals the world over, there has existed a drive towards union that, however nebulous, is unending and compelling:

[I]t is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (7)

What has been lacking until the second half of the twentieth century have been scholarly attention and public awareness of the size and geographical extension of the LGBTQI community. Debates rage between “essentialists” and “constructionists,” who propose, alternatively, that homosexuality has always been either biologically and/or psychologically inherent in a minority of humanity or that it is a culturally-specific conceptual category applied to certain actors and their acts (Greenberg 485). What no one disputes, however, is that history plays an essential, although different, role in helping members of the LGBTQI community to imagine the potential community to which they belong, as Anderson has observed: “In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). The role of the historian now becomes critical in offering members of the LGBTQI community evidence of gay life in the past, thereby lessening the sense of isolation and providing examples of those who have shared something of the same experience. Whereas heteronormative society has sought to medicalize and criminalize same-sex desires and actions, LGBTQI scholarship has stressed that what is at stake is not a theoretical determination of the origins of homosexuality but rather the recognition and welfare of LGBTQI human beings, as Louis Crompton has so poignantly observed:

Whatever the vocabulary, two elements are present – the sexual fact and the possibility of human love and devotion. For many centuries in Europe, homosexuality was conceived

principally as certain sexual acts. This was because it was viewed theologically and in the light of the legal system this theology spawned – that is, as a sin and a capital crime. But we must not be complicit in this dehumanization. These “sodomites” were human beings with whom the modern gay may claim brotherhood and the modern lesbian recognize as sisters. To divide history in two in 1869 at the moment when the word “homosexual” was coined is to deny this bond. To adopt Michel Foucault’s view that the homosexual did not exist “as a person” until this time is to reject a rich and terrible past. (xiv)

It is with this in mind that the creators of “biopics” of gay individuals have undertaken the task of chronicling the lives of certain individuals who have played significant roles worthy of recollection by members of the LGBTQI community.

The Advent of Gay Histories and the Emergence of the “Biopic”

Film is particularly important in this educational enterprise of bringing positive examples of homosexuality and same-sex love to light, as it has the power to transform minds and imaginations. Speaking of the “Stalin Myth,” critic André Bazin has captured the vast potential of film:

The cinema is in its essence as incontestable as Nature and History—not only because cinema’s meaning and persuasiveness is incomparably greater than any other means of propaganda, but especially because the cinematic image is other, seeming completely superimposable with reality. A portrait of Petain or de Gaulle or Stalin, even if it’s blown up to 100 meters square, decomposes as it composes—in the end, it engages nothing. However, a cinematic reconstitution of Stalin, especially when it is centered on him, is enough to define forever his place and meaning in the world—enough to fix his essence irrevocably. (39)

Just as in the case of print media, this is the goal of cinema: to preserve forever the positive images of the LGBTQI individuals that not only attest to their actions but also serve as models for future generations. Dennis Bingham offers a comprehensive summary of the “biopic” in the creation of the history of a community:

The biopic narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of a personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person, or to be a certain type of person, or, as with Andy Kaufman, to be that person’s audience. The appeal of the biopic lies in seeing an actual person who did something interesting in life, known mostly in public, transformed into a character. Private

behaviors and actions and public events as they might have been in the person's time are formed together and interpreted dramatically. At the heart of the biopic is the urge to dramatize actuality and find in it the filmmaker's own version of truth. The function of the biopic subject is to live the spectator a story. The genre's charge ... is to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology, one way or another, and to show why he or she belongs there. (10)

As historiographer Hayden White has so convincingly proven in his now classic work *Tropics of Discourse* (1985), it is impossible to construct a completely "objective" history. Rather, histories, just like literary narratives, are the product of a selection of facts, creative ordering of those facts, the use of tropes, and the crafting of a narrative. "Biopics," like their historical and literary counterparts, in many ways represent the perceptions and desires of their creators as much as they highlight the factual elements of their subjects' lives.

Markova: Comfort Gays

Gil M. Portes' *Markova: Comfort Gays* (2000) is a filmic *Bildungsroman* that traces Walter Dempster, Jr.'s (a.k.a., "Walterina Markova," 1924-2005) development as a transgender Filipino and the last surviving "comfort gay" who had been pressed into sexual servitude by invading Japanese soldiers during the occupation of the Philippines from 1942 to 1945. The winner of numerous awards, including the prestigious Brussels International Film Festival's "Prix de la Meilleure Interprétation" (2001), as well as "Official Selection" at the Brussels International Film Festival (2001), the Seattle Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (2002), and the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (2002), *Markova* has been dubbed by Filipino critic J. Neil C. Garcia to be among the most outstanding gay films produced in the Philippines because of their concrete local grounding: "The more remarkable of these films are those that locate themselves firmly in the national social context, and force a rethinking of so-called traditional Filipino values, gender and sexual identities, heroism, and the political and imaginative act of 'telling history' itself" (424). Adding to *Markova's* gravitas was the film's protagonist -- Dolphy (Rodolfo Vera Quizon, Sr., 1928-2012) --, one of the most celebrated contemporary actors in the Philippines, who was nominated for "Best Actor" by the FAMAS and Gawad Urian Awards in 2001, and "Best Performance" by the Young Critics Circle in the same year. Strong performances were also rendered by Eric Quizon and Jeffrey "Epi" Quizon, the recipients of various awards, who played "Walterina" in middle-age and in youth, respectively. Also of note was the performance of Loren Legarda, a highly-regarded journalist, environmentalist, and senator, who played herself as an interviewer of "Walterina," and his experiences as a "comfort gay."

Of the many films produced by the Philippines, *Markova* is unique in being a historical chronicle of the experiences of a member of the LGBTQI community. What is more, it is the

only film in the world to document the experiences of “comfort gays” in Asia, and specifically in the Philippines during World War II, as well as documenting many of the attitudes of Filipinos towards homosexuals over the period of the 1930s to the 1990s. For this reason, *Markova* will be the central focus of this study. The film is especially significant given that the Philippines was bombed by the Japanese more than any other Asian nation, and suffered the greatest number of civilian deaths at the hands of the Japanese during World War II. As the film demonstrates, Philippine society, although it has generally been recognized as among the most tolerant of homosexuals in the world, has still been far from treating members of the LGBTQI community with equality and respect (Whitam and Mathy 144-146; Tan 119; Itiel 10).ⁱ

Screenplay writer Clodualdo Del Rey, Jr., makes impressive use of flashback and stage performance, and begins the story *in medias res*, with Dempster awakening from a bad dream of an encounter with Japanese soldiers; he then makes a simple declarative statement: “My name is Walterina Markova, 73 years old. Comfort gay. This is the story of my life ... one bad dream ... A nightmare ... but every bit real.” Walterina begins to tell his story; he is living in the “Home for the Golden Gays”. “Never heard of it?” he asks, “There are many things you don’t know.” He then proceeds to recount the history of the home, which was established by the transgender journalist, activist, and City Councilor Justo Justo in 1996 as a place of refuge for aging gay men. Going down to breakfast, Walterina hears the young and highly-effeminate server calling the residents to the table: “Hey you antiquated fags! Food!” Walterina rebukes the youth sharply, telling him to “call them—nicely—the Flower Queens.” The server, who has been justly chastised, sarcastically calls out, “Oh most beauteous gays ... Breakfast is ready!”, and walks off in a fit. Thus, Walterina early establishes his role as an instructor of the next generation of gays.

Shortly after, Walterina and his companions watch a report about the plight of Filipino “comfort women” at the hands of Japanese soldiers during World War II. The director of the home notices that Walterina is disturbed and knows that it is related to the documentary. He later seeks out the deeply religious Dempster in a local church, and Walterina explains that he would like to tell the story of Filipino “comfort gays” to the world, just as Nana Rosa has told the story of “comfort women.” Anxious to help, the manager contacts a friend, the noted journalist Loren Legarda, who did the story on the “comfort women,” and invites her to interview “Markova.” When the journalist arrives at the home she asks for “Mrs. Markova,” and cannot understand when Walterina appears. In a flashback, Walterina recalls growing up gay and the treatment he received in his family home. Notable was the contempt his brother Robert showed for him, a hatred that grew more intense over time and which often devolved into violence, a phenomenon common in the Philippines among male siblings (Tan 119). In Walterina’s case, his brother even arranged for him to be raped by a family friend, underscoring that even though homosexuality is often tolerated in the Philippines this does not preclude the possibility of violation and physical abuse.

Much of the film focuses on the bonds established between Walterina and four transgender friends, Carmen, Anita, Sophie, and Minerva. Living, working, and engaging in adventures together, these gays function as entertainers and “call girls,” and constitute a small community of like-minded individuals. During the Japanese occupation, the five “girls” go to a nightclub dressed in their most alluring evening gowns, and there they are wined and dined by Japanese officers. Eventually, they are brought back to a swanky hotel for further adventures. When the ranking Japanese officer realizes, in the midst of foreplay, that Walterina is a man and not a woman, Markova and the other “girls” are put into military trucks, brought to a warehouse on the outskirts of the city, and repeatedly raped by soldiers. This represents one of the most important moments in the film, and illustrates that “comfort gays” were subjected to the same violence, torture, and sexual degradation as “comfort women,” and, as *Markova* also shows, transgender gays did their part in the struggle for liberation, often paying a high price. Carmen was tortured and put on public display by the Japanese for theft, Sophie died in prison, and Minerva was never seen again.

After the war, Carmen, Anita, and Walterina formed another singing group, and now performed for the many American servicemen who were stationed in the Philippines. This was the age of Philippine independence; normalcy was returning, and relative peace and freedom returned. But this was not to last. The film then moves forward to the time when the AIDS epidemic broke out in the Philippines, ravaging the gay community and spreading fear everywhere. During this time Walterina had retired from stage performance but was employed as a make-up artist in theaters and on some movie sets, and also worked as a dance coach for young Filipina’s preparing to go to Japan as top-dollar call girls. What is more, having dodged the bullet of contracting AIDS, Walterina performed corporal works of mercy for some of his ailing “sisters,” and especially consoled Carmen, who in her old age needed triple-bypass surgery but could not afford it. With age, Walterina also became increasingly pious, spending many hours praying the rosary in various churches, and becoming something of the “grande dame” of the neighborhood.

Markova has been highly significant in the construction of the gay history of the Philippines on numerous levels. As an aged Filipino who had endured many years of domestic and foreign oppression, Walterina symbolized the strength and resilience of both the Filipino and the LGBTQI communities, as highlighted in everyday occurrences and in moments of crisis such as the Japanese occupation and the advent of the age of AIDS. Still living the horrors of past abuse many decades after World War II, Walterina struggles to make the world accept his story and recognize the reality of who he truly is. One of the Filipina call girls preparing to go to Japan makes a very perceptive observation: “If nobody listened to the comfort women, why’d they listen to you? Now they’re dying one-by-one. Comfort gays ... wow, that’s fantastic!” The interviewer, Leona Legarda, echoes the same sentiment: “But what if nobody believes you?” And this is precisely the purpose of the film: to remember that members of the LGBTQI

community are just as much a part of history as are others, even though majority populations would oftentimes prefer to obscure their presence and participation in world events. Walterina asks Legarda if she believes him; she hesitates and says that she still needs to investigate, which provokes a bitter response from Dempster: “Only one thing will set a person free – the truth. How will you know the truth if you refuse to believe my story?” With this statement, Walterina highlights another of the film’s central messages: majority populations that seek to blot out gays from history not only steal true freedom from the LGBTQI community, they also choose to live in the bondage of lies by not accepting the reality of history. Walterina snatches the tape that Legarda has been using to record the interview, at which she exclaims, “That belongs to me!” Walterina retorts, “This is *my* life! Come back for it when you believe already [sic]!”

Dempster goes off to look through an album of photos of himself across the decades. In each he sees himself dressed as a woman, and crying, after each one he utters a different derogatory term: “Homosexual ... Faggot ... Queer ... Queen ... Gay ... You are being true to yourself ... but all they see ... is a sham.” After this, he makes himself up and says, “I am Walterina Markova.” Dressed in a long purple and blue evening gown, with a frizzy purple wig and a gaudy long necklace, Walterina waltzes about a stage, and is soon joined by mid-life Walterina, and then by the young Walterina, all dressed in the same purple and blue gown. Perhaps coincidentally, these are the colors of Lent (a time of penance and suffering leading up to death on the Cross and Resurrection) and Advent (a time of preparation and anticipation before the new life of Christ’s birth) in the Roman-Catholic liturgical cycles. Finally they all dance together and are blended back into the aged Walterina, who throws up *her* arms, and smiles. Walterina has at long last come to be at peace with *herself*. She has told the world the truth about her life; now, it is up to the world to accept or reject that truth. What is more, Walterina has established the fact that there were, indeed, “comfort *gays*,” and that there has been a land-standing and long-suffering LGBTQI in the Philippines for many decades. Screenwriter Clodualdo Del Mundo, Jr. has made a powerful statement about the suffering that Walter Dempster, Jr. experienced over decades which led up to the birth of the truly free “Walterina Markova.”

Before Night Falls

Beginning with his recollections of a childhood of poverty, violence, and homosexual yearnings, *Before Night Falls* is the filmic rendition of Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas’s (1943-1990) autobiography of the same title (in Spanish, *Antes que anochezca*). Raised on a poor country farm with his single mother, a grandmother, an ignorant and violent grandfather, and several aunts, Arenas recognized his homosexual desires very early in life, but was aware of the rigid strictures of *machismo*. In Cuba, the sexual code of *machismo* was more about public image than reality, such that, in Arenas’s words, “It is a rare man who has not had sexual relations with another man”; but these relations always had to be undertaken in private (as

quoted by Lumsden 32). The sexual act performed by two men was of itself inconsequential; men's sex drives were considered to be so insatiable that almost any form of satisfaction was considered understandable (Lumsden 31; Bejel 144). Despite all of the invectives of the Roman Catholic Church, the practices of *machismo* are deeply rooted in Cuban culture, and also govern the unspoken rules of same-sex relations:

To have sex with another man is not what identifies one as homosexual. For many Cubans, a man is homosexual only if he takes the passive receiving role. And a man is suspected of being homosexual only if his behavior is not macho: if he does not show interest in rough games, or is not physically strong and muscular; if he is gentle or quiet or perhaps has a nurturing sensibility to other people's feelings; if he does not care to control others or to posture and aggressively compete with his fellows. Then his behavior is seen as inferior, inadequate, and deficient; that is, it is labeled effeminate, the behavior of inferior, secondary people. (Leiner 22)

Given this cultural backdrop, *Before Night Falls* tells the tale of Arenas's (played by Javier Bardem) broken family life, his sexual exploits in the countryside, his early sensitivity to words and language, his desire to follow in the revolutionary path of Fidel Castro, and his deep wish to flee from to the city. In one of the most disturbing scenes of the film, the young Reinaldo's teacher goes to the farm and tells his grandfather that the boy has an extraordinary sensitivity for poetry. Enraged, the grandfather grabs his hatchet, slaps the boy on the back of the head, and storms out of the cabin. Passing trees on which Reinaldo has carved poetry, he comes to the tree with the most writing and hacks into it. From an early age, Arenas was made aware of the perception that any interest in poetry was believed by ignorant country folk to be a sign of effeminacy, if not an outright declaration of homosexuality. So great was the grandfather's shame that shortly thereafter he moved the entire family to the eastern city of Holguín.

Arriving in Holguín at just about the same time as Fidel Castro's revolutionary troops, the young Arenas believed that the new leader would bring not only political freedom to Cuba, but also social liberation for homosexuals. In the city, Arenas quickly entered into literary and homosexual social circles, and garnered several important awards for his writings. As *Before Night Falls* demonstrates, however, public attitudes towards homosexuals were hardening, especially after the definitive seizure of power by Fidel Castro and the proclamation by the regime of the birth of the "New Cuban Man," who was to be pure, virile, morally upstanding, and completely dedicated to the service of the Revolution. Homosexuals were quickly identified as being the antithesis of these values, and, as *Before Night Falls* shows through the events of Arenas's life, a strange dichotomy existed between homoeroticism and militarism; same-sex sexual relations were at once forbidden but at the same time actively pursued and even proliferated during the early years of the Revolution.

Imprisoned for “ideological deviation” Arenas was sent to El Morro, the Spanish colonial fort that had been converted by the Castro regime into a prison. There, he suffered multiple forms of torture, and was exposed to the various forms of “deviancy” that were being punished by the State, including homosexuality and transvestitism. Eventually released, Arenas was imprisoned again many times, almost always for “anti-social” activities, which was the Castro regime’s moniker for homosexual practices (Bejel 105-106). Finally, as part of Castro’s plan to purge Cuban of those who were “undesirable,” “antisocial,” and “scum,” Arenas was released as part of the 1980 Mariel flotilla in which 125,000 Cubans were launched to the United States (Bejel 107). *Before Night Falls* captures Arenas’s joy at finally being free – able to be openly gay – but, sadly, how he came to realize that the crushing demands of capitalist life could be just as confining and oppressive as the strictures of life in a Communist state. Even worse, Arenas was found to have contracted AIDS, leading to even greater personal despair and a sense of urgency in trying to finish his autobiography—*Before Night Falls (Antes que anochezca)*—before death carried him away. The film ends with scenes of Arenas committing suicide by overdosing on pills and large quantities of alcohol, followed by a reprise of the initial scene of the film, with Arenas as a baby, sitting naked in a deep hole in the dirt. “I am that unlikeable child,” Arenas says, “definitely unwanted, with the round dirty face, who before the giant street lights or under the grandames [sic] also illuminated or in front of the little girls that seem to levitate projects the insult of his dirty face.”

Beautiful Boxer

The partial life-story of Parinya Charoenphol, who was born to a very poor family in Northern Thailand, *Beautiful Boxer* portrays how “Nong Toom” – “Lil Sis Toom” (b. 1981) came to be one of the most celebrated *muai tai* fighters in Thailand. A form of martial arts that combines devastating kicks, clinching, lightning-fast punches, and wrestling, *muai tai* is the national sport of Thailand and has come to represent the very essential of Thai masculinity. From a very early age, Charoenphol knew that he was not like other boys, and embraced his femininity unabashedly, even hoping to have sex-change surgery from the first time that he learned of its possibility (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 227). He writes of the gentle spirit and love of nature that he remembers having since his youngest days, an aspect of this personality that is presented in the earliest scenes of the film:

I loved collecting flowers and often climbed up trees to collect the orchids clinging to their branches so that I could place the prettiest ones above my ears. I admired women with long, straight hair. I would wrap a towel around my head and pretend it was my hair. I would gently sway my head so that my imaginary mane could flow freely down my back. (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 227).

These desires to be a woman placed Charoenphol squarely in the Thai tradition of the *kathoei*, which, in traditional Thai culture, included “all forms of gender/sex variance,” but which, since the 1970s, has referred exclusively to “a person who is born male but subsequently enacts a feminine role (male transvestite) or undergoes a sex change operation (male-to-female transsexual)” (Sullivan and Jackson 16).

A chronicle of a life of struggle, *Beautiful Boxer* shows the hardships Charoenphol (played by Asanee Suwan) endured to help his family survive. After his mother was imprisoned unjustly due to local corruption, the boy assumed the care of his father, who had been severely injured, and also worked tirelessly until he was able to procure the release of his mother. Charoenphol both loved his mother and was inspired by her fortitude in the face of suffering, a lesson that was reinforced in his mind during his three years of service as a Buddhist monk. Although he ultimately turned to the violence of *muai tai*, Charoenphol, who donned make-up and lipstick when he fought, never forgot the teachings of endurance and benevolence professed by the Buddha. He comments wryly on the events of his life: “At the time, I didn’t fully recognize the irony of my situation: participating in such a masculine sport so that I could ultimately become more feminine” (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 233). As the film shows, preparing for each match the fighter performed the traditional dance called “*sao noi pra paeng*” (“girl putting on facial powder”) as a means of honoring his teachers (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 225). After defeating an opponent, Charoenphol kissed him, an action that was received by Thai audiences as both hilarious and terribly insulting to the loser. Yet, as the boxer notes in an interview, he performed the action “to show that I didn’t bear any ill feelings towards them” (Aldous and Sereemongkonpol 225).

When “Anaconda,” his first opponent in Bangkok, threatens to “crush Nong Toom’s chest over him,” the protagonist mildly responds, “This transvestite boxer has knocked out eighteen real men in the past twenty-two fights.” Later, at the “weigh-in” before the fight, a local approaches and says to Toom, “A real man should not be shy about letting others see his ‘thingie!’” The shrewd Charoenphol retorts, “Yes, and only sissies would flock to see what a real man has got.” “Nong Toom” goes on to defeat Anaconda soundly, curtsying to the thrills of the crowd and bringing himself one step closer to sex-change surgery. *Beautiful Boxer* concludes with a scene in which Charoenphol’s parents must give their consent for him to undergo the surgery. His father, who has never approved of his son’s feminine tendencies, finally agrees to sign the papers. Near the end of the film, in a scene reminiscent of *Markova*, seven Parinya Charoenphols, each from a period of his life from childhood to the present, wait for a bus. In the background, the interviewer asks, “One final question. Which is more difficult, being a woman or being a man?” Charoenphol replies profoundly, “It’s hard being a man. And it’s difficult being a woman. But the most difficult thing is trying not to forget who you really want to be.” As the door opens, the bottom of the dress and the gold shoes of the future Parinya, now fully a woman, move down the steps.

Beautiful Boxer concludes with a scene in which the transformed Charoenphol, now a woman, is making herself up in front of a large mirror. In the background, she is visited by the younger version of herself as a fighter, who says that he will be leaving her: “You don’t need me anymore, right?” Saddened, she hesitates; “I ...” The younger Charoenphol responds wistfully, “Don’t worry. When you do, just like me know.” The film ends with a post-script: “Nong Toom is now a model and actress in Bangkok. She no longer has to hide in toilets to put on her makeup.” Just like Markova and Arenas, Charoenphol is able to live openly and freely.

Piñero

Finally, we consider *Piñero*, which tells the story of the bisexual drug addict, thief, prisoner, poet and playwright Miguel Piñero (1946-1988), who lived much of his brief life with a male lover, the Chinese-American artist Martin Wong (1946-1999). In this sympathetic portrayal of the life of the conflicted yet brilliant Piñero, Leon Ichaso attempts to reconstruct the sentimental life of the protagonist, who was never fully able to accept his homosexuality, and who faded in and out of the gay scene of the Lower East Side of New York City from the 1960s until his death by cirrhosis of the liver and complications of AIDS in 1988. For the purposes of the construction of a filmic gay history, *Piñero* is significant for its insinuation, but baldly obvious omission, of the central role homosexuality played in the poet’s life, especially in his later years. Troubled by alcoholism, drug addiction, and the memory of a sexually abusive father, Piñero had frequent bouts of depression but also many moments of near clairvoyance into the hearts of so many in society who suffered but could not express their pain.

The film offers several moments in which viewers are asked to consider Piñero’s (played by Benjamin Bratt) homosexual proclivities. First, when he is seduced by “Sugar” (played by Talisa Soto) a woman he has known since his youth, Piñero does not respond sexually as she had hoped. Disappointed, she makes an off-handed but telling comment: “I guess it’s true what they say about jail. What’s with you; little boys?” Piñero is very offended and tells her to get out of his apartment, but Sugar confesses that she has wanted Miguel for years. The scene ends with the two having sex in the shower, a moment that was to mark the beginning of an ongoing sexual relationship between them. This, however, did not mean that Piñero would now follow a fulfilled heterosexual relationship only with Sugar. Later in the film, he is pictured watching a woman’s strip show with his younger protégé, Reinaldo Povod (1960-94). He asks Povod, “What do you think of the girl?” to which Povod replies, “She’s not my type.” As he says this, Piñero slowly runs his hand over Povod’s upper thigh and crotch as the two men look intently into each other’s eyes. Finally, a later scene depicts Piñero running his hand over the shoulder of a young man who has been watching a performance by the poet as the former leaves the stage.

As a film, *Piñero* is a powerful mix of flashbacks and readings from his various works, and focuses on the staging of his most important work, *Short Eyes* (1974). Its major contribution

to filmic gay history, unlike the other films considered in this article, is to document the life of a man who was never able to accept his homosexuality and suffered enormously for it. Like many gay men, Piñero was haunted by the specter of failing a heroic mother who had suffered greatly but who had always loved and inspired him. In one of the most moving scenes of the film, Miguel, who is in prison a second time, promises his mother that he will change: “O.K., mami; I’ll make you proud of me.” Piñero certainly did achieve acclaim for his work, yet, sadly, at the time of his mother’s death he was still incarcerated in Sing Sing Prison in New York City. The film concludes with a very moving tribute to Piñero. According to his wishes, upon his death family and friends gathered to read his celebrated poem “Lower East Side Poem,” a tribute to the neighborhood he loved, as his ashes were scattered about the streets.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the subject of each biopic resists the “chrononormativity” described by Elizabeth Freeman on various levels, first by being gay, then by “betraying” the “respectable” career paths marked out for him by society (62). These “betrayals,” however, will lead to each man making singular contributions to his local culture as well as to universal queer cultural history. In the cases of Markova, Arenas, and Charoenphol, their combined legacy is that of the freedom of liberation that came from the acceptance and realization of self. Perhaps just as important in the chronicling of the gay experience is the life of Piñero, who, like so many men, never fully accepted his homosexuality, and went to the grave with his demons. Did Piñero’s inability to accept his “gayness” lead to his alcoholism and difficulties in loving? There is no causal connection. Nonetheless, the lives of all four men demonstrate that chrononormativity was impossible for any of them, forcing them to seek fulfillment by extraordinary means, along uncharted paths.

Elizabeth Freeman invites us to avoid the tired narrative of LGBTQI men and women that focuses on the victimization of the community and to shift our attention to the pleasures of being gay. Until the LGBTQI community can openly exist without ridicule, persecution, or unequal treatment, “victimization” will of necessity continue to be the core narrative gay history. The personal pleasures of being gay will always exist; however, the potential for the complete joy of the community cannot be achieved until all forms of oppression are eliminated. The legacy of all four subjects of the biopics can in many ways be summarized by a comment made by Dempster: “As humans, we won’t live long. Revealing my own story is my way of inspiring other gays who continue to be oppressed today. By my act, I may have probably given freedom to many other gay people.” The act of self-revelation, whether it be complete transparency or simply sharing some of our struggles, is a gift to any community; however, in the case of the LGBTQI community, such revelations ensure the continued existence of what is very much an “imagined” community. Homosexuality has always existed and was “transnational” centuries before “transnationalism” was conceived. The LGBTQI community, however, may be said to

have relatively recent origins, as it only came into the public forum for investigation in the Late Modern Era. Lest its legacy remain hidden and possibly be lost, it is essential that scholars and members of the LGBTQI community continue to document the activities of that community as they unfold over space and time in the future. If one can speak of the “chrononormativity” of the majority population, perhaps we should adopt the neologism “homodivergence” as an equally compelling construct of time and space, which befits the quality and reality of life of LGBTQI men and women. Life writing through biopics plays a critical role in the preservation of those human experiences that otherwise would have been lost, to the detriment of us all.

Notes

ⁱ Regarding the high degree of tolerance of homosexuality in the Philippines, Whitam and Mathy write that, “Filipinos, unlike Anglo-Saxons, view homosexuality as natural and inevitable in certain individuals and something about which little can or should be done. Such tolerant attitudes may be related to large families. In a family of eight or ten children it is not so important if one is homosexual, since it is probably the others will be heterosexual” (67). This is strongly contested by J. Neil C. Garcia who retorts that, “The oppressibility of being bakla cuts across all classes, and despite the seeming omnipresence of kabaklaan in nearly all areas of popular culture, homosexual love remains outlawed within polite Filipino society. (In truth, a few years before Itiel published his book, American sociologist Frederick Whitam has studied the bayot and the “swards” of Cebu City, and had arrived at the same delusional conclusion)” (68).

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Conditions and Limits of the Autobiographical Self in Joya Mitra's Prison Memoir *Killing Days*

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Abstract: As a genre, prison writing has often been analyzed as a subcategory of the larger umbrella term we call “life narratives”. In my paper, I look at Joya Mitra's *Hanyaman*(1989), translated by Shampa Banerjee as *Killing Days* and examine the conditions and limits of the autobiographical self emerging in the prison memoir by situating it within the intersections of two paradigms- the role of the prison in the 'institutionalized killing of the subject' and theories about different genres of life-writing like autobiographies, testimonies and others.

Keywords: prison-writing, life-writing, bender, autobiography, penitentiary

There is no future, and no present either. There are no seasons here, no changing patterns of joy and sorrow, good and evil. The human community that collectively thinks, eats, sleeps and works here exists in only one time- the past. And the past is always intimately personal.

- Joya Mitra, *Killing Days*, (37)

In Georges Gusdorf's seminal article titled “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography”, he talks about how ‘the genre of autobiography seems limited in time and space’ (29). This is a reference to how, this genre has not always existed everywhere and can not be found outside one

cultural area and ‘one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures’ (29). He further clarifies that the ‘conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life’ which an autobiography presupposes is the late product of a specific civilization thereby proposing that the notion of a bounded self presupposed in autobiographies is a purposeful and culturally specific construct. Though post-structuralism has long since made suspect the idea of the sovereign subject and deconstructed much of the coherence and self-knowledge upon which it is based, the question of the sovereign, autonomous self takes on a different import and meaning in the context of the prison writing. As a genre, prison writing has always occupied a contested space within the larger umbrella category called life writing. In this paper, I hope to present an analysis of one such work of prison writing, written in a language other than English. I will look at the ‘prison memoir’ form through *Hanyaman*(1989), written by Joya Mitra in Bengali and translated by Shampa Banerjee as *Killing Days*. I aim to closely examine the construction of an autobiographical self by a female prisoner through an analysis of her ‘life-narrative’ written during the postcolonial milieu of 1970’s Bengal.

In the context of prison and prison writing, Georges Gusdorf’s argument needs to be further supplemented by looking at thinkers like Bender. John Bender in *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* argued that Gusdorf’s idea of a coherent bounded self which is also malleable and a personality that can transform through a series of events was crucial for prison reformers and shaped the modern penal institutional logic. He argued that ‘penitentiaries assumed novelistic ideas of character ... to reconstruct the fictions of personal identity that underline consciousness’ (2). Thus, in English prisons beginning in the 1780s, ‘each convict would be assigned upon entering one of the new penitentiaries to live out a program or scenario,’ and ‘different stages of the sentence’ were separated out ‘like the stages of a classic plot’ (23). Once a prisoner had been incorporated as a character-type into an existing plot, ‘providence’ would ensure that the known conclusion of the fictional narrative would transpire in the real life of the prisoner, too. He is referring to the criminality-change-citizenship trajectory, the process through which the prison tries to rewrite the ‘social deviant’ as the ‘penitent citizen’ (23). My aim with this paper would be to analyze the conditions and limits of the autobiographical self emerging in *Killing Days* by situating it within the intersections of these two paradigms- the ‘institutionalized killing of the subject’ (Rodriguez 85) in prisons and theories about the genre of life-writing.

To be a prisoner is a process of being variously written about and fixed through narratives. Thus any mode of autobiographical writing is viewed by many scholars as inherently emancipatory. Judith Scheffler, the editor of *Wall Tappings: An International Anthology of Women's Prison Writings*(2002) argues that the writing of autobiographical accounts, provide a way of regaining control by allowing the incarcerated self to ‘order reality according to one’s

own perceptions and organizing principles' through writing(xxxv). The self Scheffler alludes to however cannot exist freely apart from the coercive environment that marks most prisons. Even the use of the term 'prison writing' instead of 'prisoner's writing' highlights the ways in which the prison regulates how the prisoner writes. Mitra's *Killing Days* explores the power of 'official writing' in the everyday lives of prisoners, not just their arrest. The first few pages of the memoir are filled with the narrator-subject's confusion regarding her circumstances- carried on a stretcher she cannot remember whether she is in a police station, hospital or the little town jail. The narrative action as such begins with the sound of her identity being fixed in the official record: "Write down! 21/9, first transfer of the day' I remember in a flash, it's my birthday, the beginning of my 21st year'(4).

'Official Writing' poses a continuous threat and can engineer further displacements within the prison ecosystem. The subject-narrator for example talks about how 'a little piece of official paper' is enough to ensure that the prisoner gets transferred to a different facility at any time(15). It orchestrates the separation of another inmate Jalamani and her son, the news of which she receives via a piece of paper that she cannot read : 'But Jalamani doesn't understand any of it. Bijay has grown up? Of course he has. It's been three years since the case opened. He can't live here? He'll go to an orphanage? Why? He's not an orphan!' (29). The memoir highlights how the orders that organize such a separation can't however ensure accountability via a paper trail, for when Jalamani is released she is left searching for the 'the authorities andask[s] them the address of the orphanage where children who have mothers are sent?' (30). 'Official writing' is laid out as the regulatory presence in the lives of every prisoner. The specter of the 'ticket', 'case table' and 'marks' hangs over their lives and dictates not only the ways in which they are written about but also the only official ways in which they can 'write' themselves.

Every morning, lying in bed I watch the day's new women prisoners coming into the hospital. The doctor checks their height, weight and identifying marks on a big card and signs it. That's what they call a 'ticket' here. Before this, the prisoners are taken to the Jailor to be entered into a log and be informed of their length of stay and reasons for incarceration. This is called 'case table'....Sometimes I get into trouble with the jargon here. (6)

The 'modernist' Enlightenment prison, an 18th century invention, was the deliberate architectural expression of an idea - punishment through rehabilitation in temporal isolation. Practices like solitary confinement for example were based on a belief in an autonomous self. With the removal of 'bad influences', inmates were expected to draw on their interiority and employ their agency in the service of reform. Prison practices described in the memoir reflect how rehabilitation ideals inform day to day functionings within the prison as well. Like how prisoners may earn money during their jail term through labour and which is then 'kept for the

day the prisoner is free again, so that it can be of use in her rehabilitation. At that point, because ‘*she is happy*’, the erstwhile prisoner is supposed to part with some of the money in a strictly predetermined way’ (48, emphasis added). The marks system is another manifestation of this ideological imperative which imposed the rehabilitation ideal on the lives of prisoners who were expected to mark their journey within the jail along the teleology of crime and punishment (and, potentially, redemption).

“Marks” are a magic wand in the hands of the jail authorities. When it is waved at them, the convicts quietly obey all orders. The courts may sentence somebody to a number of years in prison but the jail authorities have the power to commute the sentence on the *basis of good conduct*. This process of reducing the sentence is commonly described as a system of giving or taking away “marks”. (17-18 emphasis added).

Life-narratives do not have the authority to define the kind of judicial, evidentiary truth that is established in a courtroom, or counter reform measures imposed through measures discussed above; but they provide a kind of personal/alternative truth that can contest the official, legal record in the public forum of an expectant readership. Along with this, a counter-narrative can also provide a more complete account of a prisoner’s life that explains or even justifies his or her involvement in crime. But the narrator-subject of *Killing Days* reveals very little about her pre-prison life or post prison years, the pages of the memoir are instead filled with short, self contained narratives of the lives of other women.

Their ‘crimes’ are narrativised, often revealing what Michel Foucault calls the ‘carceral continuum’ because social norms, glances, gestures, taunts, official exclusions goad women, especially unlettered, poor and tribal women toward criminality and ultimately into the prison (56). Foucault writes that the prison ‘continues, on those who are entrusted to it, a work begun elsewhere, which the whole of society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms of discipline’ (302-303). The autobiographical self in *Killing Days* delineates how female, uneducated, impoverished, mentally ill and tribal women are already marked as ‘deviant’ in large part because of the intersections of gender, tribe and class. Through this, I think the memoir functions as a counter-narrative that directly critiques the ideal imposed by prison reform.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write in *Reading Autobiography* that prison narratives enable ‘prisoners to inscribe themselves as fully human in the midst of a system designed to dehumanize them and to render them anonymous and passive’ (201). But Joya Mitra’s memoir does more than humanise and memorialise fellow female prisoners. Through the narrativization of their lives, the narrator-subject points out that the ‘prisoners’ are already marked as a ‘criminal underclass’. The narrative ends up describing how the prison reform model ostensibly attempts to transform the criminal into a model citizen, but a majority of the female prisoners were

already marked as deviant, as un-citizens by the civil society way before they were officially marked as criminals by the law. This comes through most apparently in the case of Jamini and Baroda-Ma. The narrator-subject describes how Jamini was arrested and sent to jail for 20 years for murder. The narrator is witness to her bout of insanity in the prison during which she physically harms her own child. Within months the ‘Supreme Court rescinds Jamini’s sentence on the basis of her mental state, *but because she is insane, she has to remain in prison forever*. Who will post bail for her and take her home?’ (22, emphasis added). Similarly the narrative describes how Baroda-Ma pleaded guilty for the murder of a predatory moneylender that her son committed. However, while describing her arrest the autobiographical self writes about how the judge convicted ‘sixty-year-old illiterate Hindu female Barodadasi’ of wilful murder and sentenced her to twenty years rigorous punishment’ in spite of significant doubts regarding the truth of her claims (36). The narrator hints that the judge did not find any similarity between Baroda’s wrinkled face and the face of Madonna. This along with the reference to her illiteracy reveal how Barodadasi was already marked as an unnecessary citizen and a woman. The prison as a mechanism of rewriting can not erase such markers of ‘double deviance’ that inscribe most of the female prisoners described in these pages. ‘Double’ deviance is a reference to how female prisoners are viewed as breaking both gender roles and the criminal law.

The subject-narrator of *Killing Days* thus uses the prison memoir as a traditionally accepted counter narrative in the sense that it provides a kind of personal truth for the lives of fellow prisoners that can contest the official, legal record. I have argued however that the narrative ends up countering more than ‘official writing’ by presenting an alternative truth. It also provides a critique of the Enlightenment ideal that underlies the rehabilitative ideal of prison reforms by pointing out the ‘carceral continuum’ and ‘double deviance’ that already mark female prisoners. *Killing Days* re-configures the function of a counter narrative by questioning the accepted teleology of reform- the movement from a ‘social deviant’ to ‘penitent citizen’.

But what about the autobiographical self? Interestingly no attempt is made to employ this narrative to offer an alternate or fuller account of her own ‘crime’. On the basis of this choice that the subject-narrator makes to not talk about her pre-prison experiences or provide an alternate account for the ‘crime’ for which she is in custody; one could say that the autobiographical self takes on the role of a witness. This raises the question, can this prison memoir then be read as a testimonio?

The term testimonio is used in Latin American Cultural and Literary Studies. The concept of testimonio is developed by, among others, George Yúdice, John Beverly and Pierce Armstrong. Yúdice explains the term as:

Testimonial writing may be defined as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.).

Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. (Yúdice, 17).

Sharmila Rege in her work *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* reads dalit life narratives as testimonios, 'which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance' (23). She sees these life narratives as a challenge to the bourgeois genre of autobiography 'as they represent not the journey of an individual voice, emotion and consciousness but rather a social and community-based chorus of voices'(27). *Killing Days* however I would argue does not function as a testimonio. Firstly, in prison writing, such acts of witnessing have its ethical and methodological problems. It can easily slip into voyeurism, or it can produce a power differential between the witnessing writer and the witnessed prisoner.

Joya Mitra's memoir too may unwittingly repeat the biographical project of the legal and penal systems that produce official narratives (such as criminal records, files, and case-studies) about their prisoner subjects with little if any input from those about whom they write often overwriting the complexities of prisoners' stories while highlighting the complexity of the author-narrator's subjectivity. Thus, in this segment I will argue that while the subject-narrator sometimes behaves in the capacity of a witness to the events unfolding in the narrative, she is also configured as a skillful agential force negotiating her powers as the literate subject and witnessing writer. There is a mention of how she 'had written slogans on the walls of the ward by rubbing fresh leaves on the white surface.' However the Head Warder later came with buckets of white wash to clean the walls and told her 'Why do you do these things?...Our jobs will be in danger and *who in this ward can read and understand what you write?* Why do you write all this' (14, *emphasis added*).

Literacy doesn't just mark her out as a witnessing writer, it also marks her out as a citizen of the 'free society' and 'lettered city'. Here I am referring to the book *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* by Joseph Slaughter where he argues that 'with its discursive, idealized alignment with modernity, democracy, and liberty becomes the primary qualification and capacity for participation in . . . a free society—a society that writes about itself *as a ..lettered city*' (279). I would argue that this is the reason why agency isn't deployed in the narrative through the force of literacy. In fact, early on when the subject-author wishes to complain to the Jailor, he 'cautions (her) against too much excitement...(and) offers some books' advising her to stick to her reading 'to the exclusion of everything else' (13). At other times, she comments on how the books in the prison libraries are all 'neutral religious books' (46) she has no interest in reading. She instead frames her individual agency in the narrative through her multiple rebellious acts, like the hunger strike, or mobilizing fellow prisoners or protesting against the matron.

I would also argue that the narrator-subject's agency is deployed in consciously not representing some of the other prisoners as 'others'. For example, the instance with Jamini's which I quoted in the first segment. In that instance, there was a possibility for the memoir to construct a fundamental distinction between the prisoner as the rational being and the other prisoner as an impulsive animal. The narrative however, does not reproduce the vocabulary of total difference between the otherworldliness of the prison and the comparative normality of civil society that she belongs to, even within the prison walls. The whole incident surrounding Jamini dashing her own child's head to the floor is framed by the narrator's commentary:

In the 40 minutes that elapse before the door is opened, Jamini ...dashes the child's head to the floor. If ever there is a fire in the ward, it will take about the same amount of time to reduce it to cinders....By now, having finally finished his dinner, the Jailor comes to the ward looking anxious..The doctor comes and prescribes a sedative for Jamini...Matron goes with a syringe to the verandah in front of the cell, but quickly retreats....I ask the doctor whether he will allow me to give her the injection....I don't think I will ever forget that moment. It was one of those times when I did something so stupidAfter I gave her the sedative, Jamini went and perched on the cell door once more. I came out and pulled the door shut. I still don't remember clearly, but was I in too much of a hurry? The heavy door shut with a jolt and Jamini's forehead knocked against the iron grill. And Jamini, the terrifying spectre of just half an hour ago, gave me a strange, sad smile and said, "You hurt my head?". (19-21)

Here I propose that the mention of a 'fire in the ward' and the accompanying delay in action on the part of the prison authorities is deliberately employed by the narrative to de-construct any opposition that might emerge between the mentally sane, self contained and charitable narrator-subject and the violent subjectivity of this fellow prisoner. Jamini's actions aren't staged as instinctive and involuntary violence. She isn't just humanised, but she is also presented as subject to the same kind of criminal negligence that would affect all the prisoners in case something like a fire broke out.

Sometimes however, the subject-narrator has also describes the larger collective of incarcerated mentally ill patients who populate the madhouse:

Cages large enough to hold tigers and lions in a zoo.....Rice and vegetables don't come in plates to this cage, they are thrown on the floor inside and the inmates must scramble for them...They are just naked bodies here, their bones jutting out under the filthy skin. If they are given anything to wear, what if they use the cloth to hang themselves? (109)

The vocabulary used here can be described as grotesque and dehumanising. I would argue that it has the effect of 'corrupting' the official discourse. Genet writes in the introduction to another

work of prison writing that ‘the prisoner must use the very language, the words, the syntax of his enemy. . . . He has only one recourse: to accept this language but to corrupt it . . . skilfully’ (22, emphasis added). Here and in many other instances, the narrator-subject uses the ‘syntax of the enemy’ in expressions of subversion, defiance, and resistance. In this case for example, the grotesque (naked bodies, bones jutting out under the filthy skin) is a direct result of the absurdity of the warden’s logic, repurposed as a rhetorical question, that if they are given anything to wear, what if they use the cloth to hang themselves?

While the autobiographical self in *Killing Days* does act as a witness at times, receding from the narrative action of her own life-writing; in a prison memoir such an act of witnessing must ensure that the power differential between the witnessing writer and the witnessed prisoner does not recreate the hierarchy of official writing and life writing. Here I have argued that the description of mentally ill patients and literacy can be read as choices made by an agential subject-narrator that negotiates the dynamics of being the witnessing writer and the literate prisoner. This describes a negative deployment of agency, the limits on the autobiographical self. To conclude, one needs to also look at the role of memory, language and time in the construction of the autobiographical self.

Central to most autobiographical writing, starting with the *Confessions of St. Augustine* is the sense of a dual self which is temporally displaced, marking a distinction between the past self, which I will refer to henceforth as the ‘experiencing self’; and a later present one (that is, present at the time of writing), which I will refer to as the ‘authorial self’. This sense of a ‘then’ and ‘now’ which is crucial for life writing, isn’t marked in any distinct kind of way in the narrative especially in the Bengali text. In the English translation, this distinction is marked more clearly, something that Shampa Banerjee has also commented on in her Translator’s Note: ‘Joya’s prose brings the past into the present, to the here and now. The Bengali language accommodates that leap forward in time with great felicity’ (xvi). The narrator-subject’s skillful employment of this shift allows her to make several choices.

Sometimes the ‘authorial self’ acts as an all knowing, omnipotent narrator whose awareness is added to the narrative as a supplement to the immediacy of feelings captured by the ‘experiencing self’. For example, on her first day in Presidency Jail, she describes the buildings: ‘On either side of the courtyard are large enough rooms that are mostly dark...The upper floor has no windows, only a wall with small openings between bricks. *I was unaware then that for the next two years and more*, those little holes would become my windows to the world’ (75, emphasis added). The narrator-subject can make such a choice because the narration of her entire time in prison in a linear fashion is not the central objective of this memoir. Within the first few pages, she writes ‘this is not nostalgia. It’s more like turning the pages of an album’ (4). So some pages are turned in random, some instances are mentioned in passing, some are commented upon by an all knowing ‘authorial self’ and some described in great detail.

Sometimes the ‘authorial self’ is invoked to compound the immediacy of feeling: ‘Even today an overwhelming sense of futility clutches at my throat, choking me, when I see the sophisticated, the cultured, the civilized, enclosed in their cocoon of security, displaying the same emotions towards the insane- laughter, ridicule and repulsion’ (111). In a few striking instances though, this distinction completely collapses. For example:

People who haven’t witnessed the naked mad women of the female ward of Presidency jail won’t know most of the time that the two femur bones that come down the thighs from the wide pelvic bone in a woman’s body, have about eight inches of space between them. They won’t know how completely denuded of flesh a starving body can be (111).

The narrative depicts both the failure of representation, while simultaneously invoking the kind of framing used by photographs that have the power to shock and disturb an intended readership. This is opposed to descriptions of scenes witnessed by the narrator-subject while being transported from one jail to another : ‘A man stands with a dark little boy his head shaved, a coloured thread round his waist, digging into the mud on the riverbank. The picture is still sharp in my mind, framed in twilight’ (16). In many instances in the memoir however, especially when the narrator-subject is describing her solitary confinement, the language is stripped of literary devices and becomes merely descriptive. The autobiographical self does not use a better metaphor for being locked up in a tiny cell since she is already locked up in a tiny concrete cell.

In conclusion, I began this paper with Gusdorf’s idea of the bounded self and in the epigraph, as well as in many other instances, the narrator-subject says that ‘memories...freeze into stasis here (in prison)’ (37). Hence my final argument would be that the autobiographical self emerging in *Killing Days* isn’t just the dual self temporally displaced, traditionally found in many autobiographies and fictional works. It is the temporally disintegrated autobiographical self of the prison memoir, flitting between a past that is indefinitely stuck in a static space and a future that provides commentary without temporal mobility. The autobiographical self in *Killing Days* bears witness and counters the rehabilitative ideal while simultaneously presenting the failures of language and representation and the process of the erosion and disintegration of the bounded self presupposed by autobiographical acts.

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Re(discovering) the Self: Memory and Narrative in Gabriel García Márquez' *Living to Tell the Tale*

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Abstract: The paper discusses the ways that autobiographies can serve as documentaries of memory of the physical self and of a deeper philosophical signification. The memoir, which is a referential better suited to such narratives, brings out different contours of the self. The multiple ways that the self can be written through the act of remembering becomes of grave importance in a day and age of short attention spans and digitized memory drives. Thus, the act of autobiographical telling becomes performative- a selective oeuvre of events and incidents that serve a positioned narrative.

Keywords: Gabriel García Márquez, *Living to Tell the Tale*, Autobiography, Memoir, Paul Ricoeur

In his Nobel acceptance speech in 1982, Gabriel García Márquez described Latin America as a "source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune." The writer went on to say that "Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable" (McGuirk and Cardwell 211).

Even when Márquez says that there has been a lack of conventional means to render lives believable, in his memoir Márquez tries to create a world so similar to everyday life and yet so very different from it, a reality in which the veneers of the real and the fantastic fade away quite naturally. Fantasy is used not as part of narrative structure but as a total world where normal relationships are reversed, where events are controlled by irrational forces and there is a constant contrast between the expected and actuality. It is significant how the narrator is forever beguiled

by the possibility of multiple versions of a past reality, of even his own reminiscences rescued from the memories of others as he always had "intrauterine remembrances and premonitory dreams"(63). Such prophecies, dreams, and irrational fears in the story of Márquez's life helped him give a realistic touch to what seems magical in life and portray a new affirmation of reality. This privileged the formation of his protagonists and episodes in most of his later fiction.

As Margarete Sandelowski states in the article "Telling Stories: Narrative Approaches in Qualitative Research", "the imposition of a narrative order on life illuminates the differences among what anthropologist Edward Bruner called a life –as – lived (what actually happened), a life –as – experienced (the images, feelings, desires, thoughts and meanings known to the person whose life it is), and a life – as – told (a narrative)" (163). Sandelowski elaborates that "these representations do not simply re - present, but rather (re) construct lives in every act of telling for, at the very least, the outcome of any one telling is necessarily a re-telling (163). This is pertinent to what Márquez says in his memoir, "Well, then the first thing a writer ought to write is his memoirs, when he can still remember everything" (*Living to Tell the Tale* 350).

Life writing, or any other personal account is a representation of life at a given moment rather than life itself. In telling stories, what is remembered and forgotten, and why, change over time because acts of remembering are implicated in how people understand the past and make claims about their versions of the past. Life narrative inextricably links memory, subjectivity, and the materiality of the body. Paul John Eakin in his work *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* problematizes the notion of autobiography as 'the story of the self' and argues that in the act of narration one is engaged in a process of making a self and that "our lives in and as bodies profoundly shape our sense of identity" (xi). The ability to recover memories, in fact, depends upon the material body that perceives and internalizes the images, sensations, and experiences of the external world. Memories are 'autobiographical subjects' created as the subject reconstructs a sense of identity while engaging with the world.

French philosopher and historian, Paul Ricoeur observes that by telling personal and collective stories, we make sense of our lives for "the reaffirmation of historical consciousness requires the search, by individuals and by the communities to which they belong, for their respective narrative identities" (274). An autobiography is in fact, a reflection of history resulting from the reconstructions of the past through several memorized events internalized by individuals. Events thus remembered "do not follow a single life story, but also highlight facts which make sense for the memory of an (imaginary) community" (Cuesta 2). The narrative of the self, evinces an interest in self-reflection about the personal and collective experiences as understood by the self and others. Life narratives are significant in this way because they are one way of defining the self or the existential selves. The way in which a person sees oneself in one's own mind is the internal self while the described self represents the outward or projected self (Smith and Watson 25). Smith and Watson point out that a memoir showcases the two selves, "one is the self that others see— the social, historical person, with achievements, personal

appearance, social relationships” (25) and the self - experienced only by that person, the, self felt from the inside that the writer can never get “outside of” (27).

Living to Tell the Tale, the first of a projected trilogy narrates what, on the surface appears to be the portrait of the young artist through the mid-1950s, but at a deeper level, transcends a straightforward autobiography. Memoir is an artistic expression in which people present themselves in the way they see themselves and can be largely fictional and offer wholly inaccurate depictions of lives even when it purports to be a ‘true’ account of one’s life. As Márquez rightly observes in *Living to Tell the Tale*, “the memory is clear, but there is no possibility that it is true” (63). Memory can play us false. The writer says, “So many contradictory versions have been the cause of my false memories”(63). In acts of remembering, how people remember, what they remember, and who does the remembering are historically specific and situated. Márquez remarks that “nostalgia, as always, had wiped away bad memories and magnified the good ones” (17). A particular culture’s understanding of memory at a particular moment of its history makes remembering possible for a life narrator.

Nevertheless, the politics of remembering also is related to the questions of who is authorized to remember and what to remember, what is forgotten, both personally and collectively. Sharing a social past, memory is an “intersubjective phenomenon”, as W. J. T. Mitchell suggests: “...a practice not only of recollection of a past by a subject, but of recollection for another subject” (Smith and Watson 17). Thus, acts of personal remembering can be fundamentally social and collective. Individuals determine how they would like to be viewed by others as the impressions widely matter. In daily interactions, this process becomes so streamlined that “individuals effectively projects a definition of the situation” (Goffman 6) in order to develop and maintain their intended projection of self.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their work *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* assert that the term “memoir” has emerged as a more inclusive term for representing a much wider range of forms of self-writing.

The term memoir, then, seems more malleable than the term autobiography, foregrounding historical shifts and intersecting cultural formations; and so when a narrative emphasizes its mode as memoir, as in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, readers are invited to think about the significance of that choice and the kind of reading it invites. (26)

Memory, apparently so immaterial and personal and elusive, is always implicated in materiality. The central story of *Living to Tell the Tale*, is the narrator’s journey with his mother to sell the home in which he had grown up. Márquez writes, “On the day I went with my mother to sell the house, I remembered everything that had made an impression on my childhood but was not certain what came earlier and what came later, or what any of it signified in my life” (62). This

journey ignites an outpouring of memories that spans Márquez's life from his birth in 1927 through the beginning of his career as a writer to the moment in the 1950s when he was about to leave for Europe. It is a story permeated with people, places, music and events, above all, parts of undisclosed history and incidents that would later appear, transmuted and transposed in his fiction. Márquez pertinently exclaims "Memory is more interested in the future than in the past" (5).

Psychologist Frederic. C. Bartlett, one of the forerunners of cultural psychology in his work, *Remembering*, asserts that memory retains "a little outstanding detail" (qtd in Lee 128), while the remainder of what we remember represents an elaboration that is merely influenced by the original event. *Living to Tell the Tale* expounds the author's life as a series of events and feelings weaved together by threads of memory. The memoir begins in *medias res* at a particular day in writer's life "My mother asked me to go with her to sell the house" (3) and then tells the story of how and why that day was unforgettable:

This simple two-day trip would be so decisive that the longest and most diligent of lives would not be enough for me to finish recounting it. Now, with more than seventy-five years behind me, I know it was the most important of all the decisions I had to make in my career as a writer. That is to say: in my entire life. (5)

The story begins from a journey he has to undertake as an adult to his native town Aracataca with his mother which evokes the whole memory of his childhood. Márquez recalls:

I was convinced my bad luck was congenital and irremediable, above all with women and with money, but I did not care, because I believed I did not need good luck in order to write well. I did not care about glory, or money, or old age, because I was sure I was going to die very young, and in the street. (365)

It is this nostalgic journey to his hometown, where he lived until he was eight years old that records past his memory, that would decide the vocation of the young precocious boy. This journey was significant in his life and is reminiscent of the opening line in his magnum opus *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" (1) and many other moments, when an event is identified as setting in motion the story and the meanings that flow from it. Márquez is consciously connecting a moment in his own life to certain moments in his fiction, where a decisive, unforgettable experience is illuminated and obsessively returned to.

Frederic. C. Bartlett refers to this key characteristic of memory as reconstructive: ‘We are so good at this sort of reconstruction . . . that we are often consciously unaware that it has happened. This seems especially likely to happen when a memory is told and retold . . . In such situations the “reconstructed” memory often seems as real as the “recollected” memory” (8). Márquez’ observation in this regard is interesting as he states that he was able to reconstruct the story, “rescuing the truth that had been lost in a tangle of contrary suppositions and reconstructing the human drama in the order in which it had occurred, and apart from all political and sentimental calculation (443). The writer remarks that it would not have been possible at the moment it happened “because of the awkwardness and unwieldiness of reality” (443).

Memories, individual and collective of past events vary to a great extent. Just as socio-cultural contexts shape individual memories, a “memory” which is mediated must be actualized by individuals, by members of a community of remembrance, who may be conceived of as *points de vue* (Halbwachs 48) on shared notions of the past. In his collection of essays, *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self Narrative*, Ulric Neisser notes that “if the remembered event seems to have played a significant part in the life of the rememberer, it becomes an example of autobiographical memory and may form part of a life narrative” (1).

Craig R. Barclay in his work *Autobiographical Remembering: Narrative Constraints on Objectified Selves* reinforces the notion of multiple selves and posits that because there is no single self, the image of the self is the product of a selected number of memories and their corresponding versions. He claims that the reconstruction of memory that occurs in the mind is a self-serving mechanism that allows people to fill their personal needs of self-image and societal belonging. He writes, “My position is that the self is not remembered because the self does not exist as something to be remembered”(71). The choosing of certain events and the subsequent choice to mould them into a narrative is clear evidence of multiple selves in memoir. This is evident in Márquez's writing that was constantly informed by his leftist political views, themselves forged in large part by a 1928 military massacre near Aracataca of banana workers striking against the United Fruit Company. Márquez writes: “From the first line I was certain that the new book ought to be based on the memories of a seven -year-old boy who had survived the public massacre in the banana zone in 1928. But I rejected this very soon because it limited the narrative to the point of view of a character without sufficient poetic resources to tell it ” (366). He was also greatly influenced by the assassination two decades later of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a leftist presidential candidate. Márquez exclaims, “At no moment did I realize that I was already an apprentice writer who would try one day to reconstruct from memory the testimony of the hideous days we were living through” (298).

In his article “Group Narrative as a Cultural Context of Autobiography” Jerome Bruner writes that what we remember from the past is necessary to keep that story satisfactorily well-formed and that when new circumstances make the maintenance of that well-formedness sufficiently difficult, “we undergo turning points that clarify or “debug” the narrative in an effort

to achieve a clearer meaning”(41) and such form of continual revision in self narrative is a form of self-preservation that represents the struggle between the self of the past and the self of the present.

Representations are constructions, with whose help the pasts, the presents, and the envisioned futures can be shaped, articulated and reflected as a story, history, or biography. Since language is a cultural tool, memory and recollection are also cultural phenomena. Largely, it can be said that in a retrospective culture, different ways of representing the past, present, and a foreseen future, which rely upon the attainments of memory and recollection, are themselves prominently thematized. Actions are performed in a symbolic medium such as language, which inevitably gives them shape. Alluding to this aspect Márquez writes in his memoir: “... my life was always agitated by a tangle of tricks, feints, and illusions intended to outwit the countless lures that tried to turn me into anything but a writer” (120).

Memory, especially episodic or autobiographical, change, and the contents of memory are complexes of ideas which are constructed and re-constructed in the process of recollecting, “... even the most personal and intimate ones—as dependent on cultural and social semantics as well as on linguistic or other symbolic repertoires and modes of expression” (Brockmeier 218). In tellings, events are selected and then given cohesion, meaning and direction; they are made to flow and are given a sense of linearity and even inevitability. Echoing Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, Márquez uses his memoir as justification for telling an artful story that challenges notions of authoritative record or chronology. Time is fluid in Márquez's Colombia, flowing back and forth among the mythic moments of his personal history to accommodate his fascination for place. While recalling a trip he took as an adult to his grandparents' house in Aracataca, he veers suddenly back to childhood and his earliest infant memories in that house. Born in Aracataca, a small Colombian town near the Caribbean coast, on March 6, 1927 as the eldest of the eleven children of Luisa Santiaga Márquez and Gabriel Elíjio García, a telegrapher and a wandering homeopathic pharmacist, Márquez was raised for ten years by his grandmother and his grandfather, a retired colonel who fought in the devastating Thousand Day War that hastened Colombia's loss of the Panamanian isthmus. His grandmother's tales would provide the inspiration for Márquez's fictional style and Aracataca became the model for “Macondo,” the village surrounded by banana plantations at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains where the writer's magnum opus *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is set. Márquez writes: “Only today do I realize how much my mother's unhappy state of mind and the internal tensions in the house were in accord with the fatal contradictions in the country that had not surfaced yet but did exist” (227).

Gabriel García Márquez dedicated himself to three cultural passions—his fictional works, cinema and journalism in addition to his love for music and plastic arts. The search for literary expression was therefore one of the foremost concerns of writers and poets in Latin America and it is in Márquez's narrative style, in his “magical realism” that Latin America found its most

potent literary voice. It was for his political convictions that he was exiled several times from Colombia, his country, and was denied US visas during years for his clear and forthright criticism of Washington's violent interventions from Vietnam to Chile. For Márquez, memory and narrativisation is not an individual act, it is for him recollection and collision of people's narratives he had not witnessed. The writer talks about his frail memory and perils of nostalgia and the "events that he professes to have witnessed are not childhood memories but the memories of later family conversations in his 'lunatic' house" (Carr 48). He places importance on creative mining of memory rather than nostalgia. Márquez writes:

I needed this old age without remorse to understand that the misfortune of my grandparents in the house in Cataca was that they were always mired in their nostalgic memories, and the more they insisted on conjuring them the deeper they sank. (64)

While narrating his formative years in secondary school and college he cites specific works that affected his development as a writer, such as Joyce's *Ulysses* which "provided invaluable technical help to me in freeing language and in handling time and structures in my books"(247) and Kafka from whom he learned that "it was not necessary to demonstrate facts: it was enough for the author to have written something for it to be true, with no proof other than the power of his talent and the authority of his voice" (247).The writer provides in great detail his intellectual and emotional progress through school and the university years when he wanted to write and pursue a journalistic career.

Márquez toys with the boundaries of truth and fiction throughout his memoir. He acknowledges that his memory is often faulty, especially with regards to his crucial, formative years with his grandparents. And his explorations of key moments in his life show that, despite his vivid "intrauterine memories" (63), the events were often temporally impossible. Further, he sketches his tale with recollections of ghostly presences and occult events, alongside the documented accounts of his early successes as a writer.

With its play on time and truth, memory and storytelling, *Living to Tell the Tale's* literary form acts as early evidence for Márquez's inevitable calling as a writer, with the enticing promise of the literary career about to explode. Entwined with personal and cultural history, Márquez's portrait of himself as a young writer is as revelatory and powerful as his fiction. For through the very process of recollection, the writer surveys and explores his own history, toward the end of making and remaking the sense of who and what he is, by inquiring into some of the very conditions of self-understanding that are woven into the fabric of contemporary life itself.

Remembering for Márquez is thus tacitly a kind of writing, which, rather than being a re-presentation of the past, refigures it in and through consciousness. The very process of widening

an understanding of the past by rewriting and reconstructing it is tantamount to its deformation and, distortion. For it is often impossible to ascertain the validity of statements made by an author within a memoir or biography. Hence the veracity of truth regarding the much larger questions matters in such a text. Nonetheless, the fictional dimension of both recollection and those narratives based upon it, are often taken into account often leaving the truth claims behind. As Sidonie Smith observes, when we read or listen to an autobiographical narrative, then, we listen for and attend to the role of remembering—and conscious forgetting—in the act of making meaning out of the past and the present. In a way, life narratives, depending on the memory they construct, are records of acts of interpretation by subjects inescapably in historical time, and in their relation to their own ever-moving pasts. (Smith 24)

Rather than assuming the role of 'autobiographer', Márquez assumes the role of a reporter, a witness, who will tell it as it is. The writer says: "The truth is there were no witnesses. An authorized version would have been the legal testimony of my grandfather and his contemporaries from both factions, but if there ever was a file of documents, not even its shadow remains" (39). He could conjure up some memories a series of 'coincidences', strewn together, that he resists the desire to falsify and distort his experience, however powerful it may be. Márquez avers:

... the terror of writing can be as intolerable as the terror of not writing. In my case, moreover, I am convinced that telling the real story brings bad luck. It comforts me, however, that at times the oral account might be better than the written one, and without realizing it we may be inventing a new genre that literature needs now: the fiction of fiction. (358)

Living to Tell the Tale is in no way a conventional literary memoir but is rather, as critic Christopher Carduff writes, "a way for an elderly master to revisit the monuments of his life's work and to view them from a different angle, to exhibit them in a different light, and to at once elucidate them and deepen their mystery" (qtd in Garagiola). The writer's intimate experiences which are personal and the stories he learned from others make Márquez an autobiographer of the collective self that constitute an integral part of his identity. Being a witness in society the narrator becomes the reader of his own experience, and the writer becomes an outsider of dominant culture. For Márquez "Getting a life means getting a narrative, and vice versa" (Smith and Watson 80) and his memoir demonstrates the truth that the life lived counts for as much as how it is relayed.

The narrators of autobiographical writing as they are telling unified stories of their lives, are creating or discovering coherent selves which are the myths of identity. For there is no coherent "self" that preludes stories about identity, about "who" one is nor is there a unified, stable absolute self that can remember everything that has happened in the past. Construing

autobiographical telling as a performative act, Márquez aptly remarks: “Today I realize that the novel itself could be another novel” (230).

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Gendered Lives: A Study of Two Biographies of Indira Gandhi

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Abstract: Post-modern biographical perspective holds that biographies neither 'reveal' a 'truth' about a unified, coherent entity, nor are biographical representations untainted by politico-ideological positions. Rather identities are multiple, decentred and fluid, and subjects are constructed and (re)presented through language and shaped by the positions of those who define them. The representation of women is doubly problematized because the politics of gender also reconfigures the narration. A comparative study of two biographies of Indira Gandhi, *Indira Gandhi: A Biography* by Pupul Jayakar and *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi* by Katherine Frank demonstrates the importance of gender to female experience and representation. This paper borrows from Judith Butler's ideas of performing gender and Norman Fairclough's views on power/discourse. It interrogates the representational strategies that forge contrasting images of the gendered subject through an analysis of lexical fields used to interpret specific events and participants.

Keywords: Indira Gandhi, Pupul Jayakar, Katherine Frank, Norman Fairclough

The post-modern conception of life- writing holds that biography does not communicate an essential 'truth' about a stable, unified self; it is only a textural representation or 'fragmentary record' through which a subject is constructed. While earlier biographical research interrogated sources and texts to find a coherent core or meaning, theorists now reject the idea that a text can 'reveal' a life; all one has to work with is language with its conventions, contradictions and silences. This idea stems from the reconceptualization of the individual self as 'decentred, multiple, or unknowable' rather than fixed and open to a final interpretation. In biography, meaning is created and persons, events, and actions crafted through language and grammatical

features, to communicate certain images and ideologies. Discourses of the biographical text implicitly and explicitly set up expectations of the subject and structures the reader's approach and understanding.

Feminist theory, similarly, holds that the category of 'woman' can be understood only in terms of 'performance' – there is no essential 'woman', all we have is a discursively constructed set of gender identities, continuously created, "'becoming' rather than 'being'" (Margdant 79). Multiple, shifting identities are constructed for the female subject in different historical contexts shaped by accepted cultural models. As Judith Butler put it, "...there need not be a 'doer behind the deed'...the 'doer' is invariably constructed in and through the deed" (195). An analysis of biographies of woman subjects exemplifies the extent to which the dominant, hegemonic practices shape the delineation of women.

In the case of female politicians, the participation in political life and the construction of an alternate image of womanhood destabilizes the hierarchy that enshrines political power as masculine. The representation of such a subject is, thus, either through presenting an acceptable 'idealized' image that inscribes her within the masculine discourse, or through 'unflattering' picturization that subverts the binary frame of gender. The authorized biography by Jayakar, *Indira Gandhi: A Biography* (1992), that presents the 'idealised' Indira Gandhi, interpellates her into the cultural images of womanhood, the milieu of domestic ideals and familial norms, where as the narrative by Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi* (2001), subverts the sex-role expectations of society and is therefore seen as presenting an 'unflattering' image of her subject. Borrowing from Norman Fairclough, this paper attempts a critical discourse analysis of two crucial aspects of the biographical diegesis – the elaboration of romantic liaisons and the depiction of the declaration of Emergency, and interrogates the representational strategies that forge contrasting images of the gendered subject through an analysis of lexical fields used to interpret the specific events and participants.

Critical Discourse Analysis, which has its roots in Critical Linguistics, shows how language and grammar can be used as ideological apparatuses and texts re-examined for the way different lexical choices affect the categorization of persons, events, and actions. By making apparent the broader set of associations that may not be overtly specified, the underlying ideologies of the text can be denaturalized, (Machin and Mayr 2). "Strategies that appear normal or natural on the surface ... may, in fact, be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends" (5). The practices and conventions within and behind the text shapes and is shaped by the power interests and politics of representation.

According to Halliday, the way people are perceived is shaped by representation of transitivity or of how they are represented as acting or not acting (104). Jayakar's biography presents Indira Gandhi as chaste, demure and feminine in the depiction of relationship with her

French teacher at Shantiniketan, the German, Frank Oberdorf. Agency/ verb process belongs to the man, while the woman is given the object/ affected position. Oberdorf is activated – he “comes to Shantiniketan”, is “attracted by Indira”, has “no inhibitions expressing his admiration”, “told her she was beautiful”, “persist[s] in love”, “continu[es] to call her beautiful” (62-63, italics added). He has more voice and, therefore, more power. He is “the active, dynamic force” (van Leeuwen 43), controlling events and making things happen. Indira, on the other hand, is the receiver of the verbiage, and is described through mental and behavioural processes of transitivity. She “reacts”, continues to “offer friendship”, “withdraw[s]”, feels “vulnerable”, “insecure”, “terrified” (Jayakar 62-3). According to Van Leeuwen, ‘reaction’ is a particular kind of mental process, and social actors depicted through mental verbs about sensing and reacting tend to connote passivity (Machin and Mayr 108). Participants made subjects of mental processes are ‘reflectors’ or ‘focalizers’ of action, which makes them seem active even when there is no material process. They are humanized, but since their actions have no goal or beneficiary, they are theoretically categorized as ‘weak agents’.

Lexical or word choices set up different ‘lexical fields’ that “signify identities, values and sequences of activity” (Machin and Mayr 30). Word connotations signify without making overt statements. Jayakar portrays Indira’s words as having an “elusive quality”, she can only “hint” at a close relationship, she stands at “the threshold of a memory” but “shies away”, she ‘withdraws’ as the intensity of the relationship increases (62, italics added). She ‘offers’ friendship – a weak verb – which can be refused, as opposed to the possible verb, ‘give’. The words connote hesitation, irresolution, lack of confidence – a liminal space of indecisiveness and delicacy.

Just as her reserve and decorum are over-lexicalized through the surfeit of quasi-synonymous terms and behaviours – ‘terrified’ at the idea of marriage, “wept and wept” and “reacted angrily” (62-3) to the admiration of men – so is the idea of her sacrifice in the interests of the nation. Two relationships are renounced because “the affairs of the country were *too serious* for such *frivolity*” (Jayakar 62, italics added) and “...all involved in the freedom struggle and during battle no serious person could think of such *frivolities*” (63, italics added). Her conceptualization of marriage is depicted as “the *betrayal* of her father’s dream” (85). This is part of the ‘repertoire of images’ through which a woman political leader can be crafted, an idealized image that “could imprison and restrict women, denying their human needs and desires as it elevated them to the rarefied heights of the ethereal” (Margdant 91).

The life of purity, denial, and sacrifice, in being over-lexicalized, becomes a performance text – a set of actions that are repeated, consolidated by and consolidating the gendered subject. Indira speaks of her ‘despair and loneliness’, her ‘fears of the future’ and Oberdorf is the brief ‘incandescence’ in her life. The positive metaphor of light is here employed to deploy the deliquescent binary of the ‘darkness’ of her “hard, difficult life” (62). In connection with her public and familial role, the liaison is presented through the negative flood metaphor - “She was

not *swept away* by him...her upbringing had left her with a certain *primness* and *rectitude* which she did not lose..." (85, italics added). The lexical choices and grammatical positioning of actors are reflective of a socio- cultural regime where identity categories of duty and decorousness gain positive connotations as opposed to individualism and desire.

Indira performs in and through the text when she 'weeps' in private but expresses herself with "no emotion" (63): the resonance of the text tries to subvert the public semiurgy of strength and dominance by employing the gendered paradigms of sensitivity and suffering, "...signifying gestures through which gender itself is established" (Butler xxxi). The discourse of Jayakar's biography incorporates the powerful, dynamic man who initiates actions and the passive woman who resists and reacts.

On the other hand, Katherine Frank's biography constructs Indira Gandhi as an assertive figure with complete agency. She is described as a "mature and serious seventeen year old" who found herself "strongly attracted to a man" (97), thus, capable of actions that have an outcome. The stereotype of self- sacrifice is undermined as Indira is described as unwilling to go abroad – "she did not wish to leave the Abode of Peace or possibly, Frank Oberdorf, or both" (98). The auxiliary verb "did not" constitutes high transitivity and the authority level of a person so encoded is substantial. She is also represented in terms of interactive material (affecting people) and verbal processes – " ...she wrote to [Oberdorf] that she *did not* love him, and, she *brutally* added, she *did not want* to love him either 'even if he was the last man on earth'" (118, italics added). In addition to the high authority auxiliaries, the lexical connotations of 'brutal' with its implications of ruthlessness and remorselessness, produces the discourse of a woman in control and authoritarian, and inverts Jayakar's picture of an outwardly strong, but inherently sensitive woman. Frank further connotes the theatricality of Indira's hyperfemininity and sex role expectations of society – "Though she often *appeared* frail and vulnerable, there *was* a hard and resilient core in her: she *never* collapsed" (112, italics added). Structural oppositions are set up between appearances and actuality which problematises the gender constructs and foregrounds how it is "an act of cultural *inscription*" (Butler 199, italics in original).

The narrative on the declaration of Emergency commences with a discussion of feminism and womanhood in Jayakar's biography where Indira declares that she is "not a feminist in the accepted sense of the word" and repudiates the example of the western woman who equated emancipation "with an imitation of men"(265). This is a relational verb process about states of being, where western women and feminism are imbricated as conceptually opposed to the dignity of women. Significantly, the biographical component, which deals with the brutality of Emergency, is introduced through the prism of creative energy of women and the destructive ego of men (266-7).

A technique used by Jayakar in detailing the circumstances of the Emergency is the use of functional honorifics. She receives a “message from Prime Minister” (265), Dikshit “was convinced that there was a conspiracy against the Prime Minister” (271), “Information had reached the Prime Minister”, “‘Siddhartha, we cannot allow this,’ said a tense Prime Minister” (274). Functional honorifics represent people in terms of what they do and suggest superiority and respect, connotes importance and authoritativeness. Jayakar, thus, obscures Indira behind the legal title, mitigating her role and legitimizing the Emergency. At the same time, functionalisation reduces the person to a role, dehumanizing the social actor and denying her agency.

Similarly, Jayakar’s biography individualizes only members of Indira’s coterie – Siddhartha Shankar Ray, Barooah, Bramananda Reddy, Om Mehta, Bansi Lal – while, apart from Jayaprakash Narayan, Morarji Desai and Deshmukh, those opposing her are collectivized as “other senior leaders” and “the Opposition”. This transfers empathy and humanism to the former while denying it to the others. While the reader is given an insight into the mental processes of the former and therefore, evokes empathy, the text is silent on the deliberations and state of mind of the Opposition. On the other hand, Frank’s biography personalises all the social actors so that the reader identifies alternately with both.

Indira’s responsibility for the declaration of Emergency is removed further by the use of the passive sentence structures. “News had percolated to her...”, “Secret reports had reached her...” about the conspiracy (270), a method by which actors are hidden and ambiguity is created so that the reader’s vision is channelled and narrowed. The text becomes dense and compressed but the details of the events themselves are reduced and agents backgrounded, so that the resultant action is constructed as justified.

The semantic and grammatical forging of female dependence in Jayakar’s biography is foregrounded in the deliberations over Indira’s resignation. While Frank states that she “discussed the situation with her son, Sanjay” (372), a verbal process where she initiates the verbiage, Jayakar delineates how Sanjay “took his mother to her room, and told her *angrily* that he *would not let* her resign” (272, italics added). The man is the actor/active participant in the material process, while the woman is the goal/ patient; he is associated with the verbal process and has high deontic modality, she is the receiver of his verbiage. Indira’s modality is further reduced when another authority has to be named in decision- making – “The Prime Minister *and Ray* realized that unless immediate action was taken... there would be chaos in the country” (275, italics added). The decrease in power is indicated both by recourse to a male authority and by the use of the passive voice which removes her agency – “On Siddhartha Shankar Ray’s advice, a decision was taken by Indira Gandhi to promulgate Emergency laws...” (275). Actions can also be played down by grammatically positioning it later in the sentence. While the process mitigates responsibility, it also elides power.

Indira is also passivised through verbs of mental process: “...she felt trapped...” (275). The verb of cognition in Jayakar’s work does not connote agency or position her as a doer, though it gives the reader a glimpse into her inner turmoil. In terms of transitivity, Indira comes off as weak.

In contrast, Frank returns full responsibility for action and prepotence to Indira – “Indira did not want advice; she needed an imprimatur for a course of action that had already been set in motion the previous day...” (375). She has the capacity for agentive action as she is grammatically positioned in the dominant clause. She is attributed verbiage: “...she told Ray that she did not want to discuss Emergency with the Cabinet until *after* it had been imposed” (376, italics in original). The mental process verb, ‘want’, and the typographic variation serve to convey a sense of decisive individualism and audacity. In Frank’s text, the decisions and deeds are instantiated by Indira and, grammatically and diagetically, she regains primacy in discourse. However, her centrality and agency subvert the received notions of gender and propriety. Frank follows Jayakar in detailing how “She was *convinced* that India would self- destruct if she relinquished power” (375, italics added), but Indira is not functionalized or in need of male authority to add credence to her beliefs. Also, ‘convinced’ is a stronger mental verb than ‘realized’.

In addition to grammatical features, another representational strategy is suppression or lexical absences – absences of elements and activities that reveal the underlying ideology of the text. “What is missing from the text is just as important as what is in the text” (Machin and Mayr 85). Both Jayakar and Frank narrate the details of the meeting of Ray with Indira on 25th June, 1975, basing their record on personal interviews with Ray. In Frank’s account,

...with great emphasis and far from spontaneously, she repeated, “Some drastic, *emergent* action is needed.” Ray was struck both by the adjective ‘*emergent*’ and by the fact that grammatically Indira used the passive rather than active voice – she said action is *needed* rather than they must take action. (374, italics in original).

The transcript verb, ‘repeated’ marks the development of the discourse, and demonstrates that the initial postulation of Emergency lay with Indira, and the ‘emphasis’ manifests the implicit agenda of the consultation. Ray, himself, comments on Indira’s use of the passive – the grammatical device which hides agents and actors. When ideologically Indira constructs the necessity of strong action without implicating herself, the discursive framing of the text presents her as the person *using* the voice – the provenance of power lies with her. Responsibility and power/knowledge is attributed to her, it is the man who is attributed the mental process of being ‘struck’ by her verbiage and is the receiver of information. The verb processes represent her strongly as a ‘doing’ kind of agency.

Jayakar's biography, as a restitutive text, is silent on the event. Along with omitting crucial elements in Ray's narrative, Jayakar over-lexicalizes Indira's anxiety and uses the us/them division in pronouns used.

"Siddhartha, *we* cannot allow this," said a *tense* Prime Minister. "*I* want something done..." (274, italics added).

The use of the functional honorific adds credence to the anxiety on national interests, and the use of the mental verb process grants the reader a glimpse into the mind of the character. Secondly, the personalization of the social actor and the use of pronouns like 'us' and 'we' help the reader identify and empathise with the speaker. These pronouns "are used to align us alongside or against particular ideas. Text producers can evoke their own ideas as being our ideas and create a collective 'other' that is in opposition to these shared ideas" (Machin and Mayr 84). Jayakar positions the reader to empathise with Indira, but these representational strategies also situate her as the nervous woman whose modality and authority have to be reinforced by a male figure.

An analysis of language in a text reveals the pressures of interested investment that shape and naturalize the practices, values and ideas communicated by the text. The two biographies of Indira Gandhi reveal the subjective selective perception in the shaping of the same elements, events and actors. Neither reveals a 'truth' or 'life' but embody the 'multiple, shifting identities' constructed for a subject. The grammatical patterns, structure and omissions reveal how the authorized biography "written with the close collaboration of her subject" (Jayakar, blurb) reinstates a political leader widely regarded as autocratic and ruthless, into the matrix of normative femininity, while the other critical text presents Indira as "a woman who played a dominant role in the history of the twentieth century, and ...was voted the Woman of the Millennium" (Frank, blurb). One legitimises actions and exonerates the subject by emphasising the first element of the hyphenated identity: woman- politician. The other ascribes agency and power to the woman by not construct the subject to follow a gender script. The authorized biography creates the public woman through the discourse of female and family; it is the un-idealized image that can present a woman as being autonomous and wielding power.

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The Cartographic Paradox: Investigating the Fragmented Truth of a Map in *Adrift* and *438 Days*

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the notion of truth in survival tales, *Adrift* (1986) and *438 Days* (2015), through analysing the Cartographic element in them. Both *Adrift* and *438 Days*, described as true tales of survival (where the castaway subject survived alone at sea), employ various maps in them. Deceptively innocuous though it may appear, this research will argue how the maps in these texts have multifarious-dimensions.

A map attempts to be truthful, by relying on order and factuality. It has ability to compress mammoth details, while simultaneously presenting them with astounding clarity. However, it must also depend on distortions and omissions to convey a selective reality. The map becomes a contested site, where truth and lie coexist. The understanding of truth as a solid, monolithic entity suddenly shatters. This ambivalence becomes our entry point in understanding the nuanced nature of a map in life writing. Its paradoxical existence, its interconnectedness with things beyond itself, allows the map to possess an added dimension, which the written word does not possess.

Furthermore, this paper will highlight how maps in survivor tales do not just place the narrative, but themselves exhibit a narrative potential. The relation between the written word and the experienced world culminates harmoniously in the visual world of map. This study will argue how the map provides a framework necessary to structure the text. Furthermore, this paper will also depict how a map transcends its factual role, and becomes a holder of memories by making the survivor's traumatic experience more palpable. This research will ultimately attempt to challenge the rhetoric of concealment around maps, and pierce through the myth of their apparent objectivity. Through a work of select scholars this study will scrutinise maps as social constructions of power and knowledge in survivor narratives which mould the reader's understanding of truth.

Keywords: Maps, Truth, Life Writing, Survivor Narratives, Power, Knowledge, Cartography

Life at sea has never been easy. Cut off from the comforts of land, the sailor often had to face extreme odds – unruly storms, titanic waves and the unrelenting pangs of hunger and thirst. To enter willingly into the briny waters, is to enter in a primordial world detached from safety of civilisation, where disaster was a real possibility. “The sea represented a frontier filled with danger. Treacherous waters, hidden reefs, and vicious sea life meant that many sailors never returned” (Cook 26). Despite the massive strides made in technological advancement, not much has changed for life at sea. Unfortunately, for Steven Callahan and Salvador Alvarenga, these disasters soon became a horrifying reality. In 1981, Steven Callahan set out to sail across the Atlantic Ocean on his self-designed ship, the *Napoleon Solo*. A few days into the voyage, he encountered a terrifying storm which caused his ship to capsize. Callahan barely escaped the sinking vessel, while managing to salvage an inflatable raft from the debris. For the next seventy-six days this small raft would be his shelter. He faced ravaging storms, man-eating sharks, extreme physical and mental torture as his body and mind were pushed to the brink of human survival. And he survived to tell the tale. *Adrift: 76 Days Lost at Sea* (1986) is an autobiographical work chronicling Callahan’s incredulous journey across choppy waters. After release, *Adrift* was met with instant success and managed to stay on the New York Times bestseller list for an amazing thirty-six weeks. The other figure of interest for this study is Salvador Alvarenga. In 2012, he set out on a fishing expedition off the coast of Mexico along with an inexperienced young seaman Cordoba. Shortly after beginning their journey a storm blew them off course. Alvarenga immediately sent out a transmission for help, but the rescue party failed to locate their vessel. Unknown to him at the time, Alvarenga would go on to survive for more than a year (four hundred and sixty days to be precise) floating across the Pacific Ocean. On this journey he would battle exhaustion, face suicidal thoughts and witness the tragic demise of his only companion. This epic survival quest was penned down by journalist Jonathan Franklin, titled *438 Days* and published in the year 2015.

Both *Adrift* and *438 Days* are promoted as genuine survival narratives, emphasising the element of truth in them. It is precisely this label of truth which my study engages with. The eventful ordeal is grounded in the real non-fictional world; hence the stories are considered indubitably truthful. However, the presence of truth in Life writing is a conflicted and fluid notion. “All life stories claim to tell a ‘true life story’. Yet each life story genre highlights different aspects of the truth” (Chew and Mitchell 1). They highlight the ambivalent and varying nature of truth. The claim towards veracity is further problematised due to a peculiar characteristic of this journey. The only eye-witness of the ordeal, who could vouch for its credibility, is the survivor himself. Callahan was a lone individual, and Alvarenga’s fellow shipmate Cordoba did not survive the ordeal. The testimony of the subject is the only primary

proof available. Specifically with Alvarenga, his personal testimony was under great scrutiny. He was accused of cannibalism, deceit and even had to undertake a polygraph test. A million dollar lawsuit was filed against him by Cordoba's family. It must be noted that *Adrift* and *438 Days* offer not just the factual documentation of the event, they also provide an intimate and subjective record of the experience. Though scientific remapping and research could suggest the degree of truthfulness of the stories told, it cannot be completely assertive in its findings.

It is against this contextual background that my study attempts to understand the notion of truth in *Adrift* and *438 Days*. The focus of this research is not to determine the veracity of the tales, rather an attempt will be made to understand the how truth is constructed in these survivor narratives through investigating the cartographic element in them.

Before one begins reading these tales of adventure, a fascinating encounter takes place - an encounter with a map. Both *438 Days* and *Adrift* present an intricately designed map which offers a factual as well as a visual summary of the survival quests. *438 Days'* wide map, (see fig. 1), is a dark canvas sprawled across two pages, presenting not only the topographical details of the perilous odyssey, but also a chronological summation of the events. As the story proceeds several more maps make an appearance (see fig. 2, fig. 3), each depicting a particular phase in Alvarenga's journey. *Adrift* too begins with a similar design (see fig. 4) – a two paged map chronicling Callahan's geographical journey. Whereas the map used in *438 Days* is precise and immaculate, *Adrift's* cartographic elements are more crudely presented. But both maps serve the required purpose – to give a bird's eye view of the entire quest, while offering enough tantalising details to pique the reader's interest.

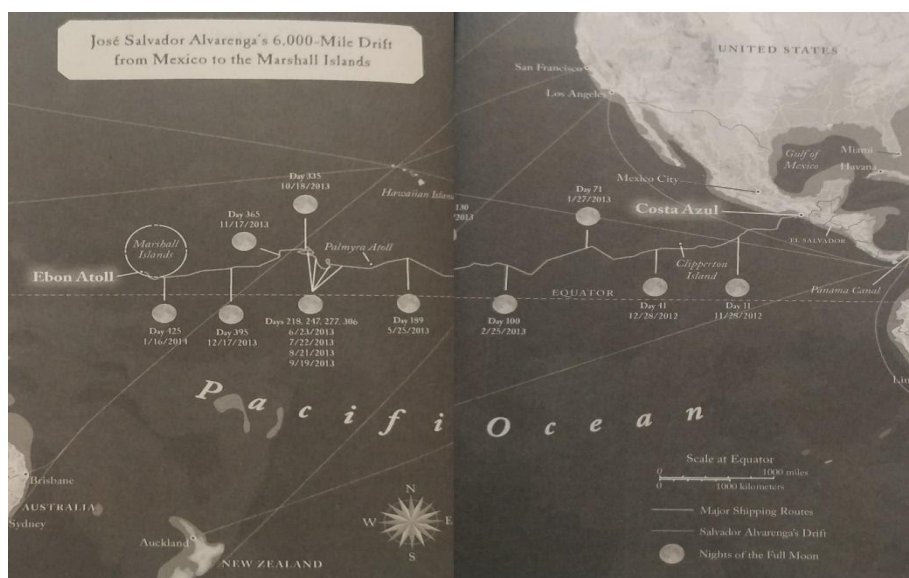


Fig. 1. Alvarenga's journey represented in a map right at the beginning of the *438 Days*.

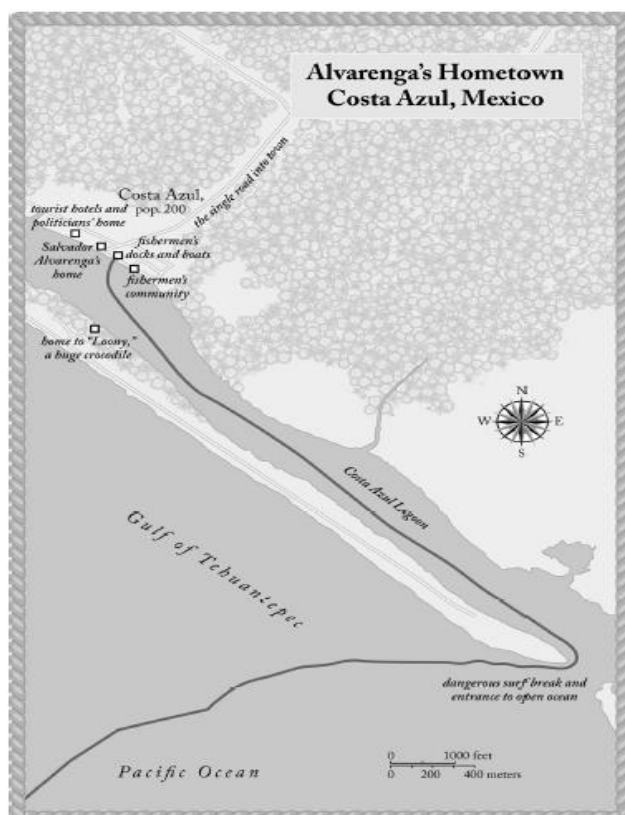


Fig. 2. Map of the dangerous surf break where Alvarenga entered the ocean.

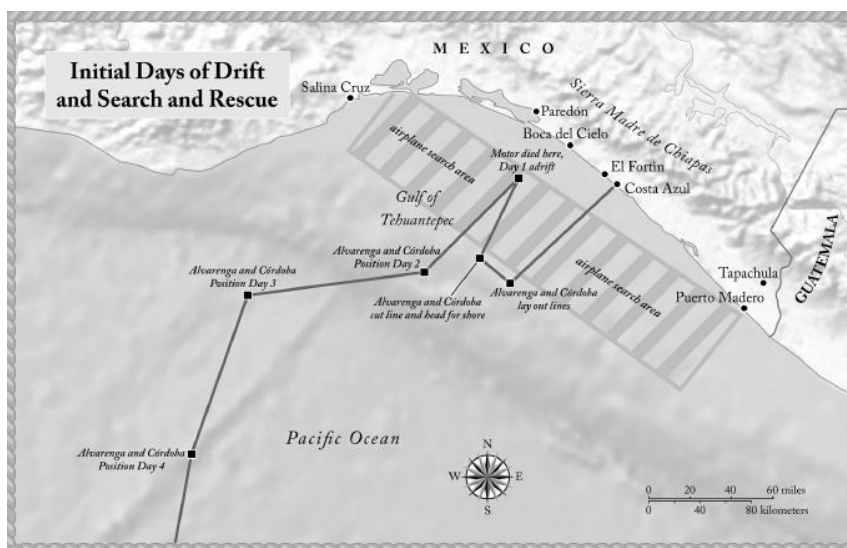


Fig. 3. Map representing the initial days of Rescue after Alvarenga's distress call.

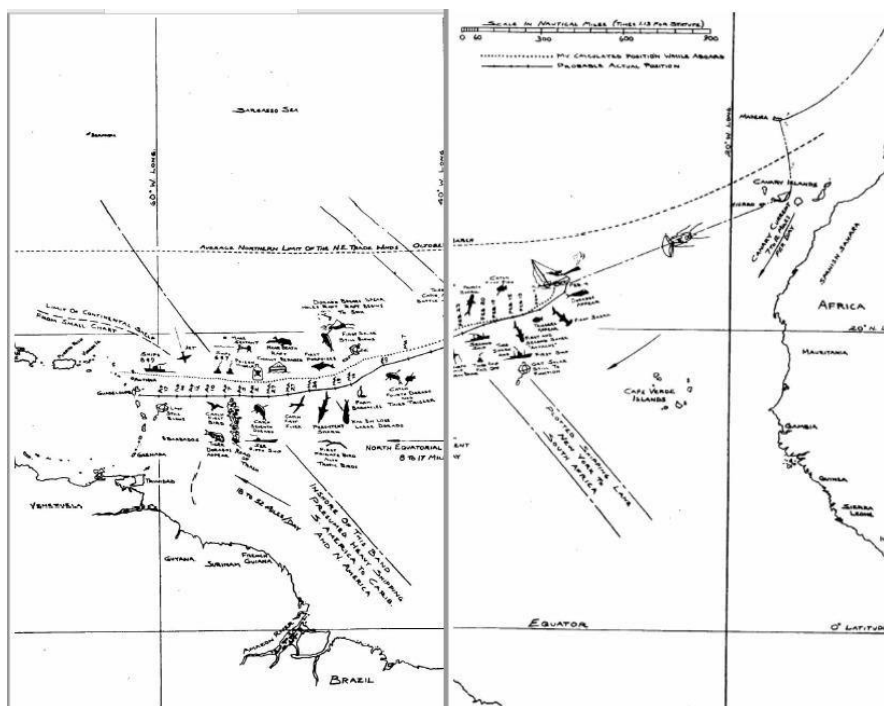


Fig. 4. Steven Callahan's journey printed in the beginning of *Adrift*.

Deceptively innocuous though it may appear, the positioning of the map right at the inception of the narrative is a significant occurrence. The presence of the map asserts an indisputable fact - the journey did happen and here's the definitive proof. However, this paper suggests that the apparent objectivity of the cartographic elements conceals multifarious meanings, which offer a fragmented and scattered version of truth in survivor narratives. An expertly crafted map ensnares the readers in an invisible web, guiding their movements through the entire length of the narrative. The ambivalent nature of a map will be revealed subsequently, as one realises how the same map performs varied roles, from cementing the credibility of a narrative to stimulating the readers fantasy.

A map is a practical tool which embodies precision and accuracy. Its ability to compress mammoth details, while simultaneously presenting them with astounding clarity highlights its utility value. In simple words, a map acts as a storage space for factual information. Muehrcke and Muehrcke in their essay *Maps in Literature* (1974) argue that there exists a 'force of truth in maps' (327). This 'force' lends the map an authoritative agency. Herein lies the appeal to position it at the very beginning of the narrative. As the reader interacts with it, Alvarenga's and Callahan's story becomes more believable. An ordered and truthful map wraps the text in an aura of authenticity.

Howard McCord in his poem 'Listening to Maps' writes:

The page is a mind's track.

Everything reveals. It is not necessary to read. (lines 12 -13)

McCord's lines highlight an ingenious ability of the map – it can subtly disarm the reader's inhibitions regarding the believability of a tale. A map appears as an exact truth which should not be contested. It is no more 'necessary' to read Alvarenga's or Callahan's tale to test its credibility. The map itself becomes a stamp of veracity. The map in *Adrift* too 'reveals' the timeline of the ordeal, by showing specific dates of the journey. Accompanying this timeline are selected events which took place during Callahan's ordeal, in the form of miniature sketches (see fig. 4). 'First Shark', 'Get Solar Still to Work', 'Catch First Fish' are a few examples. The map reveals both the duration and the perils faced in the journey. *438 Days* also plots Alvarenga's journey in precise details by mentioning particular days – 'Day 11', 'Day 41', 'Day 71' et cetera. Both the maps offer specific details of the respective quest.

The authors further claim that "No map, of course, can be completely 'true'. It must sacrifice truth in one dimension to show truth in another. Yet writers still find an irresistible force of truth in maps. Perhaps this is because maps possess a spatial fidelity that no words can capture" (Muehrcke and Muehrcke 329). A map is connected to both an external space, and the experience of an individual in that particular space. Because of its interconnectedness with things beyond itself it has an added dimension. A dimension, and this must be noted, the written word does not possess. However, the assertion that no map can be completely 'true', pits it against the belief that a map is always honest. McCord's poem too reiterates this sentiment:

There is no way to satirize a map.
It keeps telling you where you are.
And if you're not there,
you're lost. Everything is reduced
to meaning.

A map may lie, but it never jokes. (lines 32-37)

Both the writers and the poet suggest that a map must sacrifice something to appear truthful. This paradoxical condition suggests that a map must lie to offer truth. The understanding of truth as a solid, monolithic entity does not hold true anymore. How does one explain this anomaly?

Mark Monmier in his book *How to lie with Maps* (1991) offers a possible explanation. He writes, "To portray meaningful relationships for a complex, three-dimensional world on a flat sheet of paper or a video screen, a map must distort reality" (1). A map is essentially a representation of an outward reality, and any representation is subjective by nature. The map maker has to decide what must be included and excluded from the map. If a map has too much information, it runs the risk of losing clarity in a flood of detail. Monmier argues that, "Reality is

three-dimensional, rich in detail, and far too factual to allow a complete yet uncluttered two-dimensional graphic scale model. Indeed, a map that did not generalize would be useless” (1). Let us consider the map in *438 Days* (fig. 1). The specific days depicted in the map are selected because they fall on the full moon. If the map were to present all the four hundred and thirty-eight days it would be cluttered and practically useless, defeating its very purpose. For a map to be of any use it must depict an incomplete reality. Monmier terms this the ‘Cartographic Paradox’ – a map must lie to tell the truth.

A map distorts the reality it represents, by scaling it down to a smaller size. In the novel *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893), Lewis Carroll humorously addresses the issue of practicality and representation in map making. The traveller ‘Mein Herr’ describes the cartographic practices of his world:

"That's another thing we've learned from your Nation," said Mein Herr, "map-making. But we've carried it much further than you. What do you consider the largest map that would be really useful?"

"About six inches to the mile."

"Only six inches!" exclaimed Mein Herr. "We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!"

"Have you used it much?" I enquired.

"It has never been spread out, yet," said Mein Herr: "the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well. (115)

Though Carroll stretches the element of distortion to an extreme, one understands the point he’s trying to convey. To create an exact replica of the reality is an unattainable task. The map demands our belief, that what it shows correlates to an outward reality. In his short story *The Mapmaker* (2006), Neil Gaiman unabashedly explains the folly of creating an exact map. He writes, “The more accurate the map, the more it resembles the territory. The most accurate map possible would be the territory, and thus would be perfectly accurate and perfectly useless” (4).

A map attempts to be truthful, by relying on order and factuality. But at the same time, it must also depend on distortions and omissions to convey useful information. The map becomes a contested site, where truth and lie coexist. This sense of ambivalence serves as our entry point in understanding the complex nature of a map. The friction between truth and lie, engender an unusual depth in the map, which goes well beyond the physical paper it is printed on. This nuanced nature of the map will be investigated in the subsequent sections.

The map is indeed a masterpiece of utility, but its abilities are not chained to the domains of truth and accuracy. A map is also an imaginative and creative work of art. A map is a promise of a new unexplored world. It has an element of fascination and wonder attached to it, which stimulates the reader. Josef Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* touches upon the alluring nature of a map. Marlow, the narrator remarks:

“Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, ‘When I grow up I will go there.’ The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. Other places were scattered about the Equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. I have been in some of them, and . . . well, we won’t talk about that. But there was one yet—the biggest, the most blank, so to speak— that I had a hankering after” (8).

The ‘blank spaces’ in a map are not really empty. They hold in them the capacity to arouse wonder, delight, fear, adventure and even confusion. Muehrcke and Muehrcke characterise the essence of a map as a ‘controlled abstraction’ (317). The abstract nature of map allows the reader to fantasize about the ‘blank spaces’, filling them with their own meaning. What is a blank space, if not an invitation to construct one’s own version of reality? It’s worth noting here that the ability to entice a potential reader is yet another reason why a map is positioned at the beginning of the narrative. Let us look closely at the information offered in the map in *Adrift* (fig. 4). Alongside factual details, the scribbled figures of events are strange yet enticing to watch. The reader knows what happened, but does not know how the event came to pass. The reader is left to imagine! The effect of the map is magnetic. It attracts the reader, and the more time one spends reading a map the more invested one becomes.

The functions of a map become synonymous with that of an advertisement. Monmier argues that both maps and advertisements have a common trait – the necessity to broadcast an appropriated version of truth. He argues that, “an advertisement must create an image that’s appealing and a map must present an image that’s clear, but neither can meet its goal by telling or showing everything” (58). Both strive to create a tantalising and interactive graphic outlet. He further claims that maps are proven ‘attention getters’ (58), which is also the aim of an advertisement. The maps used in *Adrift* and *438 Days*, act as visual stimuli. They perform both functional and aesthetic roles, which delights but also informs. The map is an immensely flexible tool, performing silently on different fronts.

But perhaps a map’s most fascinating trait lies in its narrative capacity. A map’s relation with storytelling is not a novel occurrence. Since the beginning of time the cartographer has

depended on the tales of voyagers and seafarers to map foreign lands. Alison Russell in his essay *Getting the Lay of the Land: Maps and Travel Writing* writes, “The impulse to map the world or any part of it, or to trace one's path through geographic space, has much in common with the travel writer's need to render a journey or place in language” (38). The linking of travel and narrating one's experience with mapping is an attempt to fathom one's own position in an alien setting. The map makes the unfamiliar, familiar. Paul Theroux in *Mapping the World* (1981) writes, “A map can do many things, but I think its chief use is in lessening our fear of foreign parts and helping us anticipate the problems of dislocation. Maps give the world coherence” (280).

Theroux's claim of maps providing coherence transcends the boundary of topographical order and spills over in the textual world. A map is not just an additive ornamentation to attract the potential reader, but also a mould which shapes the writers understanding of the book itself. A map and a book exist in a complementary relationship, the former offering the site as well as the sequencing of events. The map provides a framework necessary to structure the text. Its presence establishes tight narrative patterns. It is important to note that a map is not subservient to the book. Its purpose is not limited to merely help ground the story, instead a map can give birth to story itself! Robert Louis Stevenson's famous novel *Treasure Island* (1883) originated from a map he drew to entertain his stepson. In his work, *Essays in the Art of Writing* (1905) he describes how a map propelled him into a fictional world. He writes, “I made the map of an island; it was elaborately and (I thought) beautifully coloured; the shape of it took my fancy beyond expression; it contained harbours that pleased me like sonnets; and with the unconsciousness of the predestined, I ticketed my performance ‘Treasure Island’. (113)”

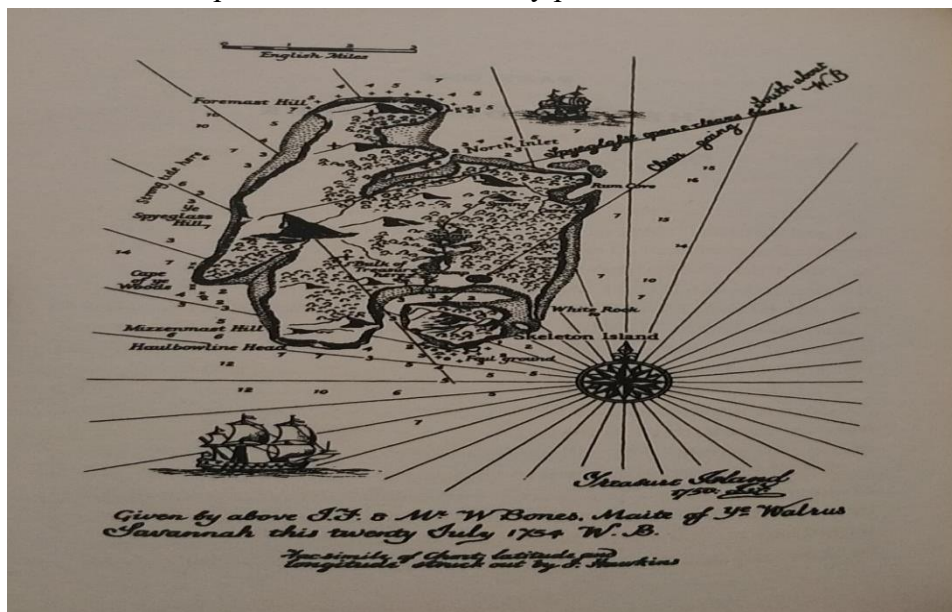


Fig. 5. The fabled map which led to the creation of *Treasure Island*.

The map did not just offer the site for ‘Treasure Island’ but also catapulted him into writing the story itself. He adds, “As I paused upon my map of ‘Treasure Island,’ the future character of the book began to appear there visibly among imaginary woods; and their brown faces and bright weapons peeped out upon me from unexpected quarters, as they passed to and fro, fighting and hunting treasure, on these few square inches of a flat projection. The next thing I knew I had some papers before me and was writing out a list of chapters (113)”.

Where Stevenson’s map was a figment of his imagination, the maps in *Adrift* and *438 Days* are based upon the real world despite their highly subjective characteristics. However, the focus of this argument is to highlight the ability of a map, fictional or real, to act as a catalyst for the narrative. In short, the maps in the concerned texts do not just place the narrative, but themselves exhibit a narrative potential. By offering the chronological summary, the geographical setting and a holistic point of view, the map allows the writer to create a new world. The relation between the written word and the experienced world culminates harmoniously in the visual world of map. The presence of a map in the book also helps the reader to visualise the scale of the events as they happened. Tania Rosetto in her article *Theorizing Maps with Literature* argues that the “cartographic and novel work in concert to shape the reader’s perception of space” (516). A map also allows the reader to trace the progress of a character. In *Adrift* and *438 Days*, the detailed map acts as a guide which ensures that the reader is not lost in unfamiliar territory. It facilitates a deeper understanding of the text. The map is no longer an appendage attached to a text, rather it breathes life in the world of the text. In a fascinating turn of events, the text has become a commentary on the map!

Caquard in his article, *Narrative Cartography: From Mapping Stories to the Narrative of Maps and Mapping* (2014) also highlights the emotional capacity of the map. He argues that a map transcends its factual role, and becomes a holder of our memories (102). For Callahan and Alvarenga the map is a record of their traumatic survival and their journey, and arguably the most important struggle of their lives. It is a reminder that they looked Death in the eye, and survived to tell the tale. Caquard further writes, “The maps of stories of individuals who have experienced tragic life events, such as forced migration and accidents, can serve multiple purposes beyond the simple location of a chain of events. At a personal level, mapping can serve as a therapeutic and healing process” (102). The map makes the traumatic experience more palpable, allowing them to come to terms with the immensity of their feat through a tangible medium. The map performs a cathartic role for survivors of trauma. The chaotic, nonlinear journey is condensed in a structured format, which allows them to impose a semblance of order on a deeply traumatizing ordeal.____

The use of maps in *Adrift* and *438 Days* emphasise the fact that maps are not objective communication tools. To consider a map as an autonomous and scientific source of information, is to submit to the rhetoric of concealment around them. Jeremy W. Crampton in *Maps as Social*

Constructions: Power, Communication and Visualization (2001) defines maps as ‘Social Constructions’ (240). He argues that maps function as an intermediary medium between the mapmaker and the reader. The map is not the end product, it is the reader who has to extract meaning out of it. Maps create a hierarchical chain between the mapmaker and the reader, where the latter is on the receiving end. The function of the map then does not remain limited to providing scientifically accurate data, but it’s evolved to affect the psychology of the map reader while wearing a garb of scientific indifference. The map has to be moulded in a certain manner to incite the required emotions – awe, incredulity or amazement. Once we pierce through the apparent precise, calculative and indifferent nature of a map, we understand its layered role in shaping a readers’ perception of truth.

The map informs and instructs, but it also delights and enthrals. It is duplicitous and manipulative, but this ambivalence permits it to represent an experience to a higher degree, beyond the rigid boundaries of factual truth and veracity. The map is like a conjuring trick. It reveals, but also conceals. It speaks, but never in entirety. It captures times and holds it stagnant, allowing us to visit the past or glimpse at the future. It is a deceitful enemy and a loyal friend.

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