

'The Lady Vanishes': Sexual Difference and the Politics of Writing Pain

Anirban Das is an Associate Professor in Cultural Studies at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. He did a graduation in Medicine and shifted to the humanities with a PhD in Philosophy. He has published essays on feminist theory, postcolonial theory, philosophies of the body, science studies and the history of medical epistemology and has edited the first comprehensive volume on deconstruction in Bangla, *Banglay Binirman/Abinirman* (2007). His academic monograph *Toward a Politics of the (Im) Possible: The Body in Third World Feminisms* (2010) has been published by the Anthem Press. He is currently working on three book projects and a number of articles.

Abstract

Can one access, through writing, the experience of pain? Is the act of writing, inscriptions of the stylus/pen on the white surface of paper, inscriptions of words on the already inscribed upon surface of intelligibility, enough to reach and re-present the phenomenon called pain? Is writing enough to break the barriers of ineffability in pain? Is writing pain inherently masculine, a logocentric gesture of the phallus/pen? Or, on the reverse, is it necessary for the politics of feminism to 'write' pain? Is it not a reversed gesture of defiance to use the stylus to inscribe one's own silenced trauma in the field of phallogocentric noise? Between respecting the singularity of pain and the politics of representing pain, should one choose? Can one do both at the same moment? In this presentation, I try to address the double binds through a couple of theoretical and empirical instances. That enables me, yet one more time, to talk about the necessity of doing theory in the politics of feminism.

Keywords: Pain, Writing, Feminism, Politics, Theory

Like all forms of politics, feminism has to work through a paradox. It has to address the necessity of working close to the 'real' existing conditions of life, and at the same time, the need to reach out to something that is already not there. This may not seem to be a paradox at all. The ambiguity becomes apparent only when one becomes aware of the disjunction between the 'real' that is now and the future that is not derivable from the now. The paradox, which continues to operate at the level of the 'field', may only be understood and worked upon once one addresses the level of abstract theory. Yet, even at that abstract level, feminist theory has to retain strong bonds with the grounds of feminist politics. Such an act enables one to think of the abstract workings of justice always in the context of given situations.

The paper, thus, talks about pain as a metaphor for the impossible 'outside' that a politics grounded on reality has to strive to access; if it wants to remain realist in its scope. This metaphoricity, in its turn, is constitutive of the phenomenality of pain.

A Question of Pain

She is in pain. Literally. Immersed in an ocean of pain that takes form in her own womb (is it her own anymore?) dragging her mercilessly in. The waves moving out into the depths of her being. Her own being? Does it hold together now? Shreds of her existence melt into that emptiness called pain. The pain that seeps inexorably in every five minutes of the sleepless, sleep-driven night.

I stand before her. I stand before the chasm that separates her from me. I stand in search of the bridge that, perhaps, never was.

I was at least as much responsible for the child that is being born. I, in a way, caused this pain. I cannot share it.

The sense of impotent (I utter in irony) rage is far more than matched by the dumb mechanics of her deep breaths. Breathe deeply, the night nurse had advised, to lessen your pain when it comes.

Do I, thus, romanticise the woman in labour? The pain she suffers, does it lend her some incommunicable essence of being? An essence that is valorised day in and day out, in rhymes and parables and folklores, in the everyday ideologies of motherhood and the fertile woman. In a seeming paradox, this valorization of experience does also involve a reification of the phenomenon; a reification that renders it invisible – pushing, repressing it into a zone of forgetfulness. It is as if the pain that essentially marks the productive heterosexual woman, that lifts her into the haloed position of motherhood, the rite of passage to the *crest* of her feminine existence, is simply just not there.

The doctor, who is a conscientious and sympathetic practitioner, does not visit her in eighteen hours - you got to give a chance for normal delivery to happen, this length of time is quite common in the woman going to be a mother for the first time. And the pain? You got to bear it. After all, you are going to be a mother. The nurse is on the verge of scolding. Do you want the baby to come out, or remain as it is? The attending staff remains unmoved. It's common to tear your pillows to pieces. After all, it is labour pain.

Labour pain is something a woman, once she is a mother, talks about quite often as an experience almost to be proud of. For that experience confers motherhood upon her. Motherhood that in its turn, confers a certain authority in the patriarchal family - the mother bearing the *name of the father* in a somewhat rustic Lacanian sense. Motherhood, in this perspective, is the *normal* fate and goal of every woman. Derivatively, then, labour pain is 'normal'. As an affliction it marks the body. But this mark and this affliction is *natural*. Something that is part of the *normal* process of *life's development*. And thus, this mark, being the mark of the natural, is naturalized; it vanishes from social consciousness with reduced sensitivity. The pain in labour, like the fire-branded tattoo on the body of some aborigine in a traditional anthropology narrative, is so naturally evident that it disappears from view. Like the famous *purloined* letter of the queen's lover, it remains hidden from sight, being *just left aside*. In 'The Anthropology of Pain', Veena Das speaks of two 'theories' of pain. One of these, views "pain (as) the medium through which society establishes its ownership over individuals."¹ According to the other, "pain is the medium available to an individual through which a historical wrong done to a person can be represented,.....[sometimes in].....the form of a memory inscribed on the body."² In the second, the individual, through pain, resists complete incorporation into society. Whereas in the first theory, pain is the 'guarantee given to the individual that he belongs' to society.³ Both these formulations deal with the theme of memory. Das goes on to grapple with the problem of

¹ Das Veena, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 176.

² Das Veena, 176.

³ Das Veena, 182.

communication – 'does the acceptance of pain create a moral community'; or does it separate the person from the society, where the 'person' is seen to be a *debtor* in relation to the society, the *creditor*, and tries to fulfill his/her obligation through pain, indignity and torture inflicted on his/her self⁴. Thus pain, that experience common to the victims, might as well produce these victims as separate persons – persons, in whom, as Sunder Rajan (1993) has pointed out following Scarry, the radical subjectivity of pain is inextricably linked with an 'essential privacy and incommunicability'⁵. The experience that unites remains *incommunicable* and thus, separates. Das invokes Wittgenstein to speak of a possibility of communication, of 'relating to the pain of others' through 'forming one body'.⁶ She quotes Drew Leder who argues, "When another consents to form one body even with the ill body - one in pain, contorted, or disabled - this exerts a healing force."⁷ Therefore the "pain *felt* in another's body" shows the inalienability of pain.⁸ Vis-a-vis a conception of pain as unrepresentable, ontologically anti-discourse, (as Rajan describes Scarry's notion to be), can be posited, Das' reading of Wittgenstein, where the 'expression of pain' and the 'sensation of pain', though disjointed, are seen to have some correspondence - "to say 'I am in pain', is not the end of a language game but the beginning of it. This does not make my pain incommunicable."⁹ This prolonged discussion on the notion of pain does have little direct relevance to our context for we are here dealing with a pain that is naturalized into nothingness. This pain gains symbolic significance at the cost of visibility. Yet the discussion would, in the latter part of this essay, provides some clue to the theoretical exegeses at work in the effort to establish linkages among 'incommunicables'.

One figure that comes to mind at this juncture is that of the *sati* in nineteenth century Bengal, a figure much written about in postcolonial feminist literature. For the *sati* too, the act of burning (in the pyre of the husband) confers a certain *authentic existence* to the woman – "not a devalued 'body for burning', but a body invested with exceptional physical properties."¹⁰ It is an extreme instance, where the body, like that of the martyr, gains a sort of permanence by being subject to destruction; an instance of a phenomenon, which as it marks the authenticity of an existence, reifies that into non-existence; a certain turning back into one's own theoretical presuppositions might lead us into the vexing question of whether the category *woman* could present a similar predicament.

From where does the repressed return? From the future, some would say.

The above formulation has sufficient vagueness and ambiguity to seem prophetic. It offers an openness of interpretations. I use that opening to wedge in my own. To treat the figure of *pain* in the *woman in labour* or in *sati* as a trope of valorization/ reification is to view the process as a sort of *reverse foreclosure* - the figure that (re)appears in the Symbolic being foreclosed (in reverse) in the Real.¹¹ This act of figuration (of the pain) seems to be an act of reinstatement on the one hand and a turn of the repressed towards freedom on the other. At the level of a (fashionable)

⁴ Das Veena, 183.

⁵ Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1993), 19.

⁶ Das Veena, *Critical Events*, 195.

⁷ Leder Drew, *The Absent Body* (United States of America: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 161.

⁸ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *The Blue and Brown Books* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 49.

⁹ Das Veena, *Critical Events*, 195.

¹⁰ Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder, *Real and Imagined Women*, 20.

¹¹ Lacan, Jacques, *Les Psychoses*. (Paper presented at Sainte-Anne Hospital in Paris, 1955-56)

discourse-analysis of the dominant view on 'woman', the metaphor of reverse foreclosure may act as a device that unveils and brings out the 'reality' of the experience of pain, and thus gains prestige as a method of critique. In a prevailing mode of (Hindu) revivalist theorization, the figure of the 'woman in ancient India' is subject to a certain deification that, paradoxically, robs her of her phenomenality. Modifying Spivak a bit, we could put it as 'the female empowers (in the symbolic), but the males do (in the real)'.¹² And significantly, the agency shorn of phenomenality is reached by the woman through a series of role-playing actions and 'rites'. That would again be a fitting example of the process of valorization/reification. Feminist critiques point this out conveniently, and not to forget, correctly.

My concern here is to think (through) the (im)possibility of such a process acting in the figuration of *woman* as a category in critical feminist theorizations – the repressed (in the dominant discourse) returning from the future (in the critical discourses). Or put simply, does the category 'woman' in critical theory bear traces of that reverse foreclosure of the categories of *pain* or *womanhood* that mark the body of the woman in received wisdoms. To refrain from such an extension of the argument, is to confine oneself to convenient dissections of representations of women in the dominant cultural fields and constructions like the audio-visual media, shying away from problematizing one's own presuppositions. The problems that beset a representation of the identity of *woman* are not extraneous. What is it to speak of subject(s) of feminism? Just by asserting their historicity or contingency, do we thus get rid of a certain reification that accompanies *any* positing of a subjecthood? To assert these subject(s) to be non-transcendental, do we thus, through the act of naming, get rid of the transcendence inherent in the (theoretical) act of subjectivation/subjectation? Or somehow, we tend to retain elements of a *reified existence* of the (*wo*)*man* in the (im)possible exercises of feminist theories. Maybe, this mode of conceptualizing is one that retains (instead of a reverse foreclosure of) the 'woman' in the 'Real' as well as its agency in the symbolic, and in the process, de-objectifies certain elements of its role in the 'Symbolic'.

The Question of the Woman

This brings us into the problem of the constitution of the subject(s) of feminism. Bearing in mind the numerous theoretical positions that go under the name of 'feminism', we in a way, try to trace certain ways in which these trends would answer some common concerns. The way these concerns are addressed and the answers to them, would we presume, largely constitute the edifice(s) of these theories. The journey from 'women's question' to 'gender trouble' was marked by a shift of focus from sexual discriminations to the mechanisms of the construction of gender identities. But then, if these 'mechanisms' were not to be considered invariable in space and time (which at least was shown not to be the case in numerous studies), and if, these were to remain *amenable to change* through the agencies of feminist ethics or politics, one had to think beyond the structural dynamics of the 'sex-gender' system that would *reproduce itself infinitely*. To theorize the 'system' consistently was to look into the dynamics of its reproducibility. Yet the agency of active 'subjects' who could bring about 'structural change' had to be accounted for. This was the classical structure/agency problem in social theory. In the field of gender studies this often called for 'identity categories' like the *woman* or the *sexually deviant*, who were not always, and not even mostly, co-extensive. The problems continue to hinge on the

¹² Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (United States of America: Harvard University Press, 1999)

possibility of knowing and identifying the subjects of feminism and the modes of their agency (as presumably, the concept 'agency' might as well be defined differently in a non-patriarchal context). *There remain the question as to whether such agencies can be conceptualized in language or acted out through performances too deeply implicated in the reproduction and the continuance of the sex-gender system.*

In the process of thinking through these problems, I hope to raise certain points concerning two major themes. The first concerns the (im)possibility of a (dis)junction between the two *subjects* of *woman-hood/feminism*, the *epistemo-ontological* and the *ethico-political*, and the consequences of the predicament. The second is the question of location/situatedness of theory and its possible relations with the *subject of knowledge* in feminism and/or the other critiques to modern knowledge systems.

My own concern regarding these themes flow from an anxiety about and a longing to theoretically ground the (im)possibilities of communications across identities, that probably work in disjointed and discrepant manners to undermine certain modes of exploitation, coercion or objectification that constitute our beings.

I submit that the *specificity* of the definition of a *specific identity* (woman, postcolonial, racial) flows from, has a correspondence with, the phenomenological *existence*, a certain *onticity* of the category. Problems of representation, of (im)possibilities of *real universals*, of the *reality constraint*, become implicated in the process. It is not that the specificity and the onticity are co-extensive, nor is the latter the essence of the former. But they have a certain correspondence. It is here that the concepts of *location*, of *embodiment* or of *history*, become important.

To clarify - that knowledge systems are embodied, or historicised, or located, is a general epistemological assertion. This assertion might flow from a general critique of science, or some other specific position like that of post-coloniality. The specificity of a feminist epistemology flows from this embodied nature of knowledge – a specific instance of situated knowledge, that remains located at the cross-section of gendered identities.

When we speak of a certain *onticity* (a stunted unwieldy expression no doubt) of 'woman', we do not mean *body*. Linda Nicholson has convincingly drawn our attention to one of the chief presuppositions at work in conceptualizing gender, viz., *the material basis of self identity*.¹³ She asserts that "...many who would endorse the understanding of sex identity as socially constructed still think of it as a cross-cultural phenomenon ...because they think of it as cross-culturally similar social response to some 'deeper' level of biological commonality, represented in the material givens of the body."¹⁴ Against this she posits the concept of 'woman', "... in the same way that Wittgenstein suggested we think about the meaning of *game*, as a word whose meaning is not found through the elucidation of some specific characteristic but is found through the elaboration of a complex network of characteristics", through 'family relationships'.¹⁵ According to her, this is helpful as it has a 'non-arrogant stance' toward meaning. In a way, this again tries to work through the double bind of ethical sensitivity to others, yet retaining a sense of the self that does not wholly uproot the notion of identity. Our position would be akin to this,

¹³ Nicholson, L, "Interpreting Gender", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 20, no. 1(1994): 80.

¹⁴ Nicholson, L, "Interpreting Gender". 82

¹⁵ Nicholson, L, "Interpreting Gender". 100

yet differing in a greater sensitivity to the locatedness of the emerging and evanescent patterns of the meaning of 'woman'.

To clarify another point, that the specificity of a location flows from its onticity, does not confer any primal authenticity to its ontology. For, the knowledge of this onticity (ontology) is *always mediated by the epistemic location*. So the search for an authentic subject of resistance leading to an infinite regression of identities – the woman, the black/brown woman, the postcolonial brown woman, *ad infinitum* – becomes futile. When Spivak asserts, 'what I call the "gendered subaltern" especially in decolonised space, has become the name "woman" for me', I read it primarily as an act of naming, not that of authentication.¹⁶

To deal with yet another problem, a separation of the epistemo-ontology and the ethico-politics is enabling at the level of analysis. It helps one to reach the limits of the epistemological project – a questioning of the privilege of the epistemic subject in issues of ethics and a simultaneous freeing of that same subject from the 'constraints' of 'political stand-taking'. Yet the same disjunction, in a way, brings in an element of authoritarianism – the authority of the phenomenal instinct, a gut sense of pragmatics – that claims the authority on behalf of the represented. Who speaks for the woman? Who speaks for the colony? The answers would be unambiguous, would have no epistemological reason to come to dialogues with other answers. "I know the kind of woman I am thinking about" – Spivak asserts.¹⁷ An ethico-politics severed from the epistemo-ontology would at best be pragmatically useful. I would prefer, on the contrary, a sceptic/cautious *junction* of the two so as to retain the democracy / civility flowing from the inherent flux in the definition of the epistemo-ontological subject. The contingency of subjecthood is, in my view, a strength of the ethico-politics of feminism, a sense of arbitrariness and fallibility marked through the subject of epistemo-ontology.

The Vanishing Other

To posit an epistemic dimension to the others is to think of knowing in terms different from the terms of knowing we know now, different not in the sense of a Hegelian Other that is always already constituted by a sameness at some meta-level, but beyond that. This is the problem of *thinking alterity in terms beyond a dyadic relationship*. In a recent conversation, Elizabeth Grosz speaks of this as the category of the 'other of the other' in Luce Irigaray, 'someone or something altogether different'¹⁸. Characteristically, the said conversation comes to a halt at this, the participants ruminating on the various (im)possibilities of the category. As Butler puts it, "the logic of what is unspeakable and unsymbolizable returns to disrupt the operation of the symbolic...to produce [an]...echoing dissonance within it,... to show its incoherence..."¹⁹. But how can one think of such things - things 'without which we cannot do', but which perpetually escape the categories of our thinking?²⁰ What happens when one tries to *think* about these, even in a fictive mode? I try to bring out *the (im)possibilities of conceiving the slippage of an evanescent category and its concomitant moorings in the persistence of/in one's being*.

¹⁶ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiating with Unacknowledged Masculinism". In *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Teresa Brennan (London: Routledge, 1989), 220.

¹⁷ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 218.

¹⁸ Cheah, Pheng, Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, and Drucilla Cornell, "The Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell", *Diacritics*, 28, no. 1(1998): 40.

¹⁹ Cheah *et. al*, 41

²⁰ Cheah *et. al*, 22

In Hitchcock's early and somewhat mediocre film (*The Lady Vanishes*, released in 1938), the lady vanished from the vision of the girl who became the helpless witness to the machinations of the whole group of people in the train.²¹ The elderly woman who had helped this girl, talked with her over a cup of tea, written her name on the frosted window-pane became non-existent as everyone else who saw her denied the fact. Everyone in the movie refuse to be a witness to the lady's existence – the two Englishmen for they were afraid of missing a cricket match if the train was detained in search of the missing woman, a couple, to hide their extramarital excursions; some for money, some for the country. The film, producing a tension that begins with the work of vanishing and increases with every act that is performed and staged, does not retain the stress of the situation through to the end. It moves on to a tame resolution with the coming together of the young couple who unravels the knot through persistent effort. Yet what remains to the discerning audience, is the atmosphere of doubt, anxiety and simmering apprehension which literally fills the smooth and easy life of the bourgeoisie in the comforts of the train. The lady vanishes. The fact of vanishing continues to fill and destabilize the journey. The resolution notwithstanding, traces of the outside do trouble the neatness of the familiar. The film is ripe with a potentiality which is left for others to explore.

Writing about humiliation, writing about the witnessing of pain, is not a simple accounting of experience. The claims of a fully present object of discrimination and pain do raise important problems. Yet, traces of pain may – in being written – inhabit and interrupt the secure inscriptions of reasoned presence. What I propose here is not a valorization of the fictional mode as being able to touch a domain which rational philosophy or the social sciences fail to reach. My contention is the necessity to remember, on the part of a feminist politics built in the model of the descriptive social sciences, this domain of the outside. My own humble words in this essay are, I want to believe, instances of such a remembrance.

²¹ Gilliat Sidney, and Frank Launder. *The Lady Vanishes*. DVD. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. California: United Artists, 1938.