

Actresses on Bengali Stage – Nati Binodini and Moyna: the Present Re-imagines the Past

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Abstract

The Bengal Renaissance ushered in the process of multifaceted modernization resulting in the major reshaping of the theatrical space both in terms of convention and praxis. Abandoning the convention of cross-dressing (where the earlier male actors were dressed as women to represent female characters), this new theatrical space began to accommodate the women actors for the representation of female characters. Parallel with the emergence of the “New Woman” in the upper middle class society of the nineteenth century, the women actors also constituted a segregated sphere of the emancipated women. Although “free” to encounter the public sphere, they were denied the degree of social acceptability/status that was otherwise available to the then upper middle class “New Women.” This paper tries to locate the experience of a female actor of nineteenth century: Binodini Dasi: as is rendered in her two short autobiographical writings and the re-imagination of that experience in the twentieth century play *Tiner Taloar* by Utpal Dutt. Dutt uses the historical material to explore the consolidation and redefinition of the feminine space in his contemporary theatre.

[**Keywords:** theatre, actress, performance, prostitution, protest, commodification, liberty.]

The Bengal Renaissance ushered in the process of multifaceted modernization resulting in the major reshaping of the theatrical space both in terms of convention and praxis. Abandoning the convention of cross-dressing (whereas the earlier male actors were dressed as women to represent female characters), this new theatrical space began to accommodate the women actors for the representation of female characters. Parallel with the emergence of the “New Woman” in the upper middle class society of the nineteenth century, the women actors also constituted a segregated sphere of the emancipated women. Although “free” to encounter the public sphere, they were denied the degree of social acceptability/status that was otherwise available to the then upper middle class “New Women.” This paper tries to locate the experience of a female actor of nineteenth century: Binodini Dasi: as is rendered in her two short autobiographical writings and the re-imagination of that experience in the twentieth century play *Tiner Taloar* by Utpal Dutt. Dutt uses these two historical materials to explore the consolidation and redefinition of the feminine space in his contemporary theatre. In the first section of our paper Madhumita Roy would try to depict the history, the fact, as inscribed by the actress Binodini herself while in the second section

Debmalya Das would probe into Dutt's re-imagining of that historical reality within the fictional domain of his play, *Tiner Taloar*.

(I)

While exploring the aesthetics of Indian Feminist Theatre, one must come across the play *Nati Binodini* presented by Theatre and Television Associates, Delhi, under the direction of Amal Allana. Based on the two memoirs of Binodini, *Aamar Katha (My Life)* and *Aamar Abhinetri Jiban (My Life as an Actress)*, the play involved

four actresses who suggested the growing maturity, her conflicting emotions, and the schizophrenic breakdown of Binodini's personality...Structured in the flashback mode with the telescoping of the present and the past, the play opened with the octogenarian Binodini writing out her autobiography. As the old Binodini reads out from her writings, the scene moves back to reveal four other Binodinis of different ages...sometimes narrating the story of Binodini's life, at times enacting scenes from her plays, and at times going into depression born of a shattered life.¹

The dramatic adaptation aptly synchronizes with the two texts, where the author Binodini assumes both subjective and objective positions. She employs a unique mode of narration in *Aamar Katha*. The epistolary mode of narrating her life, in a way, confirms her self-assertion, while, a much later manifesto of her memoir, *Aamar Abhinetri Jiban*, embodies a poetic/lyrical quality in its eloquent, candid style. *Aamar Katha* was first published in 1912. Its second edition was published in 1913. Prior to its entire composition, fragments of the text were incorporated in two consecutive issues of the monthly journal *Natyamandir*, edited by Amarendranath Dutta under the title, *Abhinetrir Atmakatha*. The other one, *Aamar Abhinetri Jiban*, could not achieve its desired end. It was serialized in the weekly journal *Rup O Ranga*, edited by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay and Nirmalchandra Chandra between January 1924, and May 1925 in eleven issues. Due to certain unknown reasons the serialization stopped abruptly. Unfortunately, it was replaced by *Rangalaye Tirish Batsar (Thirty Years in Theatre)* of Apareshchandra Mukhopadhyay. Binodini's scripting of her professional/personal life, thus, failed to attain completion. The two texts, in spite of certain shortcomings, stand apart as the significant witnesses of Binodini's theatrical life. Segregating the actress on the stage and the individual outside the theatrical domain, they successfully delineate the position of women vis-à-vis the stage and society.

In *Aamar Katha* Binodini [1863(?)–1941] recounts her initiation into the life of an actress. Her camaraderie with Ganga Baiji directed her towards the realm of theatre. She recollects:

When I was nine, a singer came to reside in our apartment...She was an orphan, my mother and grandmother used to love her as their daughter.

Her name was Ganga Baiji. Later, she became a famous singer in the Star Theatre...We became friends and used to call each other “Golap”.²

Binodini took her initial musical lessons from her. The other tenants of their house repelled her childhood fascination. In her words, “they lived like husbands and wives, quarreled vehemently and again patched up as if nothing had happened”³. Interestingly, the “strangers” frequenting Ganga’s room always attracted her. One such encounter with Babu Purnachandra Mukhopadhyay and Brajanath Shrestha brought forth the light of dawn in her life. She was introduced to the Great National Theatre of Bhubanmohan Neogi. Binodini commemorates the moment: “From now onwards, my life began to take its shape in new mould. In that tender age, the new society, the education, the vocation: all seemed new to me. I understood nothing, knew nothing, yet, tried hard to learn the instructions.”⁴

The actress provides a catalogue of only four actresses, who performed on the stage of the Great National Theatre. They were Raja (Rajkumari), Kshetramani, Lakshmi and Narayani. Such a scanty numerical representation does not evoke wonder if one casts a look at the then scenario of the Bengali Stage.

The notion of the professional female performing artists had been synonymous with that of the prostitutes for over two thousand years in India. Thus the “dancing girls” had dual roles as entertainers as well as courtesans. They used to enjoy what one might call a “bitter fame”. They were the only group of women exempted from the *purdah* and so, remained free from other social restrictions on dress, behaviour, sexual expression and education. Over time, they became the custodians of arts. Men sought their company not only to satiate their physical appetite but also to enjoy their singing, dancing and poetry. While the Bengali women of both rural and urban households began to perceive the dawn of emancipation in the nineteenth century, the courtesans, too, sought a better living. Theatre provided an alternative “space” for them, thereby imploring them to dream, to nurture their creativity and live up to better expectations. It was Herasim Lebedeff, who set up a Bengali playhouse in Dom Tollah and put up the Bengali version of *The Disguise* on 27th November, 1795. The playhouse was burnt down soon and Lebedeff was forced by the East India Company to leave India. Much later, the play *Bidya Sundar* was staged in Shambazar Theatre, built in 1835 in the house of Nabinchandra Bose. In the following years, the building of private stages grew rampant with the increasing interests in theatre. The Jorasanko Theatre of the Tagore household and the Belgachia Natyasala of the Rajas of Paikpara at Belgachia became the sprawling centers of theatrical activity in the city. By the late sixties of the nineteenth century, theatrical performances became frequent in Calcutta, where makeshift stages were built in the quadrangles of houses or open spaces so as to accommodate two hundred or more persons. It mesmerized the middle class youth. They themselves began to form groups and put up plays. One such group was Baghbazar Amateur Theatre, whose first production was Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Sadhabar Ekadashi* in 1868. Girishchandra

Ghosh and Ardhendushekar Mustafi were two of its major members. On 11th May, the group, renamed as Shambazar Natyasamaj, produced another of Dinabandhu's plays, *Lilabati*. The consecutive successful ventures soon established the demand for a permanent theatre. Thus, in August 1868, the journal *New Essays* wrote,

For five years now the current of theatrical and musical performances has been flowing strong in this city. There can be no doubt that such performances are more beneficial to the public than the obnoxious *jatra*, *haf-akhrai*, *panchali* etc ... But the impediments which the amateur theatre in the city has to face are growing day by day. The future of the theatre is dark ... We appeal to the owners and managers : Please get together, build a playhouse in a public place, engage actors and *actresses* on a salaried basis, sell tickets and with the sale proceeds meet the expenses.⁵ (emphasis mine)

Gradually, the Baghbazar group rented the outhouse of Madhusudan Sanyal, built a stage and decided to call the playhouse National Theatre. However, their venture did not last long. The breakaway group of National Theatre with Ardhendushekar Mustafi as the leader called itself Hindu National Theatre while the other group led by Girishchandra Ghosh retained the original name.

With the establishment of public theatres, the audience began to provide an impetus for theatre production. Hence, the production of operatic performances became rampant in order to cater to the popular interests. Such performances demanded the necessity of female artists. Thus, the need to abandon the idea of cross-dressing and the employment of women to portray female roles in the theatre was felt by the authority of the theatre houses. The initial idea of employing professional women as salaried actresses was projected by Michael Madhusudan Dutta. Bengal Theatre accepted this proposal, though their radical venture had to face insurmountable oppositions. Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who was a member of the Managing Committee, resigned on the issue. However, Saratchandra Ghosh, Priyanath Bose, Botubabu, Biharilal Chattopadhyay were in favour of this innovative idea. The problem rested in deeper realm; although Bengal faced the upsurge of modernity, it was impossible for the newly educated women of households to appear before public. Thus, the need was gratified by the concubines. Hence, a symbiotic relationship was established between the stage and the professional women. While the stage needed their presence, these concubines, too, were deliberately searching an alternative mode of sustenance. The direction of the "enlightened domain" was provided by the pioneers like Saratchandra Ghose, Upendranath Das, Bhubanmohan Neogi, while, the four trend setting actresses were Golapsundari, Jagattarini, Elokeshi, Shyamasundari. The Tagore household also played its own part in the propagation of the role of female actresses. In 1877, the women of the household successfully enacted their parts in *Aleekbabu*. In 1881, Tagore's niece Sushila performed in the roles of Balika and Saraswati in *Balmiki Pratibha*. Later, these roles were taken up by Pratibha Devi, Indira Devi. Moreover, Ramakrishna's visit to the professional

stage and his appreciation of Binodini's *Chaitanya Lila* provided another important socio-religious, hence, prestigious attestation to the actresses, thereby, abnegating the unjust condemnations voiced by *Indian News Daily* in 1876: "...the theatre has by introduction of harlots on the stage become the hot-bed of immorality and corruption"⁶, or *Statesman* in 1887:

No doubt religious dramas like *Proladh Charitra* and *Chaitanya Lila* are calculated to elevate the human character, but when we consider the vicious and immoral persons who represent these characters, we are overpowered with a feeling of disgust. It has been suggested more than once that women of the town should not be allowed to act in those theatres...These women are so many pitfalls for our young men, and should be removed from the theatres as speedily as possible.⁷

But, were the actresses usually given an apt position in the society or did they remain as the perpetual recipients of condemnations, humiliations and ill-treatments? Binodini's autobiographical assertions, with pessimism strewn everywhere, depict the grim reality under the veneer of all the appraisals and attestations.

Aamar Katha and *Aamar Abhinetri Jiban* delineate Binodini's exposure to education, fame, glory followed by her sudden, deliberate self-incarceration into the realms of oblivion. It evokes our amazement as we go through the actress's life. Binodini's decision to abandon her theatrical career at its zenith really bewilders one. Between a short span of twelve years (1874-1886), this immensely talented actress lived her life on the stage. Theatre gave her the desired freedom, the exposure, which was otherwise impossible for a girl of her background. Her training attained fruition under the guidance of Girishchandra Ghosh. Under his influence she was introduced to the unfamiliar mazes of Western education, the Western theatrical conventions, the stylistics of Western actors and actresses. The "new education" altogether functioned to mould her tastes, thereby, contributing a lot in the making of Binodini: the "Flower of the Native Stage". Binodini's entire career may be seen in four phases — she was initiated into the realms of the Great National Theatre, later, she became an intrinsic part of the Bengal Theatre; she joined the National Theatre and finally, bedecked the stage of the Star Theatre. Her journey began with the role of an "extra" in the play *Shatrusanghar*. Soon, she achieved the central role in Haralal Roy's play *Hemlata*. Throughout her career of twelve years, she portrayed almost ninety characters in about eighty plays. With her acumen she could enliven epic characters like Sita (in *Sitaharan*, *Rabanbadh*), Pramila (in *Meghnadbadh*), Draupadi (in *Pandaver Agyatabas*), Kaikeyi (in *Ramer Bonobas*), Uttara (in *Abhimanyubadh*), Gopa (in *Buddhadeb Charit*), as well as, the earthly ones like Kanchan (in *Sadhabar Ekadashi*), Kamini (in *Nabin Tapaswini*), Radhika (in *Sati Ki Kalankini*). She even depicted her skill of portraying seven different characters in the dramatic version of *Meghnadbadh*. In Bankimchandra's *Durgeshnandini*, she played both the characters of Ayesha and

Tilottama. Often, she had to portray contradictory characters within a single night. Thus, people witnessed her swift, skillful transition from the spiritual portrayal Chaitanya in *Chaitanya Lila* to Bilasini Karforma, the comical representation of the “New Woman” in *Bibaha Bibhrat*, or, from Kunda of *Bishabriksha* to Kanchan of *Sadhabar Ekadashi*.

Binodini was appreciated by many eminent people including Bankimchandra, Ramakrishna, Father Lafont, Edwin Arnold and other personalities. Her encounter with Sri Ramakrishna instigated her spiritual transformation. Binodini’s search for respite in an alternative domain of spirituality curbed her earlier ambitions, thereby, installing in her a consciousness. Thus, the commemoration of her glorious life on the stage often suffers interventions, where the narrator pauses for a moment to contemplate upon her spiritual loss or gain. Her self-condemnation, her muted notes of protest may reflect that tone of stoicism and detachment, which echoes Ramakrishna’s grace bestowed upon her: “Ma, may you achieve consciousness.”⁸ Self-humiliation, self-criticism, thus, frequently appear in Binodini’s rhetoric: “I am the daughter of humility: on one hand, my ambition bars my self-sacrifice, on the other, the glorious faces of allurements implore my soul towards them.”⁹ Was such a self-condemnation really a consequence of her spiritual elevation? Or, was it an echo of her internalization of society’s reproach incessantly directed at women like her? Binodini’s depiction of the making of the Star Theatre complicates the issue further.

While delineating the story that lies at the backdrop of the construction of the Star Theatre, Binodini reveals the hypocrisy of her compatriots. Her love towards the stage, the theatre, as well as the other fellow companions, forced her to be a subject of Gurmukh Rai’s whim. Abandoning her former paramour’s shelter, she unwillingly accepts Gurmukh’s proposal of building a playhouse in lieu of Binodini. Her guilt consciousness gets reflected in her assertion: “The concubines, like us, have to endure many ups and downs; still, they have their limits. But my destiny has always been very harsh ...Our destination has remained erroneous, whenever we desire to follow the right path, the wrong comes in the way.”¹⁰ The “woman” in her utters in utmost bereavement: “To abandon one shelter and attain another has been our perpetual law yet, in this condition I was very disturbed. People may laugh at a concubine’s guilt consciousness or pain. But, if, they consider it gravely, they may surely decipher the woman in us.”¹¹ Thus, despite all her oscillations, she finally chose to discard the “woman” in her so as to value the “actress” residing within the deeper core. Moreover, her mentor Girishchandra insisted: “It is theatre that has been the ladder of my progress...Theatre establishes one’s fame in the world perpetually.”¹² Probably, his comment sowed the seeds of ambition in her. Binodini’s colleagues, too, voluntarily proposed to name the newly constructed theatre house in the name of Binodini: the B-Theatre. However, it would be wrong if we interpret her craving for fame as the sole reason behind her subjugation under Gurmukh Rai. Above all

there was her passion for the theatre. Even her emotional encounter with her previous paramour, then violently resolute to destroy her, began to create possibilities for her return. Yet, Binodini succeeds to overcome her emotion: “I was strictly surrounded by my friends and Girish Babu; there was no way to return.”¹³ At a certain point, Gurmukh Rai, too, proposed to abandon his scheme of making theatre and promised her a sum of fifty lakhs. Binodini’s oblique hint at her friends’ disappointment at this and their endeavour to dissuade her clearly reveals that for all of them she was nothing but a bait. They could not even anticipate her spontaneous rejection of Gurmukh’s temptation. Although, the artist Binodini secured appraisals on stage, the real situation was worse. Under the scrutinizing eyes of her fellow companions she retains the degraded status of a concubine, always vulnerable to material allurements. Her identity as a low-born concubine effaced the transcendence that she achieved as an actress. Thus, the theatre that found its existence with her aid was not given her name. The name “Star” resounded with a perpetual insistence on her deprivation. Later, she also recounts her inability to put her only girl child, Shakuntala to school. While lamenting her premature demise at a tender age of twelve, Binodini reveals her intense social ostracism that lies in her inability to educate her only child. A more or less similar event is etched in Amit Maitra’s documentation of another actress, Gangamani’s theatrical career. This gifted singer could not efface the title of “Baiji” from her identity. Although she presented herself in the roles of Subhadra (in *Abhimanyubadh*), Guhakpatni (in *Ramer Bonobas*), Mandodari (in *Sitaharan*), Lakshmi Devi (in *Sri-Batsa Chinta*), Goutami (in *Buddhadeb Charit*) and mesmerized the audience with her sublime voice, the advertisement of Girishchandra Ghosh’s play *Kalapahar* (1896) inscribed her as “Ganga Baiji” in the catalogue of its dramatis personae. Finally, she embraced the predicament of an “extra” and immersed into the realms of uncertainty. Binodini’s decision of leaving the stage was her self-assertion, a muted protest against her companions’ hypocrisy. But, such a decision cannot be regarded as solely her own; apart from naming the theatre as “Star” her colleagues were conspiring to marginalize her. Moreover, when Gurmukh Rai proposed to bestow the theatre’s proprietorship on her, Girishchandra Ghosh toiled hard to dissuade Binodini and her mother from undertaking the proprietorship. Her mentor’s indifference regarding her well-being was thus clear. Possibly, he could comprehend Binodini’s disenchantment with her theatre and her compatriots. Hence, Hemendranath Dasgupta holds: “Realizing Binodini’s mind, Girish Chandra taught her roles to another actress, Kiranmala. Thus, there was no real vacuum created on the stage after Binodini’s departure.”¹⁴

Binodini’s stoic resignation in the end dissolves her earlier note of protests. She finally succumbs under self-analysis. But interestingly, the narration of her bitter experience could perturb the mind of her mentor. In “Banga Rangalaye Srimati Binodini”, Girishchandra attempts a criticism of Binodini’s autobiographical piece. Regarding her narration as an instructive prose piece, he

anticipates that Binodini's depiction of her own life, her attainment of Sri Ramakrishna's grace, would enable the "sinners" to attain salvation. According to this stalwart of theatre, Binodini's autobiography would inspire other concubines to embrace theatre and serve the society. However, one cannot overlook Girish's mild disapproval of her revealing comments. He asserts: "Binodini seeks sympathy while she unveils her mind; at some places she becomes harshly critical of the society... Autobiography demands the strategy to conceal certain things, that strategy has been violated."¹⁵ Binodini's candid autobiography could thus form a possible threat for Girish. It reveals the fragile respect with which her erstwhile mentor evaluated her literary activities. Binodini and her counterparts were thus a silent presence. Despite her literary creations, *Letters* (published in the weekly journal *Bharatbasi*), *Basona* (a collection of her poems), *Kanak O Nalini* (another anthology of her poetry), she received no acknowledgement as a serious contributor to the arena of Bengali literature:

A 'conspiracy of silence' was deliberately designed by certain renowned personalities against Binodini. Hence, the then theatre-journals and books made little or almost no mention of her. Also, for this similar reason, her memoir, serialized in a journal, remained incomplete.¹⁶

If her autobiography stirred a celebrated personality like Girishchandra Ghosh, even his harsh criticism tacitly became a serious acknowledgement for her.

Anticipating such a non-chalant response, Binodini leaves her *Aamar Katha* with a mild plea: "People, who would laugh at my humble effort, should discard the idea of reading it... Those, who possess the faculty of sympathizing, will understand the pain embedded in this heart."¹⁷ Within her plea, the narrator in her engages herself in categorizing the reading public. Seeking to eradicate the possibility of ill-treatment of her autobiography at the hands of the insensitive readers, she strategically attempts to specify the target recipients of her text. She goes on to specify the reason behind the degradation of the socially attested "professional" women. Her voice of protest points the arrow of indictment towards patriarchy. The males, who designate them as degraded, are equally involved in the vicious circle of degradation. If women like her are compelled to sell their bodies, it is the so called *Bhadraloks* who emerge as the chief consumer. Binodini asserts, "There are many men, who, led by their instincts, fail to exercise self-restraint and destroy the life of powerless maidens forever."¹⁸ However, Binodini's repeated self-condemnations ironically hint at the hypocrisies of society. The actress, who was committed to cater to the interests of the society, assumes the vital role of a dissenter as she scripts her life. With her ultimate self-humiliation: "Like my corrupted soul, I have tainted the white pages by my inscription. What could I do? A degraded soul has nothing more than degradation"¹⁹, Binodini emerges out as a voice of protest seeking to transcend social ostracism through spiritual transcendence.

(II)

Utpal Dutt's perception of modernity was located in a thoroughly historicized comprehension of the past and in carrying forward the legacy of the past to future. This is the perception that is embodied in the play *Tiner Taloar* (1970), written as a salutation to the centenary of Bengali professional theatre. In the important dedicatory note, Dutt writes:

In the centenary of Bengali professional theatre I salute those amazing people who did not subscribe to any law of the diseased society and consequently received humiliation from the society. In spite of being in the patronage of the banians, they did not abandon the zeal to unmask the rich. Moving the sword of tin before the gaping jaws of bestial power, they gave the heart-ache of the colonized nation an embodiment of rebellion.²⁰

Being a Marxist theatre person Dutt always had his faith on a dialectical perception of history, be it contemporary or remote. The sixth decade of the twentieth century in West Bengal was a volatile era. With the Communist Party multiply fragmented, the rise of the armed movement in Naxalbari and the violent retaliation of the state to nullify the movement in the last few decades of the sixties Dutt encountered a lot of ups and downs in his political as well as personal life as a theatre-activist. This all pervasive moment of rupture in his contemporary reality was related by him to another era: that of the nineteenth century, when history could be seen as making itself. In the last few years of the nineteenth century the impetus of the Renaissance was getting drowned in the wave of religious re-insurgence; the colonial education was creating uprooted subjects, the wealth gained by sycophancy of the colonial masters was polluting the social and the cultural. The Bengali stage was also dwindling in the dialectics of progressivism and reaction, the monumental isolation and the angst to vocalize the mass. The time of Utpal Dutt and that of the nineteenth century were dialectically replete with the possibility of revolution. This possibility has been rendered into a valid utterance in the play *Tiner Taloar*.

The text seems to be a repository of multiple inter-textual references. To create the ambience of the period of Bengal Renaissance Dutt incorporates components from texts like *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha* by Kaliprasanna Singha, the diaries of the then actresses, and the two memoirs of Binodini Dasi. The two texts, mentioned last, hold a central position in the creation of the two female characters in the play: Moyna and Basundhara. Dutt refracts the life of Binodini into these two characters to articulate the claustrophobia, the marginalization and the commodification that almost every actress experienced in their life on the stage ultimately dissolving their angst in the possible resolution of a revolutionary fighting back.

The setting is that of 1870's Bengal, where we find Benimadhab Chattopadhyay, the director and head of The Great Bengal Opera running his

theatre, that is thoroughly secluded from the colonial reality of violence. He has to compromise and strategically deal with Birkrishna Dan (the proprietor of this professional theatre, and an illegitimate offspring of the colonial money-economy, to whom theatre and prostitution are synonymous), who is always in pursuit of instant gains through stage. No character in the play is a monolithic presence. Rather, just as Benimadhab is the representative of the pioneer theatre personalities like Girish Chandra Ghosh, Amritalal Basu, Upendranath Das, Birkrishna is an amalgam of theatre-traders like Pratapchand Jahuri and Gurmukh Rai. Priyanath Mallik represents the enlightened intellectual of that age, whose adherence to the indigenous cultural tradition, as well as, acquaintance with the elevated values of the Western Enlightenment have compelled him to reject the rapid and blind process of Anglicization, and form a protest through the medium of drama against such mimicry. A vanguard in this turbulent age, Priyanath strives to declass himself from his rich family background and reform the professional stage by making it aware of the present reality of enslavement. Playwrights like Girish Chandra, although being conscious of their diseased era, catered to the taste of the bourgeois middle-class audience. This ignorant self-complicity and preoccupation with the illusion of the newly arrived European realist theatre in Benimadhab receives the first blow from Mathur, the sewage-cleaner, a marginalized figure in the society, who mocks Benimadhab's musings of the high art in an ironic manner. It is this realm of sophisticated artistry where the peripheral presence like Mathur is nowhere represented (pp. 10-15). In this situation another marginal character Moyna enters the scene.

Interestingly enough, a famine-driven refugee in her early life, Moyna, the vegetable seller has been used as an object of experiment by Benimadhab. He makes her dream a life of glamour and wealth in theatre and thereby, uses her to fill up the vacancy, which was created in his theatre owing to the sudden departure of the actress Manadasundari. Like Binodini, Moyna is also uprooted from her class origin and initiated into the stage, a space, which would tenuously stand for both her imprisonment and liberty in the course of the play.

The majority of the female actors in the nineteenth century came from the uneducated realm of the society. As it was the case with Binodini, theatre becomes an alternative institution of education for Moyna, where simultaneously her experiential horizon is broadened and a craving for glamour and financial security is elicited in her mind. Moyna has to go through a rigorous cultural conditioning by Benimadhab. One momentarily identifies the similarity of this episode of Moyna's grooming with the experiment that Higgins did with the uneducated female protagonist Eliza Doolittle in the play *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw. Just as Higgins converted an uneducated flower-girl into an attractive lady of the elite class, Benimadhab also transforms Moyna into the successful stage-actress Shankari, whose earlier unsophisticated pronunciation of the native dialect is overwritten by the polished diction of Benimadhab's educating venture (pp. 57-58). In both cases, the artists abandon their creation for different reasons. Quite

surprisingly, Binodini seems to be well acquainted with the “Pygmalion” myth, as she refers to it in her dedicatory note of *Aamar Katha*.²¹ Thus, one single inter-textual reference expands the arena of signification in the play. The reader simultaneously gets associated with the frustration of the nineteenth century actress Binodini, the subjection of the natural self of Moyna and Eliza into the domain of the cultural, as well as the tacit indication of a rudimentary negotiation with European cultural assumptions by both Binodini and Moyna. Benimadhab falsely introduces her to Birkrishna as a lady of *bhadra* family, thereby negating her class identity for the sake of creating a gimmick, since at that time no lady of well-to-do households was involved in theatre. This gimmick of codification operates as a boomerang, as it elicits the desire in lewd Birkrishna to ravish Moyna sexually. He has never kept a mistress belonging to a cultured family so far!

Moyna is the centre in the play around which different aspects of desire rotate. Priyanath loves her, Birkrishna yearns to make her his concubine and, although Benimadhab tells Basundhara, “Moyna...Moyna is not only like my daughter, but something more. Or why do I get angry with Priyanath? Can you tell me...?” (p. 122), he uses Moyna as a commodity and sells her to Birkrishna for the sustenance of his theatre. Basundhara, a prostitute in her earlier life, has been liberated from the life of oppression by coming into the domain of theatre. But, still like Gangamani the social attestation of her earlier profession has not left her identity. We see that Basundhara accepts the abuse of a mere grocer with a smile (p. 24). Even Benimadhab mocks her when she speaks in favour of chastity. As a mother figure, Basundhara envisages the fulfillment of herself in Moyna’s conjugal life of happiness, a dream that would eventually be shattered into smithereens by Benimadhab and Birkrishna. Thus, Basundhara replicates the search for a wish-fulfilling realm, which was also the craving of the actresses like Gangamani, Binodini, Kshetramani or Elokeshi.

After her successful performance in some plays Moyna’s eyes are fascinated with the illusion of the stage. Her real life identity gets dissolved in the mirage of the stage to the extent that she herself becomes a walking illusion. The famine-stricken poor now become her eye-sore. She turns her attention to bird-flight and cannot (or does not?) comprehend Priyanath when he tries to acquaint her with the menacing reality of onslaught (p. 81-90). This willing suspension of awareness and withdrawal into a make-belief world is due to her moving upward on the social ladder. Now, Moyna is not in a position to declass herself once again and become what she was in her previous life. The sophisticated Shankari fears and hates Moyna, her previous self, but is haunted by her past at the moments of crisis. Only Mathur reminds Shankari of her actual origin, which is soon dispelled by her through a conscious process of repression (pp. 81-82). Was it this situation of no-way-outness that haunted Binodini, when the proposal to be the mistress of Gurmukh Rai came to her?

Birkrishna gives Benimadhab the proposal to turn Shankari into his mistress and in exchange promises to leave his proprietorship of theatre. He also promises to give Benimadhab the land and the required money to build a new theatre house, whose proprietor would be Benimadhab himself. One immediately recognizes that Dutt is using the Gurmukh Rai episode from Binodini's writings, although the intention behind the employment of this historical material is multifaceted. Ironically, the so called cultural self of Shankari has uprooted the identity of Moyna once again and has turned herself into a prostitute. The concealed mode of resistance that we get in the writing of Binodini has been turned into a dialectical organization of dialogue regarding the issue of prostitution, liberty, agency and the survival of art. Treating Moyna as a commodity Benimadhab says, "I can and will do everything for theatre. Birkesta [Birkrishna] has promised a new theatre in exchange of Moyna. With such a great capital like her in my hand, shall I not strike the deal?" (p. 103). Benimadhab tries to allure Moyna with the temptation of ornaments that Birkrishna would give her. Moyna retaliates,

When I was a beggar, I sold vegetables for living. Now you have turned me into such an elite lady, that there is no other way left for me but prostitution! Why have you lifted me from the street? Answer me! Why have you humiliated me in such a manner? (p. 101)

Utterly disillusioned with her stage-life, she finds that no one except Mathur wants "Moyna" in this world. When Priyanath is about to leave The Great Bengal Opera with her, Benimadhab wants to get back Shankari, his own creation, from whom, if his schooling is "withdrawn for a moment, her tongue would be cramped; in the distorted pronunciation of ugly language the sophisticated lady would be turned into a disgusting bitch of the gutter" (p. 104). We wonder whether even Priyanath would be able to like Moyna instead of Shankari. While Shankari remains the centre of attraction forever, Moyna is ostracized perpetually. Standing in the midst of the dark void, she seeks respite in her empty embrace. This is her first resistance against commodification. At this point, we see Moyna's momentary return to her actual marginalized identity. The distorted pronunciation, the dialect that constitutes her root and her "liberty", comes back. Benimadhab tries to rectify her utterance and Moyna follows him once again for the sake of maintaining her "new" identity. In fact, she gets imprisoned within it (pp. 101-102). Basundhara puts a pertinent question before Benimadhab regarding the emancipating aspects of his teachings: "Did you groom her to fetter or to bestow freedom upon her? I have found liberty from prostitution by being an actress. Why then are you sending her in the palace of Birkesta like a slave?" (p. 104). Benimadhab holds that the essential freedom of an actress is in acting: "Birkesta would let Moyna perform. That is her freedom." (p. 105). He does not believe that chastity (*Satitwa*) of a woman can be violated physically. When the enlightened Priyanath tries to make him see the immorality inherent in his decision, Benimadhab mocks him for his paradoxical

claims of being a reformer and adhering to the age-old “superstitions” regarding female chastity (pp. 102-103).

Parthapratim Bandopadhyay emphasizes the polyphonic signification of the notion of liberty and prostitution in the play. Basundhara gets freedom from the clasp of prostitution in the stage-space, while Moyna has been goaded into harlotry in the realm of theatre. On the other hand, Moyna can get liberty in this very platform of theatre, and according to Benimadhab she would be turned into a concubine if she marries Priyanath, for, a married woman can also be turned a slave, although in a different form, under male domination. Interwoven with these aspects is the idea of prostitution of art to the powerful in the social hegemony. Benimadhab and his theatre have to be submissive to the merchant class and consequently, to the state for their existence. Thus, theatre gets captivated in a static arena, where the freedom of expression is entirely denied.²² Dutt draws these problematic elements dialectically together, when in the end everyone gets his or her desired emancipation through the medium of drama.

It is in this manner, that we find in the play the vocalization of the pertinent problematics regarding which Binodini is silent. *Tiner Taloar*, resolves the enigmas embedded in Binodini’s memoirs. Unable to fight with the hostile society around her, when Binodini leaves the stage at the pinnacle of her career, Moyna’s encounter begins. She would strategically use her agency to extract wealth from Birkrishna. She decides to surrender to Birkrishna, but that surrender is exploited as a veil that conceals her ultimate sabotage. Not even in her wildest imagination can she dream of leaving the stage and lead a happily married life like Sukumari Dutta, one of the eminent actresses of the era: “I cannot leave theatre. These people are everything to me...my parents, my brothers and sisters...everything. I cannot go away turning them into destitute.” (p. 105). She explores her newly acquired agency: “I have caught *Kolketa* [Kolkata] within my fists. I have found those *babus* under my feet.” (p. 106). Whereas Binodini seeks a secluded emancipation in the alternative domain of spirituality, Moyna employs the art of a performer, that she has learnt so far under her mentor’s guidance, to exercise power on a rigidly patriarchal society. The blinkers of glamorous illusion gives way to strategic deception, through which she would actualize her profession as an actress in her real life. Moyna’s tactful use of illusion/deception enables her to be ever elusive to Birkrishna, and loyal to art. Thus she involves into the negotiation with her self, her reality and her situation within that reality.

Handing over Moyna to Birkrishna, Benimadhab wrongly assumes that his theatre has carved the desired liberty, where he can stage any play, be it replete with subversive contents, empowered with the potential to destabilize the state and its dominance. Hence, he decides to stage *Titumir*, a profoundly anti-colonial play written by Priyanath, being unaware of the Dramatic Performance Regulation Act (1876). The “Act” ideologically tried to suppress theatre’s freedom of expression. When Birkrishna informs him about the legal captivation of the

stalwarts of their rival theatre company, The Great National Theatre, Benimadhab gets afraid. The “conscious person” in him decides to suppress the “revolutionary artist” within. Depicting a genuine concern for his compatriots, he dismisses the idea of revolutionizing the stage. Rather, he chooses not to shoulder any political responsibility with a re-staging of the comedy, *Sadhabar Ekadashi*. Interestingly, as we have observed in the first part of the paper, Binodini played the role of the protagonist Kanchan in *Sadhabar Ekadashi*: the character that Moyna is supposed to portray here. This subjugation of art to the state-power appears intolerable to Moyna as it violates her personal space, where she is groping for her emancipation. She screams: “You sold me for the theatre. Now for whom are you marketing theatre itself?” (p. 117). The personal and the political intersect each other as Moyna discovers the gradual effacement of the single sphere, through which she could articulate her resistance. She realizes that her self-esteem would suffer, if she still remains associated with the theatre, which has turned into a company of courtesans controlled by the rich (p.118).

Had the play ended at this point, one could definitely draw a parallel between the detachment of Binodini from the stage and a voluntary seclusion of Moyna from the theatre. Towards the end, the plot takes a new turn. Employing the device of meta-theatricality, Dutt equips Moyna with the possible artistic way of resistance, located in the plays-within-a-play structure itself. While portraying the character of Nimchand in *Sadhabar Ekadashi* the drunkard Benimadhab suddenly recuperates and transcends to the revolutionary character of Titumir challenging the white men sitting in the audience with his sword of *Tin* (p. 127). The illusion of the stage and the contemporary reality get fused into one another. Moyna, sitting beside Birkrishna in the audience, starts singing the song of *Bangalakshmi*, thereby reinforcing her ultimate assertion (pp. 127-129). So far, she had endured the physical tortures and sexual abuses of Birkrishna but remained silent. The performance on the stage provides an impetus in her re-awakening. From her “prestigious” seat in the box, Moyna starts essaying the character of *Bangalakshmi* from Priyanath’s play, thereby, attempting a re-scripting of her desire. We find a glimpse of Dutt’s idea of modernity in his re-imagining of the actresses like Binodini. Dutt empowers his protagonist (Moyna) with what the real life actresses could not achieve. Thus, the relation of the history to his own present is explored not in a utopian manner, rather, through the nuanced and polyphonic possibilities that are inherent in the history itself.

Debaprasad Bandopadhyay observes that when, in *Titumir*, Basundhara says, “They [The Englishmen] are *harmads*. They are the pirates who have come to our land to plunder. Ravishing the *satitwa* of women and the golden India, they will return to their land on their ships” (p. 128), the chastity of the woman and the nation are equated to create the identity of woman in the socio-politically ravished realm of India. Nation and motherhood become synonymous in accordance with the nineteenth century archetype.²³ Moyna *alias* Shankari *alias* *Bangalakshmi*, through multiple displacements, is transformed into a metaphor. The equation

goes like this, “Moyna, the commodity = the commodified country/the ravished mother *Bangalakshmi* = raped Moyna.”²⁴ Thus, Utpal Dutt seeks to write back to the grand-narrative of mother-nation by locating *Bangalakshmi* in a woman who also represents a marginal sub-culture.

As a revolutionary theatre activist, Utpal Dutt did not merely keep his faith on apparent realism. He intensely believed in the notion of the trans-realist revolutionary romanticism. Whether things never attained throughout the course of history would be achieved in future, is questionable, but the possibility remains that finds its approval in this drama. This romantic zeal compels Dutt to re-imagine history as Brecht once did: “It can happen this way, but it can also happen quite in a different way.”²⁵ In fact, it is in the power of the human beings to reshape their history. Moyna, the fictional character fights the battle for Binodini against the hatred that the actress faced throughout her life. If Binodini projected her protest in a milder way, Dutt empowers his protagonist to act, to assert in a more pronounced manner, in public. The character of Moyna, thus, forces us to read history against the grain, where she as well as the other characters in the play makes their voices heard.

Utpal Dutt viewed women as a social unit, the one that getting involved in the revolutionary process emancipates and gets emancipation. Situating the question of gender and space in the theatrical domain of struggle against the colonial/capitalist domination Utpal Dutt makes Binodini and other actresses like her to relive their entire life through the fictional characters of Moyna and Basundhara. It is in this way that theatre is observed simultaneously as a socio-political space of opening and closure. The revolutionary potential, that was inherent in the troubled voice of Binodini, was silenced in her contemporary historical reality. This potential is explored by Utpal Dutt in *Tiner Taloar*. Thus, while negotiating with their respective chronotope, both Binodini and Utpal Dutt successfully enter into a dialogue with each other, being anchored in two distant realities.

Notes

¹ Anita Singh, “Aesthetics of Indian Feminist Theatre”, in *Rupkatha Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Autumn, 2009), p. 157.

² Binodini Dasi, *Aamar Katha*, in Soumitra Chattopadhyay & Nirmalya Acharya, ed. *Aamar Katha O Anyanno Rachana* (Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 1988), p. 14. Translations are ours.

³ *Ibid.* p. 15. Translations are ours.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 16. Translations are ours.

⁵ Kiranmoy Raha, *Bengali Theatre* (New Delhi: NBT, 1978), p. 27.

⁶ Biswanath Joardar, *Anya Kolkata* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2003), p. 128.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 129.

- ⁸ Binodini Dasi, p. 43. Translations are ours.
- ⁹ *Ibid* p. 30. Translations are ours.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*. p. 34. Translations are ours.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*. p. 35. Translations are ours.
- ¹² *Ibid*. p. 34. Translations are ours.
- ¹³ *Ibid*. p. 37. Translations are ours.
- ¹⁴ As quoted in Chattopadhyay and Acharya, "Introduction", p. 14. Translations are ours.
- ¹⁵ Girishchandra Ghosh, "Banga Rangalaye Srimati Binodini", in Chattopadhyay and Acharya, p. 121. Translations are ours.
- ¹⁶ Chattopadhyay and Acharya, "Introduction", p.7. Translations are ours.
- ¹⁷ Binodini Dasi, p. 52. Translations are ours.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*. p. 54. Translations are ours.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*. p. 55. Translations are ours.
- ²⁰ Utpal Dutt, *Tiner Taloar* (Kolkata: Jatiya Sahitya Parishad, 1977), p. 6. All textual quotations and references are taken from this edition and are included in the paper in parenthesis. Translations are ours.
- ²¹ Binodini Dasi, p. 3.
- ²² Parthapratim Bandopadhyay, "*Tiner Taloar: Theatre Er Ayna*" in Apurba Dey ed. *Tiner Taloar: Ispater Taloar* (Kolkata: Bangiya Sahitya Samsad, 2007), pp. 61-62.
- ²³ Debaprashad Bandopadhyay, "Renaissance O *Tiner Taloar*" in *Paschimbanga*, No.1 and 2, (July, 2001), p. 98.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*. pp. 99-100.
- ²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1983), p. xii.

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