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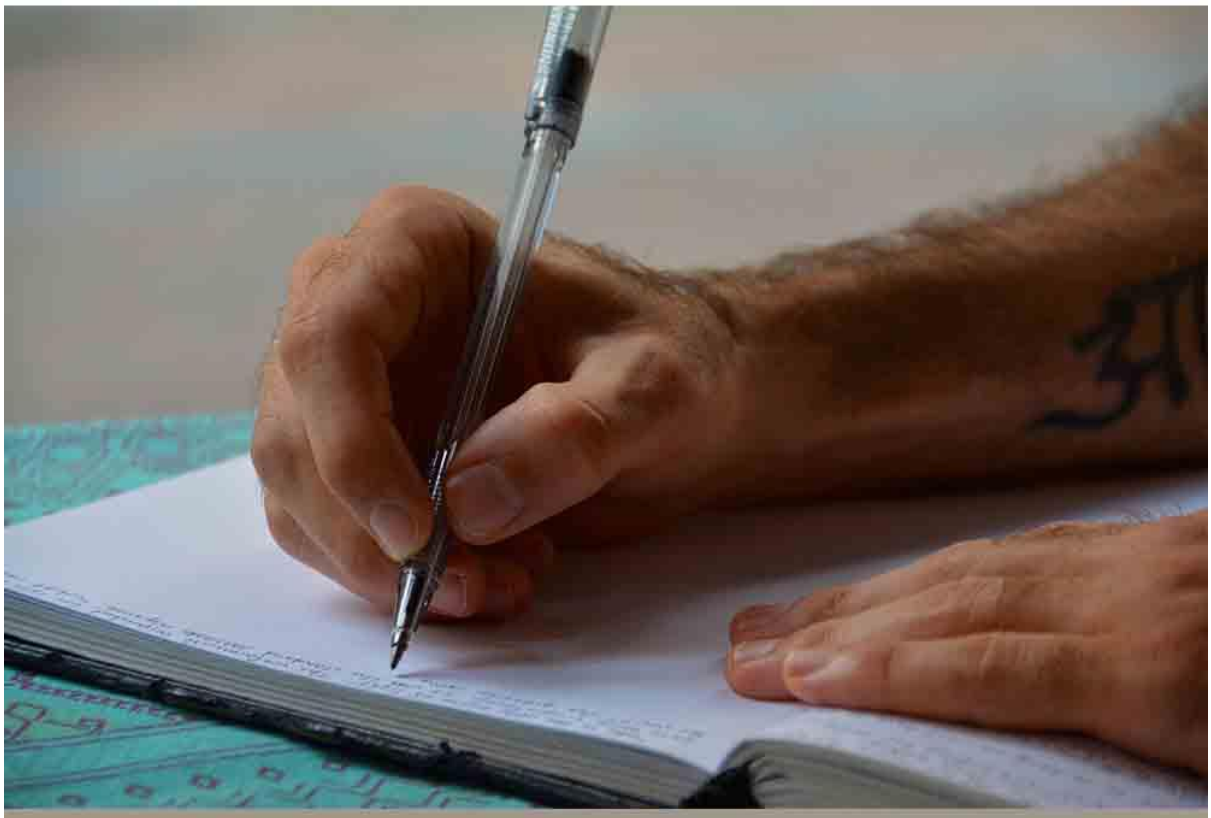

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Old Profession, New Tales: Narrative Strategies of Resistance

Abstract

The figure of the "fallen woman", as prostitute, dancing girl, or simply the abandoned outcaste has been represented in various ways in Indian narratives, whether fiction or film. The images range from that of the iconic Sita of the Ramayana, the chaste, Goddess like figure abandoned by her husband on suspect chastity, or the stereotypical, villainous "evil" woman of corrupt body and mind, to the figure of the prostitute with the golden heart, very popular in Indian cinema. But these images of the "fallen woman" have also become sites of resistance to the discursive and socio/historical structures of gendered exploitation. This paper looks at the ways in which this resistance is narrativized in select Indian fiction and film, focussing on selected works of the twentieth century, namely the short novel by Mahasweta Devi, *Bedanabala: Her Life, Her Times*, Munshi Premchand's short stories "The Prostitute" and "The Actress" and the cult classic movie *Devdas*, based on Saratchandra's novel of the same name. These works portray the female characters engaging with the exploitative, yet judgemental patriarchal power structures of society, and how they manipulate and often subvert these very structures as strategies of survival effecting a form of resistance to their categorization as "fallen women".

The figure of the "fallen woman", as prostitute, dancing girl, or simply the abandoned outcaste has been represented in various ways in Indian narratives, whether fiction or film. Discourses ranging from the early Sanskrit treatises down to the popular art forms like fiction and films have played their part in popularising and stereotyping the images by which such women are recognised and perceived in society, leading to their ostracization and inhuman exploitation. The images range from that of the iconic Sita of the Ramayana, the chaste, Goddess like figure abandoned by her husband Sri Ram on suspect chastity, or the stereotypical, villainous "evil" woman of corrupt body and mind, to the figure of the prostitute with the golden heart, very popular in Indian cinema. But these very same narratives and popular media have also been the means through which such stereotypical images have been interrogated and often subverted. In this paper, the works of three writers, the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi, the Hindi writer Munshi Premchand and the Bengali writer Saratchandra Chattopadhyay are read to uncover the ways in which women as prostitutes engage with and resist the exploitative structures of society, often as strategies of survival. They become sites of resistance to the discursive and socio/historical structures of gendered exploitation and to their categorization as "fallen women".

Mahasweta Devi's short novel *Bedanabala: Her Life, Her Times* (2005) brings alive the socio-historic milieu of pre- independence Bengal through a first person chronicle of the lives of three women, the mother Kamini, the daughter Kamalini and the grand daughter Bedanabala, who are the last of a lineage of public women, or prostitutes. In the process she critiques the institution of prostitution, and the society which both maintains and condemns it. The novella is set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Bengal, where prostitution was a flourishing enterprise, as in other regions in India, and was very much part of the buried layers of the social fabric. Sanctioned by the shastras and maintained through a vicious circle of desperate women, pimps and the male population, prostitution

ensured a way of maintaining a class of women considered public property, namely the "nagara –vadhu", who was a much sought after person, but was denied every right to a dignified human existence.

In her study of Vatsayana's *Kamasutra*, Kumkum Roy observes that in writing the text, presumably between the second and fourth centuries AD, the ancient sages "accorded legitimacy" (*Womens' Studies* 536) to human desire by making it a subject of a *shastra*, along with *dharma* and *artha* (Manu's *Dharmashastra* and Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, were probably written around the same time) . *Kama* or the sexual instinct was seen by some sages as a natural and universal phenomenon, not requiring codification. But Vatsayana argued that human sexuality, unlike animal sexuality, is socially conditioned, and therefore needs to be codified. The text constructs the "nagaraka" or the prosperous and cultured male protagonist as the centre of desire, and the woman, who is the "object of such relations, be classified and objectified" (538). So the male is a universal category in the text, while women are classified according to region and status, as wives, virgins, remarried women, widows and prostitutes, based on their accessibility to one man or many men, at one time, or at all times. Each category of woman, therefore has different sets of codes of conduct in both public and private spheres and activities. (535-37)

Mahasweta's novel displays a deep understanding of these structures that defined and circumscribed a "public woman's" or prostitute's place in society, her "duties" and her behavioural patterns. The novel is a kind of reminiscence of the contemporary character Bedanabala, whose narrative incorporates the words and memories of her grandmother the grand whore Kamini (whom she calls Did'ma, or 'grandmother'), and her mother Kamalini. During the period depicted in the novella, 'established' prostitutes also had a certain measure of independence with flourishing establishments, money and easy lifestyles. Many of them had access to art and literature and were famed singers, dancers or actresses, "nayakas". But

in spite of this apparent prosperity and a place in the structure of society, they lacked respectability, were outside the structures of marriage and the family, and were eternal outsiders. While most of them wasted away in brothels, some of them enjoyed comfortable lives as preferred mistresses of rich men, or even, though very rarely, as wives. This particular stage in the history of the 'public woman' in India has been repeatedly explored in narrative, both in fiction and film. From Sita of the *Ramayana* and Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*, whose honour was questioned in the Kuru court, to regional novels and the popular Bollywood movies, the images of women's chastity and honour has acquired iconic dimensions in narrative, and through them, in society. The texts being discussed here offer a certain level of visibility to the marginalised figure of the prostitute, and reveal many of the paradoxes and ambiguities that underlie the negotiations between the prostitute and the rest of society.

In Bedanabala's narrative, Kamini is an "old world whore", who has a flourishing prostitution business. She has grown rich through the flesh trade and is mistress to many rich men. She scouts festival grounds and steals beautiful girl children from high born families by bribing their maids and initiates them into the trade. She prides herself on the care and love that she lavishes on her 'girls', which is one way by which she attempts to assuage her troubled conscience. Kamini typifies the prostitutes who are conditioned to legitimize their trade through an elaborate system of social mores and codes. She describes the period thus: "Old world whores, belonging to an old time, following old codes of professional conduct" (*Bedanabala* 2) . These 'codes' are identified in the novel as the shastras, sutras and puranas, as well as other discursive structures like songs, sayings, stories and ritualistic prayers. The shastras enjoined that such women existed for the well being of society and were supposed to corrupt everyone who crossed their path and to profit from their clients.

Patita Purana (which could mean 'the history of the fallen woman') is a text mentioned in the novel , which, according to Kamini, "convinces you that women are, since the moment of their births, no more than bundles of sin" (17) The text has a meta narrative of social practices, rituals, narrative texts and discourses that form the base structure or ideology that supports these hegemonic practices in society. Kamini shows an extraordinary awareness of these discourses of which she is both a perpetrator and a victim. This self reflexivity is a seminal feature of Mahasweta Devi's narrative style, by which she deconstructs the patriarchal and other hegemonic structures of society, and uncovers the subtext of a resistant narrative. Kamini mentions the different names by which the prostitute was called in society, some of them euphemistic, some outright insulting, but always defining and circumscribing their identity in society through such discursive practices, " These names were old, very old – dig into this earth, this soil and deep deep down, buried in our history, you will find these names carved in stone....They've been around, always. And every age has branded them different." (37) The novel also describes their "initiation ceremony" that is presided over by a brahman priest, where girls are "married" to a piece of iron (usually a sickle-shaped knife used to cut fish), symbolizing their availability to all men and not one man in particular:

"To this blade of iron I now marry you
All trouble and strife I cross out or you
Everybody's woman. Alone no more.
Till now, a girl. From now, a whore." (22)

The text becomes resistant when Kamini breaks the first code and decides not to initiate her adopted daughter Kamalini into the profession. She is prompted by maternal love, which was a word not supposed to be in the dictionary of a prostitute. She is aware that she is breaking an age-old practice, as prostitutes were not supposed to love anyone, nor were they

supposed to let anyone among them escape from the profession. This code ensured the dehumanisation of the prostitute, completing her humiliation and degradation in her own eyes. Did'ma follows her conscience and marries her daughter Kamalini to a rich and noble zamindar who is courageous enough to break a few social codes himself. Balaram Babu braves social stigma and public ostracisation and marries the beautiful and uninitiated Kamalini, thereby breaking the code that a prostitute's daughter can never find love, happiness and acceptability, and live a regular life. This momentous point in the novella is set against the backdrop of the various social and religious reformist movements in Hindu society that accompanied the nationalist movement in the struggle for freedom. Many of the zamindar's supposedly reformist and progressive friends are shocked that he actually married a girl out of a whore's house, exposing the underlying hypocrisies and double standards of society. The novel almost achieves the impossible by showing the third generation woman, Bedanabala, completely breaking away from her past, after committing the story of her mother and grandmother to memory and to the public through the narrative.

The prostitute's right to love and an honourable human existence is again the subject of two of the celebrated Hindi writer Munshi Premcand's short stories, also set in the same historical period, and in the same milieu of upper caste Hindu society. The protagonist of the story titled "The Prostitute" (1933), Madhuri is a beautiful and accomplished woman who has two friends vying for her affections. While one of them Shingar Singh, enjoys her body, the other man, Dayakrishna, professes eternal, untainted love for her. The hypocrisy of his heroism is exposed when Maduri, who has broken her 'professional code' and fallen in love with him, asks him to marry her. Madhuri's proposition is in the nature of a poser, and forces both the men to examine and interrogate their attitudes to women in general and 'fallen women' in particular:

"How did the profession get started?"

"From the weakness of women."

"No, I think men must have started it" (78)

Premchand chooses to end the story in agreement with conventional morality, with Madhuri 'nobly' killing herself, rather than forcing a solution, but not before exposing both the men to their weaknesses and hypocrisy. She compares Shingar Singh and the men of this ilk to "vultures and jackals attacking a corpse" who would exploit a hapless woman because she "lacked a precious something" in comparison to their wives and sisters. (80) Daya is forced to acknowledge his own lack of courage when it comes to bridging the gap between idealism and practice. Madhuri's suicide is also a kind of resistance to the charge of infidelity and faithlessness that was supposed to be a part of the prostitute's infamous repertoire of tricks.

The heroine of Premchand's "The Actress" (1927) is Taradevi, a stage actress, as much an outsider and almost seen in the same light of a prostitute in the eyes of society in those days. In *Bedanabala* too, there is mention of a few of Kamini's girls becoming famous theatre actresses and later mistresses of wealthy men. Premchand draws a portrait of an admirable and independent woman who lives life on her own terms, with great courage and independence. Although there are many men more than willing to accommodate her, she chooses to remain single, deciding to give herself only to the man of her choice. When she finally meets him and he offers marriage, she falls a prey to self doubt , unable to fight the established images of herself in society. She 'nobly' sacrifices herself in the name of love to protect her man from the 'shame' he is sure to encounter in marrying an 'actress', which was often a euphemism for 'prostitute'. In both the stories, Premchand adopts a rather conventional ending, denying the woman agency by removing her from the scene through a convenient death scene, rather than create a more challenging conclusion. This is in spite of the fact that both stories begin promisingly, portraying women of remarkable independence and strength of mind. Both the stories, however, foreground the issue of society's 'double

speak' when it comes to the issue of the right of a prostitute to make a choice of her own. Although Premchand recognizes the need to question and challenge the mores of society regarding the 'fallen woman' category, the stories embody the deep rooted hypocrisy and double standards that allow women to be victims of these exploitative and inhuman structures.

The lovelorn eponymous hero of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's short novel *Devdas,* is a cult figure on celluloid, with three major remakes and numerous clones. The film versions have transformed the nondescript hero of the novel into a romantic and attractive, though dissipated hero. The privileging of the hero on screen has obliterated the roles of the two women in the novel, the heroine Paro and the prostitute Chandramukhi. Saratchandra's novel draws the reader's attention to the women's characters' rather than the male's, and is more a study of character than any attempt to glorify either the ideal romantic hero or the ideal of pure and untainted love. In the novel, the male character Devdas is delineated as a rather weak and flawed character who cannot make up his own mind, has no sense of purpose, nor has any notion about his likes and dislikes. It is the heroine, his childhood playmate Paro who recognizes the strength of their love and asks him to marry her. Devdas refuses, not recognising his own latent love for Paro, nor having the courage to stand up to parental opposition. Paro has the practical wisdom to honour her parents' decision to arrange her marriage, and the courage to stand up to Devdas' parents' disdain for her inferior social standing. She goes into her marriage with a much older widower willingly and with open eyes, unlike Devdas whose wisdom is yet to dawn. When it finally does, it is too late. He ends up a dissipated drunk and an outcaste to both family and society. Ironically, in the later film versions, it is this weakness that elevates him to an almost iconic status as the star crossed but constant lover, pining away for his beloved. The images of Dilip Kumar and

Shahrukh Khan as Devdas have left an indelible impact on generations of viewers of Hindi movies, altering Saratchandra's weak minded, nondescript hero in the process.

The novel however, is a woman centric text, famous for its portrayal of a strong willed heroine Paro, and the prostitute Chandramukhi. Just as the film versions have created the icon of Devdas as the eternal lover in popular culture, they have also created the image of the 'whore with the golden heart', through the character of Chandramukhi. In the novel however, Chandramukhi is delineated as a sensitive and thinking woman. She is attracted to Devdas because of his human frailty, his weak mind, and identifies with him as an outcaste of society. It is Chandramukhi who makes Devdas understand the workings of his own mind, and provides him with clear insights into the mind of women, whether wife or prostitute. She tells him point blank that it is his weakness and not Paro's that resulted in their separation. (89-90) Although she loves Devdas and cares for him whenever she can, she does not pine and waste away in love like he does, and the film version would have us believe. Her encounter with Devdas prompts her to give up her own profession, not on grounds of high morality or under the influence of 'purifying ' love, but because he gives her enough money to love a comfortable and independent life. This was a common practice among rich men in those times who would "keep" women in luxury for their own pleasure. *Bedanabala* too refers to this widespread practice in society. She rejects Devdas' suggestion that she go on a pilgrimage to "cleanse" her of her sins, (which was another widespread belief and practice in those days) saying that she does not believe in such religious nonsense. Instead she chooses to set herself up independently in a small village, where she becomes the guardian angel of the villagers, helping the poor and needy with Devdas' inheritance.

Devdas' attitude to Chandramukhi typifies the general attitude of society to the prostitute, which is one of deep set ambiguity, mistrust and manifest hypocrisy. The subsequent film versions have transformed the hero of the novel *Devdas* from a weak willed

character to a tragic hero at the cost of weakening the characters of the two women characters, Paro and Chandramukhi . In the process they have also sabotaged the novelist's attempt to interrogate and subvert the stereotyping of gender roles, both of men and women. All the texts discussed here offer highly nuances portrayals of women that embody resistances to the various discursive and societal practices that created and sustained the character of the prostitute, both in society and in cultural categories like literature and film. If Premchand's stories address the issue of prostitution with hope and good intentions, they fail to come up with alternative portrayals that would challenge these stereotypes. Mahasweta's and Sarachandra's texts sustain this interrogation and subversion through highly courageous and viable narratives that offer alternative readings to the age old images and discourses of gender-specific roles and value systems.

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