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 themself. 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 phallocentric class of the learned men). This work proposes a reimagining 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 reimagining 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 themself 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 phallocentric 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 *sattīva* (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.

**Works Cited**


