International Journal of Applied Social Science ***REVIEW PAPER***
Volume 5 (1), January (2018) : 57-66 ISSN : 2394-1405 (Print)
Received : 20.12.2017; Revised : 30.12.2017; Accepted : 08.01.2018

Auto (Bio) Historiographies: Speaking Self and Nation

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ABSTRACT

Reinterpreting Habermas I see the *beshya*s in Mahasweta Devi's *Bedanabala,* documenting the lives of prostitutes in colonial Bengal during nationalist resurgence, as creating an alternative subaltern community. This *subaltern erotic sphere* rather than being an excluded, non-institutionalised arena of discourse production is self-determined as an oppositional and conceptually distinct sphere which is critical of the elite nationalist masculinist bourgeois public sphere. The *beshyas* self-manufacture themselves as unassimilated and undomesticated through a defensive reassertion of aggressive eroticism and stigmatised existence. The *beshya* could not be incorporated within the modernising project of *bhadralok* nationalism because she refused to be a static repository of uncontaminated and non-threatening "Indianness" at home. *Bedanabala* remains a generic anomaly because it is technically neither an autobiography nor biography. The fact that Bedanabala never actually "speaks" despite being in public gaze suggests that the autobiographical signifier is an epistemological absence denoting the heuristic unavailability of the signified, which in this case is the "private" life of the prostitute in colonial Bengal. The absence of an outsider who will bear witness to the authenticity of the prostitute's autobiography, leads to the collapse of her autobiography and eventually her "death" as an autobiographical subject. If nationalism and the attendant discourses seem to have given birth to the modern (bourgeois) individual who is split into public and private selves which commensurably unite in the production of sociality, Bedanabala's (ahistorical) autobiography shows ways in which the interaction between self and state is mired in contest and conflict and do not result in the production of bourgeois citizenship. By obscuring the chronologising operations of history and showing the textual production of a fictionalised autobiographical self, Mahasweta disallows Bedanabala to connect her subjectivity in text to broader historical contexts such as colonialism, nationalism and decolonisation.

Key Words : autobiography, historiography, subaltern, history, stigma

INTRODUCTION

Bedanabala deliberately falls short of becoming alternative history; it relapses into the mode of fictionality. The recuperative project of constructing the prostitute's life is overtly determined by inauthentic details recovered from melodramatic representations of prostitutes in populist films. Mahasweta constructs *Bedanabala* as a generic anomaly; is it a fictionalised autobiography, is it an alternative history, or is it a fictionalised novel? Bedanabala's subaltern identity is figuratively unveiled and those of her foremothers historically retrieved in terms of disruptions and not continuities,

How to cite this Article: Bose, Arunabha (2018). Auto (Bio) Historiographies: Speaking Self and Nation. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.,* **5** (1) : 57-66.

these women and their identities are produced through modes of displacement and deterritorialisation be it the First World War, colonialism, anticolonial agitation, partition riots, Bengal famine etc. So is *Bedanabala* about patriarchal discourse within colonialism? One can only recover traces of colonialism in the construction of the autobiographical subject since the recollecting self is trying to reconstruct the invisible past of prostitution not through specific relations of white dominance but dispersed historical operations of power which predate colonialism and continue in the post colony. So, is *Bedanabala* an engagement with the aftermath of colonialism and women's access to discourses of neoliberalism and decolonisation? Again, it frustrates the reader's attempt to anchor it historically in a consistent unravelling of retrospective memory. The incoherent and at times incomplete narrative becomes symptomatic of asymmetricality, disruption and discontinuity and it is precisely through this that it disputes the consistent, progressive and stable narrative of elite nationalism and decolonisation. Firstly the recording Self "I" houses a transgressive but nevertheless ineffectual recollecting memory as Bedanabala is old, the distortions and damages of her memory undermine her credibility to speak in the name of history. If nationalism and the attendant discourses seem to have given birth to the modern (bourgeois) individual who is split into public and private selves which commensurably unite in the production of sociality, Bedanabala's (ahistorical) autobiography shows ways in which the interaction between self and state is mired in contest and conflict and do not result in the production of bourgeois citizenship. Secondly, Mahasweta further undermines the authenticity of the recording autobiographical subject by making her invisible and absent in her own life history and thus allowing it to become a life story about collective histories of many Bedanabalas. As readers, we hardly come to know anything about the unique autobiographical subject apart from the fact that *atkaurey*rituals were observed in the household on the eighth day of her birth. Her generic name itself is subsumed within dated structures of female suffering. Through all these rhetorical innovations, Mahasweta frustrates those moments when the autobiography attempts to become a counter discourse to nationalism; Bedanabala's ability to offer authentic details about nationalist discourse, serve as a reliable witness of erotic labour or an authentic informant for the cultural anthropologist's enquiry are always under threat. By obscuring the chronologising operations of history (it should be noted that no single date is mentioned in the book) and showing the textual production of a fictionalised autobiographical self, Mahasweta disallows Bedanabala to connect her subjectivity in text to broader historical contexts such as colonialism, nationalism and decolonisation. It is precisely in this narrative manoeuvre that one locates Mahasweta's challenge to all modes of historiography including alternative models.

Butler and Spivak in *Who sings the Nation-State?*identify the systematic production of *Un-belongingness*; the nation-state produces a cohesive national identity which is homogeneous; in such a political formation the excluded as opposed to embedded communities become *Abjected*. Butler says "The state does not presuppose modes of juridical belonging because it expels and suspends modes of legal protection. It can signify the source of non-belonging. The state can make us out of sorts if not destitute". *Bedanabala* doesn't sing of the nation, her self-location outside "history" provides us an epistemological frame of reference, allowing us to see mainstream history from outside. The red light district serves as a rarified space having only a refracted contact with zones housing public history. It accesses news like Kanai Dutta and Khudiram's hanging, the shooting of Lieutenant Fraser by Jiten Chowdhary through the periodical *Bangabashi*, pictures or rumours resulting in an incoherently fragmented interweaving of official historical events and undocumented private lives. *Bedanabala* constitutes a reverse movement by telescoping macro-political events from within personal spaces, thus reluctantly narrating the nation while producing

the obscure familial narratives of *beshyas*.

National history accidently encroaches upon Bedanabala's narrative; she offers readers precious little in terms of historical details, firstly because the social production of childhood memory requires the retrospective location of the self in a time of historical ferment, something that eludes the ahistorical nature of childhood memory. Secondly, Bedanabala tries to imperfectly reconstruct the past from testimonies of prostitutes who either migrated to Bangladesh or were lost in the commercial flow of trafficked bodies. The collective memory she taps into is subject to revision, amplification and distortions; according to Appadurai, remembrance is not retracing into an available past but a "temporal casting" of the self in a "synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios" (Appadurai 1996: 30)

Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History* looks at the ideological production of the bourgeois sphere of domesticity; the received ideas of colonial modernity led to the systemic production of a Hindu domestic life. Elite middle-class Emancipationists uncritically re-produced inherited models of female awakening and autonomy within the idealised bourgeois home; thus the modern privatised female subject was produced *in* domesticity. The same historical processes that led to the emergence of the modern constitutional state, give birth to *society (Bhadaralok Samaj)*, "that realm of social interaction that interposes itself between the household on the one hand and the political state on the other" (Benhabib 1996:74-75)

> "What the Bengali literature on women's education played out was a battle between nationalist constructions of a cultural norm of the patriarchal, patrilocal, patrilineal, extended family and the ideal of the patriarchal, bourgeois, nuclear family that was implicit in the European/imperialist/universalist discourse on freedoms of individualism, citizenship and *civil society*". (Chakrabarty 1992: 11-12)

This effort to appropriate all female sexualities, colonising them under the monolithic and singular sign of domesticated marital bourgeois (hetero)sexuality shows the counter-colonising gesture of anticolonial nationalism. So, the question arises what about those undomesticated, unthinkable and diverse sexualities whose erotic impulses are not enlisted towards the singular acceptable outcome, namely the teleological production of the Hindu family/nation? Doesn't the binary differentiation of the inside from the outside reinstate colonial epistemological models in which disciplined, regulated and domesticated sexualities were contiguous with virtuous modernity? Mahasweta carries forward this argument to show the ways in which sexualising economy of elite nationalism casts off certain female sexualities as improper since they cannot be inscribed within normative patterns of legitimacy. This sexualised economy which exits outside of "culture" serves as a site of subversive multiplicity; it exceeds the negative assignation as *bhadralok samaj*'s denigrated inversion and redefines polymorphous, polygamous, multiple and transgressively perverse female sexualities as positivity. Unlike the docile bodies of Hindu wives/mothers enacted upon by appropriationist logic of nationalist wholeness, the volatile bodies of *beshyas* embody transitional, hybrid, discontinuous and heterogeneous subject positions.

> "In the wake of 1866 famine, missionaries raised a storm about the sale of young daughters to prostitutes. The prostitute was designated a criminal; the accomplished courtesan, educated, trained in music aesthetically represented the feudal society and had little in common with the low caste "common" prostitute who lived in *bazar*. The Contagious Disease Act cut through the divisions of *tawa'if, baiji, devdasi*, the Muslim divorcee, the Hindu widow and *Kulin* wife (practising prostitution to augment family income). Under British military imperatives prostitution was torn from its earlier aesthetic

contexts and to be defined increasingly as a labour oriented service - sexual commerce" (Sen 1999: 191-192)

The *beshya's* presence in the public realm makes it possible for us to move beyond the simple dichotomisation of private and public as feminine and masculine. *Bedanabala* invites us to understand the heterogeneity of the *public sphere*, for Habermas it is the "sphere of private individuals come together as public" and since women are excluded from the political debate; their role in the bourgeois public sphere is at best passive. Nancy Fraser's idea of multiple public spheres in *Rethinking the Public Sphere* proves instructive at this point. For Fraser the public sphere conflates at least three analytically distinct domain- the state, the official economy of paid employment and arenas of public discourse; she points to a multiplicity of publics that "must countenance not the exclusion but inclusion of interests and issues that bourgeois masculinist ideology labels as private and treats as inadmissible". This fragmentation of the public sphere or what I call *bhadralok samaj* allows us to see the *beshya's* problematic presence within it; unlike the Hindu wife, she is always-already *present* in the public sphere by virtue of her monopoly over an unofficial economy of paid employment which imperceptibly comes in contact with arenas of public discourse such as Swadeshi movement, widow remarriage, Damodar Floods, Nabya Hindu mission, Vaishnav reformation etc. as well as is impacted by juridical functioning of the colonial state such as The Contagious Disease Act of 1868 and New Cantonment Act. For Fraser, these multiple spheres constitute a subaltern counter-public created by those who are considered "others". I would like to call this counter-hegemonic public sphere as *subaltern erotic sphere*, where public women formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities through non-normative patterns and practices of erotic labour. This Sphere is spatially cartographed as extending beyond the twenty six red-light districts such as Muktarambabu Street, Panthidoshani Lane to encompass the *bhadralok samaj*.

Now, one must ask why Bedanabala's feminist foremothers didn't write an autobiography? The autobiography serves as a cultural instrument for the production of a special arena of women centred discourse allowing the private autobiographical self's engagement with a reading public. Perhaps unlike the Hindu wife, these women didn't need the Autobiography in order to enter into the arena of public discourse. But paradoxically what comes in contact with bourgeois public sphere is not their subjectivised speaking self but the sexed body as an erotic non-self. The autobiographical utterance can be seen as the insertion of the abjected into the "speakable" domain of colonial/postcolonial history. The production of the "speaking subject" according to Butler in *Excitable Speech* is "tied to the circumscribed production of the domain of the speakable" (Butler, 1997: 139); on the other side of the limit points of national intelligibility, visibility and citizenship lie those whose very exclusion defines the stable boundaries of the state. They are what Derrida calls the "constitutive outside" and thus outlawed from the symbolic logic of Lacanian signification. Hence, the prostitutes embody the unspeakable; their identity lies *outside* and *beyond* the representational matrix and the institutionalised discourse of intelligibility. They embody the unsocialised excess whose exclusion defines the stable boundaries of the state, and the Lacanian Imaginary which cannot be contained within the repressive logic of colonial/nationalist symbolic. Bedanabala's first person narrative marks the inaugural moment when this abjected "outside" erupts into the narrative of the nation. Kristeva's idea of abjection in *Powers of Horror* (*From Filth to Defilement*) as that which is "asserted to be a non-object of desire, abominated as abject, jettisoned from the symbolic system. It is what escapes the social rationality, the logical order on which a social aggregate is based" (Kristeva 1982: 65) allows us to see how certain subjectivities are outlawed and disavowed from the domain of language and culture. But such disavowed

subjectivities threaten the security of the stable culture; they signify the Unconscious Semiotic excess that spills into the Symbolic (male) nationalist discourse. Both by virtue of their invisibility in the circumscribed space of socialisation and their exclusion from modes of self-representation, the prostitute was *unrepresentable*. Her interpellation within *bhadralok samaj* was contingent upon her being subjected to subordination, subjection, vulnerability and domesticated sexual discipline – which constitute the normalising tools of transformation into the iconoclastic image of the *grihabadhu* (Homely Wife).

Partha Chatterjee articulates the symbiotic relationship of elite and subaltern, constitutional and populist Indian national politics, and concludes that any historiography must "trace in their mutually conditioned historicities the specific forms that have appeared, on the one hand, in the domain defined by the hegemonic project of nationalist modernity, and on the other, in the numerous fragmented resistances to that normalizing (nationalizing) project" (Chatterjee, 1995: 13); it is precisely this fragmented resistance to nationalist/modernist appropriation which Bedanabala's narrative mounts. Whereas the Hindu wife's emergence into colonial modernity was appropriated by the self-aggrandising gesture of phallocentric nationalism as a metonymic restaging of progressivism within the home; thus effacing the woman as the autobiographical subject. Bedanabala's narrative refuses the ventriloquizing of nationalism's historical patrileaniality, rather than surrender her identity to nationalism's purchasing power to be used in its feminising of the nation; she regulates sexual commerce of her own body. Similarly in *Douloti*, the Kamiya whore Douloti's disease ridden body spread out on a map of India serves as a spatial metaphoric for staging the incommensurability between the gendered subaltern non-subject and the nation; subaltern sexualities thus refuse to be transformed into fictions of nation.

The institutionalised domain of elite nationalist history thrives on the logic of exclusion, "this exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed requires the simultaneous production of a domain of *abject beings*, who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the *subject*. The abject designates here precisely those *unlivable* and *uninhabitable* zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated" (Butler 1993:3). These uninhabitable zones become co-extensive with the subaltern Erotic sphere where Feminine erotics are *not* serviceable in the thematics of state. The subaltern erotic sphere violates delimiting discourses of feminine roles and privacy since it is in dialogue with the public realm of history and in turn is invaded by men. In as far as it is subjected to the scopophilic fantasies of the state and its boundaries defined by patriarchy, it is ideologically aligned to the *bhadralok samaj*'s logic of surveillance and as far as it allows women a marginal freedom in controlling its inner dynamics by moving beyond roles of motherhood and wifehood it is removed from the *bhadralok samaj*. *Bedanabala* engages with two long established scriptural discourses and exegetical traditions, *Patita Puran*, spelling the repressive law of prohibition on one hand and Vaishnav Puran on the other, both serving as inter-texts. Vaishnavism offers a libertarian release to the woman's eroticised longing for an androgynous God thus devotionalising non-marital illicit love.

Unlike regular histories*, Bedanabala* decentralises the search for single origins, instead of romanticising a single genealogy, it constructs a hybrid genealogy having multiple points of origin. "Buried in our history, deep, deep down you'll find names. Barbilashini, Manjika, Janapdbadhu, Hattabilashini, Kamlekha, Parapushttha, Nagarnati, Ranrh, Kashabi, Gastali" (Devi 2009: 37-38). Rather than simply see her foremothers against the light of nationalist struggle, she forges a uniquely matrilineal bond with women of ill repute who lived centuries before.

"A genealogical critique refuses the search for the *origin* of gender, rather it investigates the

political stakes in designating as origin and cause those identity categories that are the effect of discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origins" (Butler 2007: xxxi);

Bedanabala traces precisely these multiple points of origin showing the interrelatedness between Bedanabala's life and women's stories such as Taramani, a theatre actress turned mistress of Lakshmidasbabu of *Boubazar* who was murdered when she fell in love with a Muslim jockey and Snehalata, who set herself ablaze when her father turned destitute trying to arrange her dowry. This genealogical interrelatedness is endemic to female autobiographical acts since "autobiographical interrelatedness is mapped along a continuum of relatedness which often coincided with gendered signatures" (Miller 1994) and it is precisely because Bedanabala's autobiographical self can only acquire meaning in relation to an infinite series of disparate female genealogies both public and private that Mahasweta adopts the genre of autobiography.

> "To tell of my life I will have to tell of those women, recount their lives from the age of Uttar Veda to present. If the sky were a sheet of paper, it would not be enough for their history to be written" (Devi 2009: 76).

It would be incorrect to call this a genealogy since most of these women were abducted by Kaminibala Dasi and were biologically unrelated to her, rather I would like to call it *subalterngyneaology* to denote a unique woman centred experience

The *subaltern erotic sphere* rather than being an excluded, non-institutionalised arena of discourse production and circulation is self-determined as an oppositional and conceptually distinct sphere which is critical of the elite nationalist masculinist bourgeois public sphere. The *beshyas* self-manufacture themselves as unassimilated, undomesticated through a defensive reassertion of aggressive eroticism and stigmatised existence. *Bedanabala* offers a telling critique of middle class marriage and the *bhadrolok* conscription of domesticated femininity for its nationalist enterprise.

> "The nationalist sentiment hankered for the harmonious family that would be the bulwark against the intrusive colonial state and the unit of a regenerated nation. The promotion of (middleclass) marriage and the placing of the husband at the head of the family were nationalist enterprises" (Sen, 1999 :179).

Kaminibala Dasi's biological daughter falls in love with an aristocrat; lured by the prospect of becoming a respectable *grihabadhu* she becomes a "kept woman" only to die in the end. Bakulbala, an ageing theatre actress of disrepute having spent her youth daydreaming of marriage to a zamindar, ends up running a whorehouse to financially sustain herself. Another *beshya-abhinetri*, Chhoto-potli, rechristened as Surjomukhi is forced to convert to Islam in order to become a legally wedded wife. Again, apart from a token reference to the *Nattini,* Binodini Dasi, the book is resolutely silent about the theatre actress in Bengal. Unlike Hindu Shastras, Islam afforded a greater flexibility to women to marry, divorce and remarry without being slandered as a whore. According to the Hindu moral code, any woman sexually engaged in a relationship outside of the monogamous heterosexual one, even though socially distinct from prostitution fell within the stigmatised domain of a *fallen woman*. The *beshya*'s fashionably non-conformist assertionism rejects the retrograde gender politics that unfolds within the bourgeois domestic sphere; in which the modernising operations of nationalist-reformism sought to appropriate and re-colonise sexuality in the name of liberal emancipation. The *grihabadhu'*s evolution into a "disciplined", "educated" and "modernised" woman simply conformed and corroborated the male wet dream of anticolonial phallic reassertion to compensate for its castration under colonialism since it was a theatrically choreographed and patriarchally monitored ethnic negotiation with colonial modernity. The subaltern sphere registers a visible unease with the nativist revivalist script requiring ethnic absolutism and indigeneity from the Bengali woman.

Fraser identifies the private sphere encoded with recognisably tired and rehearsed gender markers such as motherhood and monogamous domesticity as a counter-institutional alternative to the institutionalised public sphere. But the prostitute quarters being undomesticated and un-privatised remained untouched by the institutionalised gender politics of the nationalist public sphere. What makes this counter-public sphere even more distinct is that unlike Habermas's rational, masculine and public bourgeois sphere it is infiltrated by market relations. The *beshya* could not be incorporated within the modernising project because she refused to be a static repository of uncontaminated and non-threatening "Indianness" at home. The *beshya*'s erotic capital and market capital enabled them to construct an alternative moral sphere where philanthropic actions such as contributions for flood relief and swadesi helped purchase a redemptive sociality. The nationalist bourgeois came to represent itself as an emergent ruling class, its practices and cultural preferences stood for the hallmark of civil society's cultural discourse; it sought to counteract the pre-colonial feudal model with a derivative model of colonial benevolence and establish dominance over the proletariat and peasant. The nationalist bourgeois tried very hard to appropriate and hegemonize these "different"/ "deviant" spheres but as RanajitGuha says, it was dominance *without* hegemony. Bedanabla mentions elite Calcutta *bhadraloks* such as ShyamsundarChakraborty, KrishnakumarMitra, MakhonSen but her halting recognition "Thanks to the flood I have managed to lay eyes on so many great men. Would I have ever glimpsed them otherwise" (Devi 2009: 67) alerts the reader about her distance from the *bhadralok*'s orbit of action. The Hindu Missions alongwith the *bhadralok* carried out *anti-nautch agitations* around the 1890's in order to weed out immorality and purify the red light districts in an attempt to incorporate the devadasis within the universalising rhetoric of virtuous nationalist resurgence. But this only had a limited sway with the caste Hindu *beshyas*; in an adaptive mimesis of swadesi reformism, Kaminibala starts donating for the Mission's homeopathic centre and visiting Swami Sadananda's ashram. The *bhadralok* gender reformism anchored on populist projects like abolition of sati, prohibition of child marriage and widow remarriage was exclusively a middle class pipe dream. Lata Mani in *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (1998) has documented that the practice of Sati amongst the plebeians and outcastes was either occasional or non-prevalent. Thus, reformism was polarised along class lines. The working woman, the lower class woman, the maidservant and the prostitute had no established traffic with bourgeois reformism. This is subtly revealed in an episode when an armed Swadesi youth hiding at the brothel quarters is wracked by a sense of moral revulsion towards his benefactor's profession whom he had once called "mother-figure" when in need of donation. He is rebuked by Bedanabala's father

> "such narrow minds have no business serving the motherland. We will take refuge, seek out shelter. Gratefully use their donations to our cause. And when it suits us we will turn *bhadralok*…..How can you fight when your hearts are weighed down with ancient customs? Is just the burning of foreign goods enough?" (Devi 2009: 66-67)

Now the question arises whether Bedanabala's self-representation and self-figuration inhibits the colonial prostitute's self-disclosure or enables it? Lacan's seminar on Poe's *ThePurloined Letter* identifies different subject positions in a semiological maze; the King's "glance" sees nothing and is blind to the signifying power of the letter precisely because it's a palpable presence. Bedanabala's utterance is a pre-existing public signifier disclosed and available to the "reading" public's voyeuristic gaze unlike the housewife's veiled signification. But the fact that Bedanabala never actually "speaks" despite being in public gaze suggests that the autobiographical signifier is an epistemological absence denoting the heuristic unavailability of the signified, which in this case

is the "private" life of the prostitute in colonial Bengal. But the paradox here is the ultimate unknowability of Kaminibala's actual narrative which is available only through the unverified retelling of Bedanabala, whose own narrative is ventriloquized through Mahasweta's historical recreation. The feminist historiographer/fictionaliser Mahasweta's dissembling and masquerading (Auto)Biography cannot recover the alternative history of nationalism through Bedanabala's narrative because the primal signification and the "real" initiator-inscriber of the autobiographical word are both postcolonial fictions. So, if the public woman is a fictionalised apparition who never spoke; how can her "autobiography" be used for the historical recovery of subaltern colonial archives as the translator Sunandini Banerjee seems to suggest? It appears the historian, the fictionaliser (Mahasweta) and the reader are all trapped in a phantasmatic circuit in which the original word is lost and what is being transferred is a metaliguistic puzzle whose semiological plenitude masks the dispossession of the historical signified (autobiographical content). The linguistic occasion for the stigmatised subject to re-produce and achieve an unstigmatised visibility and intelligibility is thus denied to her by the author.

So, what prohibited the *beshya*'s from generating testimonial narratives of their own? ShoshanaFelman and DoriLaub's account of the necessity and impossibility of witnessing and bearing testimony to historical events in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992) can help us understand the *beshya*'s inability to narrate the history she has lived through. Felman alerts us to an ethical and epistemological rift between the Historian (removed from the event) and the eyewitness (unique beholder of the truth of the event). She argues that the testimonial is an unrepeatable performance which the Historian cannot reproduce "What does it mean that the testimony cannot be simply reported or narrated by another?" (Felman1992 : 205). Felman further clarifies the ambivalent nature of the testimony; because its impossibility, unclarity, obscurity, elision and silence is precisely what makes it performatively powerful and more authentic than historiography. This paradox allows us to understand why Bedanabala cannot testify to the history she has witnessed and why Mahasweta's substitutive narrative cannot recuperate the unauthored primal testimonial. Felman's analysis further allows us to understand how conditions of stigmatisation and forced de-socialisation progressively corrode subjectivity leading to the cognitive demise of the perceptual subject. Ostracisation convinces the prostitute (witnessing the brothel from *within*) that her reality is uncommunicable to the *outside* world; having lost an audience to address her experience, she eventually loses the ability to witness her own reality and to speak it to the outsider. The absence of an outsider who will bear witness to the authenticity of the prostitute's autobiography, leads to the collapse of her autobiography and eventually her "death" as an autobiographical subject. Being incomprehensible to the *bhadraloksamaj*, she is an empirical impossibility. Testifying from inside the brothel first requires the recognition of not being inside; recognition of inhabiting a community of shared otherness with other outcastes, and finally recognition of one's separation from history proper that unfolds outside. Testifying from inside *otherness* is impossible since the outsider *cannot witness* and ratify the story's truth and the insider *cannot re-tell* and *re-live* the horror of her reality again which history making requires. The very collapse of a finite historical subjectivity is evident from Bedanabala's use of a generic name and her confusion with genealogical details.

Erwin Goffman's sociological formulation of *stigma* as a blemish which gets transplanted as an underlying moral failing leading to self-reinterpretation as a discreditable entity can further clarify this point. The *beshya*'s "ego identity" which is unblemished is progressively contaminated by negative meanings affixed to her "social identity"; transforming her from being discredited to

being discreditable. Goffman's account of the impossibility of disclosure to the psychiatrist can be transposed to understand Bedanabala's impossibility to speak to a historian/biographer. Appropriating Goffman, we can say that the *beshya* displays "situational improprieties" through her un-housewife like conduct which *bhadraloksamaj* and *PatitaPuran* classify as spiritual immorality. The *bhadralokSamaj* thus becomes Goffman's*Total Institution*; since its moral attack on the *beshya*inexorably leads her to "stage" her otherness as a defensive preservation of identity and in turn gets recognised as a symptom of deviance requiring social treatment.

So, now the question arises in what ways *Bedanabala*either resembles or deviates from women's autobiographies. Shari Benstock in *The Private Self* (1988) believes that autobiography engenders a desired and deferred union between textuality (writing) and sexuality (selfhood) but ends up revealing a widening divergence between individual and the social "What begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction" (Benstock 1988: 11); *Bedanabala* too generates an autobiographical fiction inorder to retrospectively recuperate the colonial world which housed the speaking subject. Unlike Male Autobiographies where the act of knowing is a persistent differentiation of the "self"; *Bedanabala* imitates the model of gendered autobiographies in narrating a communitarian history. James Olney's instructive characterisation of autobiographical self as a medium in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980); and of history being *transformed* by being lived through the unique medium of individual's peculiar psychic configuration allows us to understand how public events are reshaped and transformed when transferred through the private perspectival consciousness. But unlike regular autobiographies, *Bedanabala*never teleologically progresses towards an arrival into self-knowledge, she ends by asking the reader "What of me?" (Devi 2009: 76). Like women's permeable ego boundaries, *Bedanabala* too has porous generic boundaries admitting a transference and osmosis between the world and the text, the beshya and the reader, Mahasweta and Bedanabala. Rachel BlauDuPlessis in *For the Etruscans: Sexual Difference and Artistic Production* (1985) coins the idea of "Radical Parataxis" as a form of verbal quilting where everything is joined with no stratification and ranking. *Bedanabala*can be seen as performing a postcolonial parataxis, structurally embodying an elasticity which includes stigmatised lives of whores, maidservants and theatre actresses without privileging the national over personal and history over domesticity. Like the women it chronicles, the text is generically impure and hybrid. Francoise Lionnet's concept and practice of *Metissage* or cultural braiding " as a site of undecidability and indeterminacy where solidarity becomes the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages" (Lionnet 1989: 6) allows us to see how socially insignificant voices through their creolised, racialised and colonialized identity deflate and explode the hegemonic narrative of elitist history. The ideological violence performed by colonial archives has silenced and distorted the memories and testimonials of subalterns so that truth has been replaced by nationalist bombast fictionalising the failure of the independent decolonised state. Endorsing impure forms of counter-history like this *Auto(Bio)Historiography* becomes less an effort to un-cover and re-cover an unrecorded past of nationalism and more of an effort to dent history's authenticity by revealing the deliberate opacity, obscurity and invisibility of the *beshya* within it.

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