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**Narratives of the Self: Negotiating the Autobiographical Performance Space**

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**Abstract:**

This paper discusses Usha Ganguli's play *Antaryatra* (The Journey Within) and seeks to explore the negotiations that permeate the solo performance space that Ganguli engenders. The performance space in this research is understood as a blend of the physical space and the conceptual space—as a spectrum spanning the dramatic space of the written word, and continuing into the theatre space that manifests as the practical embodiment. Theatre offers a concrete medium to undertake a self-reflective journey, in order to reach a better understanding of the self, and its relation to the world. As an autobiographical play, *Antaryatra* traverses the journey of Ganguli originating in her childhood, following her steps into the professional world of theatre, her concerns at the time of writing and performing the play, and her future aspirations. While the play may be looked at as a theatrical bildungsroman of Ganguli the playwright-performer, it is evident that this evolution is intricately tied up with her evolution as a woman living in a male-chauvinistic world. Through a focused discussion of the play as a representative example, this paper seeks to throw light on the ways in which the theatre space can host narrative negotiations of the self.

**Keywords:** performance space, Usha Ganguli, autobiographical narrative, negotiation, narratives of the self

**Introduction:**

Usha Ganguli's *Antaryatra* (The Journey Within) serves as a rich illustration of how the solo introspective mode may be explored in theatre. It is a one-woman show, both literally and figuratively. She is herself the playwright, director and performer. Ganguli's play is essentially an autobiographical narrative in the theatre space. There is no plot as such. The entire performance narrative is a series of reminiscences, greatly interspersed with scenes from plays she has performed in the past as well as stories and anecdotes about women in her life. The almost one-hour long production is a peek into the formation of Ganguli's

individual psyche. And yet, this individuality is constructed through a constant interaction and negotiation with other individualities that find representation in her play. These other individual voices find form and body in the being of Ganguli as the performer, and reach the audience through her medium. The multiplicity of voices contributes to the plural and complex nature of the dialogical self in the Bakhtinian sense (Trivedi 20). The performance narrative essentially reveals the process of the making of the self even as the self is being constructed and deconstructed through that performance narrative. The narrating self is referring to the narrated self that exists in a past, but the narrating self is not separate from the narrated self which is stable and established—or gives the illusion of being a stable and established entity. The purpose behind undertaking the inward journey through the play is to give a critically distant shape to the conflicting forces in her understanding of the self. The goal of such solo introspective journey is not necessarily to arrive at definite conclusions, rather simply to attain greater clarity in the conception of the narratives creating the self. Another significant purpose—perhaps an unintended one—is to adjust and adapt to the journey that one has undertaken, and continues to undertake.

It would be useful to begin with a brief introduction of the playwright-performer. Usha Ganguli has carved a niche for herself in the edifice of contemporary theatre in India. Ganguli was born outside Bengal—and therefore, its rich theatre tradition—as well as theatre per se. In the beginning of the play, she shares: “...though we were *probashi*, I merged into the Bengali culture, its lifestyle, its food habits, its rhythm” (69). She then goes on to express two things that she was unhappy about in her childhood: “Why couldn’t I do sums? ... And why wasn’t my birthday celebrated? My brother had come after four sisters so he was the pampered one at home. One day I invited all my friends over for my birthday without telling Ma...” (69). The concerns that she voices right at the outset of her performance narrative does two things simultaneously—first, it establishes her identity as an outsider to Bengal, its culture and implicitly but importantly, its language; second, it foregrounds her gender as fundamental in shaping her identity both as an ordinary individual and a playwright-performer. Shortly after, she narrates how she was introduced to theatre, and the articulation clearly conveys her outsider relation to the theatre space:

I started to learn dance in my childhood. ... But I never thought that I would do theatre some day. ... Impossible, I thought, I couldn’t act at all. I would never be able to act in my life! But oh, I did, I did. Having once found the path, could the footsteps falter? Many years...of a long and a great journey (69-71).

Bengal is a region with one of the richest theatrical histories to boast of in the subcontinent. Notwithstanding the anxiety that such a legacy may create, Ganguli has

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traversed a unique and meaningful path to build an enviable body of work. She has created a strong presence doing Hindi theatre in Bengal, considering that Bengali-language theatre has historically dominated that landscape. *Antaryatra* is originally written and performed in Hindi language, and the English translated dramatic text is published as *The Journey Within*. Ganguli's performance narrative is woven by a continuous progression of episodic memory. It is quite a straightforward and explicitly autobiographical introspective mode. However, interestingly, the experiences of the playwright-performer are paralleled with those of the female fictional characters she has played. The intent of Ganguli's autobiographical narrative is a sharing of her long journey, and through that sharing, a revelation of the inner recesses of the self and a quest for self-discovery. The manner of Ganguli the performer is that of confiding in the audience. She remains her real artist self throughout the performance narrative, and not for a second does she shed her real identity as Usha Ganguli. This remains the fundamental layer upon which the adopted identities of other characters are painted. However, the fact that she is a solo performer playing multiple characters along with narrating, leaves immense scope for imagination. The identities of the women that she plays, blended with her own real identity as the playwright-director-performer, may thus be understood as hyphenated identities.

The performance space in *Antaryatra* can be figuratively conceptualized as a triangular space. One corner of the metaphorical triangle is Usha Ganguli's own life narrative, which comprises of her evolution as an individual born as a woman in a patriarchal world, and her evolution as a theatre practitioner. These two identities of her 'self', converge and run as a single hybrid identity throughout the play, forming one corner of the triangular space. The second corner of that space is held by the real women in her life, who, like her, are negotiating a world dominated by men. The life narratives of these real women in her life, interact with the individual narrative of Usha Ganguli's self. The third corner of the triangular space is formed by the fictional characters that Usha Ganguli has lived in the past (as actor and director) in her theatrical journey. There is a constant negotiation among each of these three corners in the triangular performance space created in *Antaryatra*. And this negotiation is what engenders the autobiographical narrative of the play. Throughout the performance narrative, there are radial trajectories made by Ganguli as a performer. These constant radial trajectories burst the confines of the triangular space and make it a dynamic space.

In the physical performance of the play, Ganguli uses an intriguing minimalist set design that predominantly consists of three huge geometric shapes: a triangle, a circle and a square. Digging a layer deeper, these geometric shapes may render more than mere aesthetic minimalism, and give insights into the psychological landscape of the play. The triangle is

inherently defined by tension and represents confrontation and conflict, projecting the inner conflicts of the self. At the same time, these conflicts are also a source of creative energy and dynamism. As Ganguli connects her past, present and future through the narrative, the three corners and sides of the triangle also command and channel the viewer's attention to the negotiations happening within this space. The circle stands for eternity, the infinite, wholeness and the cosmic. But it also symbolizes the endless cycles of life and hence may be envisioned as a trap, one that is difficult to get out of. The square is indicative of the physical and material realm. As a perfectly equal and balanced shape, it represents stability and human-made order. But human-made order can also be stifling, thus denoting the self-imposed limitations of material life, oppressive societal structures and patriarchal boundaries. All three geometric structures that define the performance narrative can be visualized as hosting active negotiation. Ganguli would like to get out of both these spaces. In case of the triangle, it may be visualized thus—where there is a corner, it becomes a weak spot from where one can get out. In case of the circle, it exists equally all around you, surrounding you. Ganguli may thus be understood to be caught within that space. It is difficult to get out of the circular space. The square imposes rigidity, and yet has scope for making exit through the weak spots of the corners.

In view of the above discussion concerning the physical set design and their interpretations, it is noteworthy to pay attention to certain prominent examples of characters that Ganguli frames within each of the geometric shapes during her performance. This helps elucidate the nature of narrative negotiation permeating the space. Ganguli frames Munia in *Guria Ghar* (adapted from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*) into the square, representing her entrapment in the patriarchal bounds of the marriage as well as strikingly evoking the walls of the symbolic doll's house in which she is trapped. As Nora/Munia moves out of that frame, it signals her exit from the marriage and evokes the slamming of the door in the minds of the audience. The portrayal of Sanichari from *Rudali* in and around the circle conveys the endless and inescapable cycle of systemic marginalization and generational oppression that Sanichari faces as a professional mourner. Enacting Savitri from *Lok Katha* within the triangle, Ganguli re-directs the character's grassroots mobilization toward a feminist uprising and marks a literal political elevation through the vertical corner of the triangle.

It is worth noting that the play begins with Ganguli standing within the square as she reminisces her childhood discrimination as a girl child and her outsider status as a *probashi*. However, it is significant that the play ends with Ganguli climbing onto two steps and positioning herself in the circle as she envisions a vast expanse of ocean for herself and countless women like her—a world where women like her dream and their dreams are realized. The circle of life and the journey of self-introspection through negotiation has

brought her to a point where the infinite and the eternal can be aspired for in the wholeness and perfection of cosmic harmony. Ganguli also uses different *dupattas*, to smoothly don different characters and swap between them. Her movement across the three geometric shapes marks her fluid transitions, and lets the audience into the psychological interiors of her mind—the bare and raw space shaping her inner, self-reflective, introspective journey. This physical bare space on stage not only surrounds the geometric shapes but also exists as the space hosting their existence, pointing toward how the construction and deconstruction of the autobiographical narrative is happening not only because of the space within, but also essentially the space *without* the geometric confines. The negotiation is happening within and without, seamlessly blending one character transition into another, one anecdote into another, and one experience into another.

The major concern with gender that Ganguli established right in the beginning of the play, continues throughout the performance narrative and adorns greater intensity as the play progresses. Through fictional characters that she has played, like Bina in *Parichay* ( adapted from Arnold Wesker’s *Roots*), Maya in *Subah*, and real women like Kamala and Madhuri, she effectively portrays how the gendered selves of these figures blends with her own gendered self, catalyzing the empowerment of both the fictional woman and Ganguli: “Bina and I had become like one being. She was learning and so was I” (72).

I distinctly remember the absolute silence in the auditorium when I rubbed off the *sindoor* from the parting of my hair as I spoke these lines. Once an elderly gentleman remarked, ‘This Usha Ganguli will spoil all the women with her drama.’ I don’t know how many women I have spoiled. But after all these years when I see so many young girls joining our troupe, I feel that maybe a new path has opened for them (74).

Through her performance narrative, Ganguli not only expresses the conflicts within her gendered being as a woman performer, but also gives an objective projection to the conflicts of women like her who similarly face oppressive mechanisms in their journey towards actualization of the self. Anita Singh writes:

Theatre is a public institution, a theatre performance a public event. On stage the theatre makers offer vision on the cultural and social conditions of society and negotiate, so to say, with the audience (altering) norms and values of the society. Therefore a theatre performance is both an aesthetic, artistic phenomenon and a social and political event (1).

Further,

Women who write for theatre, often reflect prejudices and general discourse about “being women”. The need to show on stage not only the relationships of power, but also of

gender, became a vital motivation. Female artistes now deploy the all-important weapon of the feminist when decrying her object position at the hands of the male spectator: that is, the “male gaze”. Women who have used stage to negotiate or negate the “gaze”; they acknowledge the mechanism and return its “stare” by examining and performing a more personal, female experience which they own – it is their tale to tell (8).

Ganguli too “returns the stare” through her sharp portrayals, biting social commentary and politically incisive observations that she voices as the playwright-performer in between character enactments. What is significant to the churning out of her autobiographical narrative is how she connects the experiences of the other women with her own experiences. At times she reveals how another woman’s experience altered her worldview or deeply contributed towards her evolution—her becoming. For instance, Ganguli’s relationship with Afsari Begum and her subsequent death had a significant impact on her self-narrative. Her inability to save Afsari and help her lead a little longer and fuller life, immediately gets connected to similarly unfulfilled wishes with respect to other relationships, and very quickly acquires a much larger metaphysical note on the nature of life and its transience: “I tried my best to fulfil her wish to live longer. But after four days I heard that she was no more. The *begum* was gone. One by one they left us. Good people go away too soon. They leave behind the burden of the world for us to carry. So much more work to be done. So many dreams to fulfil!” (83) At this point in the performance, there is a depth of metaphysical anguish that clouds her eyes only to gradually recede with the passing of the moment, and pave way for an expression of future aspirations as she comes to terms with life and physically lifts herself up in a measured manner (*Antaryatra* 52:07-42). In the theatrical narrative then, the episode and memory of Afsari Begum acts as a vital memory as it evokes a highly emotional response while simultaneously acting as a catalyst in the concluding juncture of the autobiographical narrative creation. It gets linked to unmet goals and draws upon the enduring personal concerns of the evolving self.

Ganguli’s sharing of her personal journey in the theatre space may also serve as guide and inspiration to aspirational theatre workers, as they see the light at the end of a tunnel of struggle. Theatre demands immense resilience; Ganguli expresses in an interview that running her theatre group for over forty years has not been easy – as theatre never is. Pondering on the transient nature of a theatre organization such as hers, she visualizes theatre as a vast ocean; some waves touch gently, some give harsh blows, but the ocean remains never-ending. Group members join, the director invests much effort in their training and nurturing, but some leave without due acknowledgement or notice, Ganguli laments. Such transience is in the very nature of theatre, thus reaffirming the challenge underlying theatre practice. (*Guftagoo with Usha Ganguly* 21:05-59).

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Attributing primal importance to narrative, R. H. Thomson declares:

All lives are narrative. We are not human without narrative. If you are alive you cannot escape your own narrative. Whether we have the wit to fathom the structure within is another matter. Whether we personally are cognizant of our own journey is another matter. That is what the arts and religions attempt to do—give forms to the hidden journey. ... We are only the story that we tell. We are never not narrative (327-8).

Ganguli's purpose, as the title of the play suggests, is to make a narrative journey inward, to reflect, introspect and discover the self. It's more of self-understanding and self-revelation. It is as if what is happening inside is being spoken outside. It's like a soliloquy in that sense, loud thinking. There are no marked fluctuations of style in her performance narrative, rather a consistency and a singularity of style throughout. *Antaryatra* is an autobiographical narrative in performance. However, what makes it intriguing is that the autobiographical in Ganguli's performance space is not engendered through a sense of closure. It is a process of 'becoming' that Ganguli lays bare for the audience. It also helps her outwardly project conflicts and concerns that create inward turmoil. The objective distance that the practical manifestation of the theatrical narrative provides, enables the negotiation of the self and the other/s—as well as the divided self. The narrative negotiations in the space created by the fictional women, real women, and her 'self', do not necessarily result in a state of conclusion or peace. There is no finality, in the classic Derridean sense. The vast expanse of ocean envisioned at the end posits as a transient state of tranquil and calm, but is also pregnant with uncertainty and unpredictability. So when one asks owing to the autobiographical narrative—if Ganguli has already gone through the process of negotiation and reached a state of tranquility, is there any agitation? The answer may be yes, because tranquility also contains agitation. Ganguly presents to the audience her reconciliation to the bitter realities of womanhood in this world. But she also presents her journey of negotiating with the accepted realities, and of paving her individual path in spite of, and despite of, them. Through the portrayal of this evolution, she puts forth the struggles and sacrifices of women around her, and in the plays she has performed. Thus, the stream of her autobiographical narrative that has already been enriched through negotiations with other women's narratives, continues to pour out into the real world where the women in the audience are also engulfed in the aspirational expanse of her ocean.

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