

Discourse of Feminist Voice and the Interjection of Prosthetic Memory: An Analysis

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Abstract

Memorial narrative has been one of the most enabling strategies of feminists to recover and resuscitate subjugated voices of women inextricably buried in the prevalent socio-cultural discourses. This paper attempts to interrogate the intertwined politics of voice and memory and problematizes the possibility of recovering an authentic female voice, unscripted and pure. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's critique of subaltern representation and Alison Landsberg's influential concept of Prosthetic Memory, this paper analyses a group of significant literary and cinematic texts to understand the discursive formations of the voice and the politics of performative articulation through interventionist remembering and strategic forgetting and its implications for subjectivity in techno-cultural modernity. Ultimately this paper aims to destabilize the essentialist truth claims by rethinking feminist resistance within mediated, grafted and hybridized memory formations.

Keywords: *feminist voice, prosthetic memory, representation, ethics, power*

The idea of the voice, long subjugated, forgotten, and marginalized in the dominant hegemonic discourses, has been the persistent cause of concern among historians and scholars. The search for the long-lost voice has given rise to an irrepressible urge to excavate, unearth and restore it from the hidden recesses of the archives. A voice occupying an ideologically contrarian position, resistive, counter-hegemonic in nature and emblematic of sovereign autonomous subjectivity has fascinated the scholars and the historians alike for its subversive potential. However, recovering the voice of the subaltern female, potentially subversive and disruptive in nature is extremely problematic because of the multiple layers of subjugation of the feminine subject. Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", has raised compelling questions regarding the limits of representation and signs of impossibility that loom large over such projects of recovering the subaltern voice (Spivak 271). The question regarding the excavation of a pure voice is further complicated by the notion of the subaltern as female. Spivak finds this very project of retrieving the voice flawed from the very beginning as it is premised upon the very notion of sovereign subjectivity of the subalterns and the notion of the intellectuals as transparent medium through whom the subaltern can find the lost voice. The female subaltern's

articulation, her point of enunciation is sadly missing. The colonial archives and the patriarchal hegemonistic set up rewrite her, making her incapable of accounting for her own subject position. The politics of the voice is inextricably linked to the politics of being heard and Spivak thinks that even if the subaltern tries to speak, she won't be heard and her voice will always be inscribed over (Spivak 287).

The politics of voice, hearing and the whole notion of resurfacing of the subjugated lead us to the very popular branch of memory studies. The 20th century has experienced traumatic events of mass scale wars, genocides, rise of dictatorship and along with that official institutional history based on erasure and ellipsis. Memory in such a schema becomes the site of counter discourse to preserve individual subjectivity and alternative histories. It advances the political interests of the suppressed people against the effacing institutional history. Mirek, in a moment of profound thought in Milan Kundera's novel *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, reflects, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (Kundera 3). He desperately attempts to create an alternative, resistive memorial history of the erasures and omissions of the dictatorial communist regime. However, the question remains, is memory consisting of the dialectics of remembering and forgetting a pure space? Is it inextricable from ideological maneuvering? Can it not fall into the trap of power machinations and become itself a mode of erasure? Haven't the Jewish memory of the Holocaust and the archive of oral history effectively created a very linear narrative eliding over some of the uncomfortable truths like the complicity of the east European Jewry in persecution and deportation of their fellow Jewish brothers to the concentration camps? If history is vulnerable to manipulation and emplotment, memory is not resistant to it. The performance of memory can be maneuvered implicating it in the same regressive discourse of power that it wants to counter. Thus, the binary between the official discourse of history and the counter discourse of memory dissolves. Memory like history is a construct and prone to fictionalization and may contribute to the loss of meaning and dilution of the voice trying desperately to resurface through it. The ethical schema often involved in the very process of voicing through memory may get confounded in this process. Literature has a rich tradition of complicating the plots of memory. Tennessee Williams while revolting against the drabness of the naturalistic plays gave birth to a new grammar of the memory plays. In the elaborate stage direction to *The Glass Menagerie*, he refers to memory as nonrealistic that is seated predominantly in the heart (Williams 773). Naturalistic details are rejected in the favor of mood music, lighting where the voices appear insubstantially dreamy, belonging to the different realm and thus freed from the compulsions of realism where flights of fancy take shape through elaborate poetic license. Long before the popularity of memory studies, Williams complicated the relationship between the trajectory of the voice and the discourse of memory.

The problematizing of the two central concerns of the above-mentioned question "voice" and "memory" sensitizes one regarding the essentialist, absolutist truth claims of either the voice or the one who unearths the voice. As a lot of historiographical and cultural works turn to oral histories and voices of women, it would serve us better if we transcend the fixation with the truth claims of the voices and purity of memory and focus on each articulation as another telling, another experience about the shifting and negotiating of boundaries, encoding and decoding of

power in everyday life, strategies of inhabiting the social and the individual body and negotiation of their subjectivities against the onslaught of erasures.

In the discussion of the possibility of resurfacing of suppressed voices through memory, a documentary film by Reena Mohan on the first woman on Indian screen *Kamlabai*, deserves special mention. Mohan's *Kamlabai* is a brave attempt at recovering the lost voice of the first woman on screen, a Marathi actress named Kamlabai. This act of recovering the lost voice with all its authenticity and truthfulness involves an act of speaking out by Kamlabai who remembers her life journey from stage to the screen facing the challenges of a strict patriarchal hegemonic set up and ultimately winning over all odds. So, memory and its retelling form the central concern of Reena Mohan's documentary which aims to restore the lost voice of a defiant feminine subject in the narrative of personal history that can also be read as a universal story of female transgression. Kamlabai's supposedly authentic voice narrates her personal history, this personal history is dependent on her act of remembering and it is within this personal history Kamlabai's subjectivity should be located. Memorization and remembering are not simple apolitical and ahistorical acts. They are deeply imbued in spatio-temporal politics and ideological bent of the subject. Given the interventionist set up one must definitely look into the extra cinematic apparatuses like the directorial inputs, brief given to Kamlabai and the whole set up. As a viewer, one often finds that documentaries that recreate traumatic history through the remembrance of survivors are often plagued by strategic omissions. Similarly, one must always be careful about the truth claims of Kamlabai's life history constructed by mining her memory. Was Kamlabai as defiant as she portrays herself? Why is it necessary then for the presence of a father figure like voice of the interviewer who influences her most powerful cathartic release of emotions? Why does she surrender her physical beauty to divine spirit, Krishna? Her resistive stance is again undermined by her pride in performing a rather insignificant role of the maid of Chandragupta. It is the overarching heroic king Chandragupta who seems to sustain her. Her vehement rejection of daughters and yearning for family also bring out a different aspect of Kamlabai's nature, that of a docile nature resurfacing at unsuspecting moments.

Here, Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory" becomes crucial. In *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Landsberg argues that modern mass culture produces memories that individuals did not live but nonetheless internalize (Landsberg 2). Such memories are acquired, mediated, and implanted. Kamlabai's narration may reflect not only personal recollection but also a prosthetic incorporation of collective female suffering, shaped by documentary expectations and feminist historiography.

Reena Mohan attempts a very intrusive style of filmmaking that brings to the forefront the issues of ethics and truthfulness of representation in documentary filmmaking. One of the legendary documentary filmmakers Dziga Vertov's cine-eye technique advocated capturing life unawares. It is a system of total nonintervention that captures reality spontaneous and unperformed and brings out the truth value of reality. It is this ability to bring out the truth value that distinguishes documentary films from fictional films. The objective eye of the camera watches the subject and creates a physical and mental distance between the subject and the audience, a kind of defamiliarization effect that nurtures the critical ability of the audience. Reena Mohan as a director in this question and response style documentary prompts the subject, makes her aware of

the camera and often times engages with the actress. The awareness of the camera by the subject is another big flaw in this film. The eye of the camera gets obsessively fixated on the subject following her everywhere and often capturing her in different states of undressing. Under such interventionist director and intrusive gaze of the camera, it is obvious that Kamlabai does not spontaneously remember things. She performs remembering which may include strategic forgetting and erasures. How can this strategic remembering in a rather contaminated medium be the authentic voice through which one can read the transgression of a defiant feminine subject?

In the image mediated 21st century the advent of the implants or the issue of memory as a prosthetic process has further complicated the trajectory of contrapuntal female voice and the possibility of counter history. In a world characterized by the loss of the real and substituted by spectacular simulation, the question of authenticity and agency of the voice become redundant in the hybridized, adulterated, grafted memory. Apart from the inherent micropolitics of remembering and forgetting that affect articulation of the voice, the very postmodern possibility of extraneous neocolonialist, patriarchal, hegemonic corporatist interjections through the prostheticization of memory destabilize the personal domain and dissolve the gap between the acquired and lived experiences. The surge in publication of autobiographies in the late 20th century by women focused primarily on the reclaiming the lost voices buried in the personal domain to resist misrepresentation and subsequent usurpation. Alison Landsberg in her seminal study on prosthetic memory brings forth these concerns pertinent to the feminist positions. In her study of *Bladerunner* she shows how the ontological assumptions of Rachael get destabilized because as a replicant she possesses an intruded manipulated memory. This miscegenation of memory reinscribes her whole self, a stark difference from what she assumes and what the reality is. She inhabits a memory that is a result of Tyrell's making, her identity is acquired. It is a depthless simulation. Her ability to negotiate her identity and transgress her boundaries gets severely restricted because of the inauthentic nature of her experiences that ontologically destabilizes her being. The replicants are structurally better than the humans but inauthentic nature of their memory renders them subhumans. Deckhard's reading of Rachael's memory and his objectifying gaze becomes important here and also point towards the complexities raised by the Baudrillard's dystopian notion of the loss of the real with an abundant proliferation of the depthless hyperreal, simulations (Baudrillard 1). The loss of the real, lack of referents usurps bodies in a techno-cultural continuum where private experience gets transformed into a mass cultural experience. Deckhard's access to Rachael's memory and his negation of Rachael's claim of humanity involve a simultaneous objectifying reading of her body and a visual penetration that following Mulvey one can definitely say controls and sexually consumes her through the male gaze giving him an option to peep into her private world (Mulvey 11). Dilution of resistance and ease of reading robs the subject of her autonomy and gives Deckhard the ability to control and manipulate her. Given the ambiguous status of Deckhard at the end, the gaze may also be a narcissistic search for the ideal ego, a desire to identify with the form similar to his own.

Landsberg's idea of the prosthetic memory as acquired, inauthentic, inorganic and implanted may not be the product of fertile science fiction imagination. This idea that subjectivity is built on to memory through prosthetic process, a process of acquiring what one does not possess

individually, answers many questions regarding the function and perpetuation of communal memories and the process of remembering forgetting. Prosthetic process of acquiring memory may lead to continuation of communal memory even among the community of women regarding diverse subjective positions articulated by them globally. The proliferation of slutwalk movement throughout the world that actually started in Canada in response to very specific circumstances is a brilliant example of the success of this grafting process. One of Mahesh Dattani's finest plays *Bravely Fought the Queen* alludes to a very turbulent prosthetic process of memory grafting among generations of a family tormented by brutal patriarchal violence. The act most violently happens in the case of Dolly's daughter who was born retarded and acquires experiences of not only brutal domestic violence that led to her condition but also bears the traces of communal experiences of women suffering under normalized violence in the deeply divided social strata. However, it brings with it the danger of contamination, ahistoricity, and the problem of the inauthentic that may scuttle the voice trying to surface through it. If memory becomes interchangeable, graftable and transportable, everything is thrown into crisis as the whole notion of authentic subject position and the question of voice get released into the realm of unreal, the realm of simulation making the self "heteronomous". Recently released Alex Garland's film *Ex Machina* also complicates the politics of feminine body, grafted memories and the male gaze. A female robot with artificial intelligence is grafted with human experiences and based on that she articulates herself. But the turning point comes when the robot Ava improves the implanted memory, breaks free from sexual bondage and manipulates the humans with the memory and voice borrowed from the humans, males in this particular case. Ava presents potential subversive possibilities of implanted male memories that a female artificial intelligence accepts and adapts. She reads the male sexual desires in her grafted memory and manipulates Nathan accordingly. The gaze and the dominant subjectivity are subverted by Ava through her counter hegemonic strategies made possible by the memory implants. However, the persisting problem of inauthenticity lingers on. Ava's daring act of subversion is made possible by the inheritance of grafted male memories that made it possible for her to read the male desire and subsequently manipulate it. Her strategy is successful only because males implanted their desire inside her. Her subversive gaze is only possible because of the male gaze. Her agency is activated because of the willing misadventure of the males. She lacks autonomy and authenticity as she exists only in a symbiotic relationship with the male subjects.

Voice and memory both have a complicated intertwined entity. Voice resurfaces through memory to reinstate autonomous subjective position, resistance and the history of the marginalized. As my argument points out, neither voice nor memory exists in simple structural continuum. They are constructs vulnerable to the machinations of politics and ideology. This dimension I have explored through the analysis of Reena Mohan's much acclaimed documentary *Kamlabai* and Alison Lindsberg's concept of the prosthetic memory. Both of them brought forth the question of memory and voice and provide possibility for ontological intervention to understand the epistemic shifts they engender.

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