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Holding Boundaries: Appearance and Evasion of Gendered Self as Performed in the Self-Narrative by Jayshankar ‘Sundari’

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Abstract:

Self-narrative as a literary form, adopts a constructivist approach to the ‘lived experiences’ from the standpoint of the present in a reflective manner. The constructivist approach provides the narrator with a space to assign meaning, to define and redefine the narrating ‘I’ and the narrated ‘I’ during the course of self-narration. The present paper attempts to examine this very process of assigning meaning to the lived experiences by the narrator from the point of view of gender studies.

The paper examines the autobiographical account by Jayshankar ‘Sundari’ titled *Thoda Ansu Thoda Phool* (2005) by a late nineteenth and early twentieth century theatre artiste from Gujarat, who was well appreciated for playing women characters on stage during his theatre career. His self-narrative invites to examine how the gender is performed both on stage and on page holding boundaries that constrict identities.

Keywords: Autobiography, Gender, Jayshankar ‘Sundari’, Performing Arts, Self-Narrative, Theatre.

Introduction:

According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, autobiographical telling is where “both the storytelling and the self constituted by it are narrative constructions of identity”(Smith and Watson 357). Narrative is an inclusive term that shares a symbiotic relation with social agents. We, human beings weave narratives around us and the woven narratives further reconstruct the

selves. Self is a multivocal word. According to Rom Harré, “The word “self” appears in person-centered discourses in at least three psychologically diverse contexts: perception, reflection, and social interaction (Harré 60). Considering these contexts, self-narrative as a literary form, adopts a constructivist approach to the ‘lived experiences’ from the standpoint of the present moment in a retroactively reflective manner. The constructivist approach provides the narrator with a space to assign meanings and values to define and redefine the narrating ‘I’, the narrated ‘I’ and the ideological ‘I’ as part of the narration.

The present paper attempts to study the self-narrative *Thoda Ansu, Thoda Phool* (2005) by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century theatre artiste and a director Jayshankar Bhojak (1889-1975), better known as Jayshankar ‘Sundari’ from the region of Gujarat, India. His self-narrative is partly translated by Kathryn Hansen as *Some Blossoms, Some Tears* (Hansen: 2011). The process of assigning meaning to the lived experiences by the narrator during the course of narration is an attempt to study from the view point of gender. It looks at how gender is performed both on stage and on page holding boundaries that constrict identities.

Theatre offers a powerful site of representation of gender and gendered selves. It provides a space to an artiste to assert identity and selfhood. However, the self that is engaged in the bodily discourse on stage when constructs it linguistically on page enters into various mediations like the self and an actor, the personal identity and the public image, the narrator and the narrated self which are found constantly in negotiation with each other. What role does then gender play especially for a theatre artiste who performed lifelong the characters of women on stage and in effect created prototypes for the same in society.

The term ‘gender’ is viewed as a social construct embedded with multiplicities of roles to perform. According to a gender theorist, Judith Butler, "gender cannot be understood as a *role* which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,'..." and so, “gender is not something that one is: it is something one does, an act” (Butler). It is difficult then to draw a clear distinction between ‘intentional’ theatrical performance and linguistic construction of self through creative intervention of crafting the self-narrative.

Autobiography as a Literary Genre:

Autobiography is an embedded pattern of experience and presentation; memory and narrated self. In the process, the narrator emerges as a reconstructed self. As a genre, autobiography captures and reflects the complex and elusive phenomena of life and self. Georg Misch notes in his *The History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, as a unique literary form,

Autobiography is unlike any other form of literary composition. Its boundaries are more fluid and less definable in relation to form. In itself it is a representation of life that is committed to no definite form. It abounds in fresh initiatives, drawn from actual life: it adopts the different forms with which different periods provide the individual for his self-revelation and self-portrayal (Misch and Dickes 4)

Subjectivity of the self is the focal point but it also provides an interesting distinction between the self as a subject and the self as an object. The self as subject is a conscious narrator whereas the self as an object is a socially reflected 'me'. The genre then reflects multiplicity of the self which is represented as 'me'. This multiplicity provides the lens to view how the embedded self is variously positioned within the given socio-cultural context of the time.

The positions created for self and the other are part of these cumulative fragments of a lived autobiography. The 'other' here, is not outside the self but an extended self, an intrinsic part of the self. In case of the performing artists, these extended selves are the characters played or codified method of acting that involve shifts in power, gaining or blocking the access to the certain features of claimed or desired identity.

Performing Artistes' Autobiography:

Autobiographical process weaves the concept of self through a dialogue within and with external, where it is important to observe how the performing artistes internally and externally position themselves. Performing artistes' autobiographies reflect this positioning of the self

within embedded social categories of artistes as a public self and subject as a personal self, categories of male and female, impersonator and an interior self, and so on.

Jayshankar Sundari (1889-1975), a theatre artist and a director from Gujarat, in his autobiography, *Thoda Ansu, Thoda Phool* (Some Blossoms, Some Tears) (Jayshankar 'Sundari') presents the tension of a gendered self performed on stage and on page. From the view point of the form of life-narrative, Jayshankar 'Sundari's' autobiography is both, a heterobiography where the narrator himself does not write and collaborative autobiography where the narrator along with other writers construct the narrative. *Thoda Ansu, Thoda Phool* was orally narrated by Jayshankar Bhojak and penned down as well as edited by Dr. Somabhai C. Patel and Dr. Dinkar Bhojak, son of Jayshankar 'Sundari'. The self-narrative represents the negotiation between the self and an actor, the male body performing women roles, the question on the hegemonic understanding of what masculinity and femininity mean with respect to roles performed in society. It becomes interesting to read nuances, voices and silences embedded in a self narrative of Jayshankar 'Sundari', a male artiste when describes his experiences of playing female protagonists.

It is the same person who is variously positioned in the linguistic construction, as Rom Harre explains, yet the same person experiences and displays that aspect of self that is involved in the continuity of a multiplicity of selves. Here, the attempt to study the term 'Gender' is with a denotation of difference between women and men not in an oppositional way but in a relational way, moving beyond then to the conceptual frame of gender roles. Both the groups, men and women were subject to multiple levels of redefinition. The study of autobiographies throws light on the persona of its subject and brings out an insightful account of the process of transformation from man to woman on stage through cross-dressing.

Jayshankar 'Sundari' (1889-1975):

Jayshankar was born to a Gujarati family of Shrimali Bhojak caste in Visnagar. He was born into a family sensitive to performing arts as his grandfather Trobhovandas Bhojak and his father Bhudardas Bhojak were renowned singers in the Jain community and the state. At a very early age he started his acting career under the mentorship of Dadabhai Ratanji Thunthi in a Parsi

theatre at Calcutta. Jayshankar shares in his self-narrative how rigorous the training was at the theatre company with their strict rules to follow. The young boys who played women roles on stage had to follow a strict regime every day. For Jayshankar, it was a fulfilled desire to be in the theatre world. He describes his passion for theatre since childhood in his narrative as:

I was very fond of listening to stories and tales. Dramas, plays, and especially Bhavai attracted me. ... We also had frequent Bhavai performances in one part of the town. When the Ram Lila came from the city, my happiness knew no bounds. The palaces, jungles, mountains, rivers, and natural scenes painted on the stage curtains, and the kings, queens, and princes in their makeup and costumes – all seemed real to me. ... Grandfather had an acquaintance in the Ram Lila troupe, and he allowed me to see three or four plays. Then I went into the neighbor's courtyard and made a miniature stage, draping some clothes for curtains and making cutouts of a king and queen from paper. Standing in front of the curtain, I manipulated the cutouts and imitated the performance. I myself was the producer, director, and spectator (Hansen, *Stages of Life* 186-187)

At the time when Jayshankar entered the world of theatre, the companies did not hire women actors. Many theatre companies had even a policy not to induct women actors as the women who performed in theatre came from the lower castes or prostitute quarters which was socially not considered respectful. Many drama companies believed that it would bring stigma coupled with overtones of immorality if they had women actors hired from socially 'disrespected' strata of the society. Women performing on stage and becoming objects of male gaze was not considered respectful and so the young boys like Jayshankar who played women roles. He started off his career by playing the roles of women. In his personal account, he documents his experiences as playing women roles with frankness. As mentioned above, in the early twentieth century, Parsi and Gujarati theatre companies still hired men to perform the role of women. No other "lady actor," as the male performers were called sometimes, has left such an insightful account of the process of transformation from man to woman. Through his method of total identification with women, he created idealized feminine characters that were widely

imitated. 'Sundari's stage movements, attire, and speech became models for women offstage. "Gender acts have evolved into a distinct representation of "femininity", or a female-likeness, which must be performed by a male body" (Mezur 5).

Sundari's autobiography provides a rare self-reflective glimpse of the process of transformation from man to woman. Describing the success of the play *Saubhagya Sundari* and his experience of adorning a woman's attire for the first time, he writes:

From the next day on after the performance of *Saubhagya Sundari*, many spectators had come and presented gifts to me. I certainly realized one thing at that time that spectators only appreciate the finest womanly sentiments and this ignited consciousness had left me with impersonate unconsciously (trans. mine)

Behind my success there may also have been something of divine favor. At the moment when Jayshankar first attired himself in a *choli* and *lahanga*, he was transformed into a woman, or rather into the artistic form that expresses the feminine sensibility. A beautiful young female revealed herself inside me. Her shapely, intoxicating youth sparkled. Her feminine charm radiated fragrance. She had an easy grace in her eyes, and in her gait was the glory of Gujarat. She was not a man, she was a woman. An image such as this was the one I saw in the mirror. My inner voice seemed to be asking, who is this, who am I seeing? Was it Saubhagya Sundari or Kumud Sundari or a reflection of what lay within me? It was not Jayshankar, it was a modest, proud Gujaratin. Her manner, her gestures, her sensuality shone in every limb of my body. A sweet tingling arose for a moment and then vanished, and for that instant I felt as though I was not a man. Initially, I felt some hesitation, but now it seemed to me that I truly was a woman. In this process of impersonating women, my experience as an actor would not have been possible without my spectators. My thousands of viewers made me Sundari, I say this today with pride.

Without my appreciative audience, I would only be a lone Jayshankar
(Hansen, *Stages of Life* 210)

Sundari's acting method based on complete identification with feminine sensibility implies that actors tried to disguise their male gender characteristics entirely. His most impressive performances were those that depicted feminine pathos or Karuna Rasa as described in classical Indian aesthetics.

While playing the role of a Nooraalam in the play *Sitamgar*, Jayshankar shares his experience. Nooraalam, the character, was supposed to offer her life without an objection in order to fulfill her husband's ambition to achieve greatness. Stepping into the role of Nooraalam, Jayshankar poses a question on the role of a Man and his idea of love towards his wife as well as feels sympathetic for the women who are "ideal wives". There have been a few other experiences described in the course of his narrative that suggest his strong identification felt with women characters and their emotions.

Interesting to note that the veteran artiste in his autobiography does not mention experiences of gender fluidity and experiences related to it. The negotiation with his masculine, external self and feminine internalization is always kept as clearly distinct experiences and selves. The transformation on stage and internal transformation while identifying with the characters is not voiced as if the 'voice' is not yet acquired a separate, distinct identity from its corporeal body. Along with the private self, as a public persona when he interacts with his audiences, he creates the prototypes for the society to follow that are clearly heteronormative in nature.

Jayshankar 'Sundari' though excelled in the embodiment of feminine sensibility and decorum, he in the process created prototypes for the ideal Indian woman. His sources of inspiration were the readings of literary texts created by the canonical Gujarati literary figure who had created the notion of 'ideal woman' through their fictionalized, creative pieces. The notion was strongly patriarchal and heteronormative in its nature which was further reiterated by Jayshankar through his performances on stage and followed not only by men but by women themselves as the 'correct' way of carrying the elf in society. The prototypes were thus created, appreciated and widely followed by the people creating public readings of his performances.

While narrating about his personal life in his diaries, he mentions that he was always in search of an 'ideal' wife who could fulfill these emotions in him or while playing the characters on stage, he imagined and experienced those characters as substitutes for his image of a life companion. 'Experience' is the process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject owning certain identities in the social realm, identities constituted through material, cultural, economic and interpsychic relations. As a constitutive of the subject, "Experience" according to Teresa de Lauretis, "is the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, originating in oneself) those relations—material, economic, and interpersonal—which are in fact social" (Scott 27-28).

When we read the autobiographies of performing artistes, we observe the way gender is staged during a performance and how largely it is enacted in society. Interestingly to observe, in the later years of Sundari's theatrical career, he had little to do with the acting and his career saw a new light as a director. During these years, Jayshankar cut his hair short and grew mustaches as masculine markers of the gender identity.

Eventhough Jayshankar 'Sundari' frankly shares his interior landscape and experiences of playing women roles, he doesn't voice his tensions of balancing the internal self torn between the genders. His performative transformation rejects any final gender positioning. This suggests the gender fluidity between male and female sexual attributes. The performing artistes' autobiographies throw light on these conceptually separable frames of how gendered embedded roles performed at different levels by the performing artistes are conceived from the view point of various socially constructed categories rather than they are.

Conclusion:

Showalter's 'psychoanalytic' model identifies gender difference as the basis of the psyche, focusing on the relation of gender to the artistic process. Showalter writes in her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness": Psychoanalytically oriented feminist criticism locates the difference of women's writing in the author's psyche and in the relation of gender to the creative process. It incorporates the biological and linguistic models of gender difference in the theory of

the female psyche or self, shaped by the body, by the development of language and by sex-role socialization” (Lodge and Wood 318).

Unlike theatre performance, Butler argues that we cannot even assume a stable subjectivity that goes about performing various gender roles. Paul De Man suggests that the relation between life and autobiography is similar to that between an act and its consequences. He explains in “Autobiography as De-Facement”: “We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences” (Jacobs 95). Defining and locating the personal "subject" who is-or is not-the author of a text, the architect of a deed, or the speaker of a word involves wider concerns. Autobiography, as the presumed record of self-development of a centrally placed “self,” becomes philosophically problematic but with great pragmatic value.

As discussed in the paper, gendered embedded roles performed at different levels by the performing artist through his self-narrative, are conceptually conceived as gendered roles at large from the view point of various socially constructed categories, rather than they are. This conflict of being perceived as and a continuous process of being to becoming is consciously and elusively voiced by these performing artist-autobiographers. The conflict at the level of linguistic construction of self, cross-dressing and psychological gender transformation, medium of art as transgressing roles narrates the simultaneous unity (I) and multiplicity of the self (Me.).

Thus, the genre provides a stage to the artistes to perform themselves by exploration and explication of the self on pages. For, the performing artists, who constantly face the flux of identity, autobiography as a genre creates a medium to choreograph them to evolve, to transgress and transform the fixation of gender identity. Allowing viewers, regardless of their gender identity, to fantasize about a universe that accepts what our society views as deviation as the norm while accepting the heteronormative as equal to any other alignment.

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