



BINODINI DASI ON/ OFF STAGE: ENGENDERING GOSSIP AND SEXUALIZING STARDOM

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Abstract:

The present paper investigates the link between gender, ideology and stardom with regards to early 20th century Bengali actress, Binodini Dasi. Here, I argue that the stardom of early theatre actresses was founded in infamy and they had largely oral and visual basis of stardom. Unlike actors who had mostly print – mediated circulation of fame and were always regarded ‘respectable’ celebrity. Through the lens of gender, my paper thus inquires issues – mode of constitution and circulation of narrative of female stardom, question of social respectability and female star status, construction of female performing body and ideal femininity in colonial Bengal of 1930s.

Keyword: Gender, Ferminity, stardom

Introduction

Binodini Dasi, a leading stage actress of Calcutta urban theatre shot to stardom, despite her low socio-economic profile. Acting in theater at a time when women presence in public was prohibited and female impersonation was in vogue on stage, Binodini defied patriarchal dictates of public /private divide and went on to win admiration of even Ramkrishna Paramhansa for her enthralling performance in Chaitanya lila.

Binodini’s own account of her actress life in amar abhinetr jibon, speaks of her grit and hardwork.¹ “In that tender age, the new society, the education, vocation all seemed new to me. I understood nothing, knew nothing, yet tried hard to learn all instructions.”

Despite all her contribution to theater, she is snubbed both by straitlaced society for being “women of bazaar” and also by her theatrical kins who rechristen B-theater as a star theater for they knew that theater’s name in memory of former prostitute was unpalatable to the middle class mentality. Thus Binodini is denied not only a legitimate space in society but also her due credit by theater fraternity.

Binodini pours out her pain-

“I asked them what name they had given the new theater. ‘The star’, dasu-babu said; I was so affected; I sat down and was incapable of speech for next two minutes. I wondered was all their love and affection only a show of words to get some work out of me.”²

Celebrity and notoriety; fame and fallen women

The narrative of stardom of performing women was always framed within discourse of respectability and domesticity. The middle class, upper caste held cultural monopoly and dictated home (private) as feminine space and street, (public) as masculine space.

The gendered separation of public & private became more notional and metaphysical rather than mere physical location.

All public performance by female performers becomes associated with prostitution. The body of female performer, even when fully-clad before the “gendered gaze of multitude of men” began to be seen morally obnoxious and defiled & so was the female performer in public space of theater amidst company of male directors and actors, began to be regarded as “bahri woman” “woman of bazaar” “fallen woman” (in words of Binodini), a woman constructed “other” and “inferior” to respectable home bound, duty bound, woman as wife.

Girish Gosh actively pleaded for (prostitute) actresses’. Inclusion in theater for bestowing mobility on both theater and prostitute. As theater was regarded a profane profession, capable of diverting youth from moral values.

“People say theater is a disease, a sickness, a breeding ground for pimps and prostitute! I ask you, what can we possibly gain from shutting down theater? By throwing these women out onto streets? Let us not forget theater provides them dignity, shelter and education. Such is the power of theater!”

What are worth striking are all debates and discourse on women’s inclusion in theater was by men. Girish Gosh felt that bringing women on stage could itself be sensational and lucrative crowd-puller. That his vision of theater as tool to social mobility for outcastes women is belied, prostitute actress far from being integrated into mainstream society is doubly torn between her noble self on stage and her self-defiled as ‘patita nati’ as Binodini writes:

“The most divine being granted me refuge at his feet ‘and she recalled “how cleansing with his touch my sinful body, blessed me and said “ma, may you have chaitanya”!

Binodini’s celebrity status was in her notoriety and infamy, for her (private) female body was in full public display on stage which anyone could see by paying ticket. Stardom in India: Redefining a ready-made (western) concept.

Decordova’s work on stardom suggest how stardom is function of both form of public presentation of self and as modes of circulation and exchange of knowledge about individuals.³

From the format of theater magazines to look of stars and photographs, the entire misce-en-sense of stardom as practiced in west became a ready-made mode of stardom.⁴ (Neepta Majumdar)

The use of term ‘star’ in urban India theater for eg: in name of 19th century Calcutta’s star theater, seemed to have been borrowed with implicit understanding of its meaning, that it needed no explanations in its new setting in India and that its ‘real referent’ was to be found in English theater practice. Star

became the word that conjured for more than a celebrated performer, and as widespread naming practice, it became so over-determined that its referent no longer carried any specificity. For eg: politics of nomenclature of B-theater as star-theater, suggest its connotation less to celebrity performance than for its function as an instant signifier of standard of international (English) theater. (Neepta Majumdar).

Forgrounding the difference: western (English) and Indian nation of stardom:

Unlike western nation of stardom which was rooted in modern relation between public and private, democratic ethos of liberty, individuality and mobility signifying that anyone could be star. India invested stardom with much contested meaning extolling “female protagonist in narrative” but villifying female performer in public”.

Eg: Binodini’s actress-authored account clearly manifests her preoccupation with cleansing and erasing stigma of fallen woman. The act of erasure of social stigma and defiled self is seen-

“cleansing my polluted self mentally and physically was central to my regimen. Refrained from sex, useless speech, I went to bathe in Ganges, and return and rehearsed Durga 108 times!”.⁵

In fact, Binodini’s role in male divine Chaitanya was a way of gaining religious –social sanction, albeit temporary on stage.

In west, idea of “star” was coupled with that of fan with fandom becoming gendered as female. In India, the “star” was not typically coupled with ‘fan’ and consumerist culture until as late as 1940s .

Engendering Gossip: Unofficial mode of circulation of fame:

While narrative of male stardom was largely officially circulated through printed and published ‘respectable’ magazines, female stardom was unofficially circulated through gossip, rumour, scandal focusing on unsavoury details ,juicy lies, illicit liaison ,neglecting their artistic , professional ,public side of lives.

Rumour, gossip, scandal as modes of circulating fame of celebrities ,were regarded “low” art forms and tended to be gendered as female.

Binodini offers some insight into link between fame and word star.⁶ From Rimli’s introduction to Binodini’s writing, we can infer her stardom took the form of word-of –mouth, fame, review in magazines, photograph.

Bhattacharya writes-

“while actress did write from time to time and theater magazine almost always carried their photograph, the bulk of writings were by male writer who most frequently wrote fictitious first person women’s lives, usually of actress- like figure”.

The prevalence of photographs and fictions together with dearth of personal information on actress denied them agency, and suggest their primary status as object of spectacle and speculation. Binodini’s

studio photograph where she is seen dressed up as “Bahdramahila” Bengali equivalent of Victorian lady constructs her commodity status.

The performativity of photograph allowed prostitute of sonagachi, Binodini to ape “Bhadramahila” of Bengali bourgeois class, who she always aspired to be, desired to be.

The invention of print and camera technology led to be marketable, saleable status of autobiographical and photographic image, where actress could selectively highlight and hide her public/private self.

Thus, female stardom of woman performers had largely oral (gossip), yellow talk, visual through painting and photograph, circulation of fame.

Tanika sarkar writes:

“Gossip pertains to knowledge about private or other aspects or personal lives that are not meant to be publically available and coded as privileged information scandal by nature was knowledge of public nature. Gossip flourishes within an intimate group, scandal perform the same function within an anonymous abstract public, it draws an unseen community of people together”.⁷

Stardom & Stereotypical roles:

Stardom of actress was based on specific stereotypical role as sacrificing, chaste mother, ideal wife, dutiful daughter, submissive sister. Binodini’s epical roles of sita, savitri, chaitnaya shot her to stardom. Success in a role led to public affixing names of character on an actor name or nickname. Eg: sukumari became surname of golap after her successful portrayal of the role.

So, was the case with jayashankar ‘sundari’ fida ‘hussain’ and bal gandharva. Bal gandharva’s female role was so widely accepted by people that his later male role was outrightly rejected by people. The nationalist –reformist rhetoric of 20th century dictated role and responsibility of theater and its actor/actress. Women’s on stage role was dictated by discourse of domesticity, femininity and ideal womanhood. An ideal nascent nation will be born out of chaste womb of woman; so female performers bodies became bearer of tradition and national identity. It is sad to note that while actresses bodies bore the burden of representing ideal nationhood-womanhood; but in that representation of ideal nation, actresses themselves had no space in “imagined communities”.

CONCLUSION-

Despite defined and delimited space for actress on theater, Binodini performed within patriarchal, material, social constraints and displayed her acting acumen. It is time to remember and recognise the forgotten female founder of Bengali theater. Her transformation from prostitute of sonagachi to sophisticated and technically proficient actress of Calcutta urban theater is truly commendable. She is unrecognized star of Bengali stage.

END NOTES:-

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