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## **The World within a Play or Playing within the World: Re-animating the Author through the Actor's Voice**

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### **Abstract**

The critical argument around deconstruction destabilises the author and the relationship between the authorial authority over the text and the meaning-making process. A similar deconstructive turn also questioned the actor's positioning within the larger production apparatus in relation to the dramatic text. Looking at the changing ideological construction around the author in relation to the actor and performance, this paper argues that the re-animation of the author in the recent critical arena has opened up spaces where we can re-imagine the actor as well. The exclusion of the author from the bourgeois authority of the text has freed the text to be re-connected with the actor. Through this re-connection, the method of meaning-making gets a new dimension where neither the author nor the actor has full authority over the text. Still, they remain active part-takers in the meaning-making process. This paper contextualises how deconstruction as a theoretical premise and autobiographical narratives as *active writing* have a dialogue that portrays writing as a performing narrative: a creative synthesis between the narrating self and experiencing self. It is an enquiry into that 'theatrical' space where the autobiographical 'author' and actor melts down to become an organising function which can question the earlier production apparatus and simultaneously become a creative force. This paper is an objective epistemological endeavour to destabilise the production apparatus, thus opening up new possibilities of meaning and interpretation in examining the text, author, actor, and beyond.

**Keywords:** Author, Actor, Text, Meaning-making.

### **Introduction**

The relationship between an author and the text has been a site of critical argument in literary studies for so long. In the last two decades, a critical epistemology developed in literary and performance studies, which looked for a new analytical vocabulary for the interplay of the text, author, and the performance on the stage. Along with questioning the total authorial authority over the text, it has challenged the earlier paradigms of actors and negated the notion of canonical actors on the stage. This deconstructive turn has critically questioned the authorial authority and the more extensive meaning-making process. Quite in a similar time, the inter-relationship between the dramatic text and the actor on the stage has been contested from different angles. The shifting authority of a dramatic text, the stage, the director, the actors, and the audience became a space where contestations occurred among literary and performance scholars. The conflicting relationship between Laurence Irving's theatre and George Bernard Shaw's was one of them. Gabriel Fallon starts his essay with the line, "In Irving's theatre, the actor was supreme; in Shaw's, the author; and these two contestants had to fight, and one of them had to die" (Fallon, 1939, p. 197). Different forms of connectivity resulted in different negotiations and conflicts between the actor on stage and the author of the drama text. The common

thread of theatre managers and, in some instances, the theatre manager turned dramatist has complicated the whole dynamics differently. Looking at the changing ideological construction around the author concerning the actor and performance, the paper argues that the re-animation of the author in the recent critical arena has opened up spaces where we can re-imagine the actor as well. The paper delves deep into the performance-oriented criticism of drama and dramatic text, which looks at the inter-relationships between actors and performers, re-presentation and presentation, in the context of the narrating, performing and experiencing subjects on stage.

Walter Benjamin argues in his seminal lecture on “The Author as Producer” that the interdependent relationship between the literary tendency and the political tendency of writing incorporates text into the context of social relations (Benjamin, 1988, p. 86). It primarily refers to an inter-relationship where the text becomes a part of the more extensive production process where text surpasses its literary boundaries, gets beyond the printed pages, and refers to a discourse of ‘textuality’, more enormous than the text. Benjamin looks at literary work in relation to the production means of its time, which he calls *technique*. It is a text’s critical relation and function within the more extensive literary production relations: its effectivity, discursivity, and operativeness within the literary and beyond the literary and political world. Quite similarly, an actor on the stage creates moments with a literary tendency in relation to the dramatic text but also comprises a political tendency that adheres to the author and the actor performing. It is a process of distancing the author from the text and reconnecting it with the actor performing. The exclusion of the author from the bourgeois authority of the text frees the text to be re-connected with the performing actors, and through this re-connection, the method of meaning-making gets a new dimension where neither the author nor the actor has authority over the text. It is a destabilising process of dramatic production where the ‘text’ surpasses its ‘authorship’ and becomes a *free text* to be connected with its every iteration. It refers to a process of emergence where the meaning is not inscribed in text entirely, but it emerges in the total process of making: a creative dimension of the dramatic text that reproduces itself again and again in each of its production. However, the actor on the stage and the author on the page remain active part-takers in meaning-making.

The paper takes this performative dimension of the dramatic text and critically argues how deconstruction destabilises the author and the relationship between the authorial authority over the text and the meaning-making process and also questions the actor’s positioning within the larger production apparatus in relation to the dramatic text. It looks into the changing ideological construction around the author in relation to the actor and performance. The paper contextualises how deconstruction as a theoretical premise and autobiographical narratives as *active writing* have a dialogue that portrays writing as a performing narrative: a creative synthesis between the narrating self and experiencing self. It is an enquiry into that ‘theatrical’ space where the autobiographical ‘author’ and actor melts down to become an organising function which can question the earlier production apparatus and simultaneously become a creative force. Thus the paper is an objective epistemological endeavour to destabilise the production apparatus, thereby opening up new possibilities of meaning and interpretation in examining the text, author, actor, and beyond.

### **From Text to the Stage and Beyond**

The shift from this text-orientedness to a more action-oriented understanding is to look at a text’s performance as well as examine the journey that a text and its meaning go through in the total production and consumption process. While criticising J. L. Austin’s idea of linguistic performativity (1962), Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1995) refer to the hollowness of the ‘performative utterance.’ According to them, “every textual utterance is not necessarily performance as long as it is not free to surpass the printed page and refers to any sort of

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performative capacity and thereby embodying any situation through words” (p. 9). The embodied utterance of a text in a performance space frees the words from the shackles of linguistic positionalities and initiates a web of possible meanings. For example, in the marriage function, the illocutionary utterance of the ‘I do’ is effective for any textual utterance, not because it is a performative action of ‘speaking’ but because it reproduces and is followed by a host of other performances. So, performing is not only a mode of uttering the text but a reconstruction of the text within an entirely different apparatus where the interplay of individual performance, other intertextual references, and the material and historical densities interact. Thereby, performance comes as enabling tool for a text to go beyond the words and entangle it with a context that gives it meaning. As W.B. Worthen (1998) would say, “Performing reconstitutes the text; it does not echo, give voice to, or translate the text.” (p. 1097) Thereby, performance does not refer to a production of a text on the stage but, more crucially, an entirely constitutive cycle of creation where dialogues are not textual utterances but the staging of a narrative. This is a creative method of transformation of the text that unfolds the written words in various syntheses of context, form, and means.

In this regard, Bertolt Brecht’s idea of ‘functional transformation’ becomes imperative, where he seeks a transformation of form and instrument by a progressive intelligentsia, which aims at liberating means of production. (Ray, 2014, p. 83; Hecht, 1961, p. 72) This liberation will assimilate and propagate revolutionary themes without destroying the foundation upon which it is constructed. For a dramatic text, this liberation will keep aside the individual representation of a character in the finished work and give passage to the actor for creating technical innovation with the character in particular and the meaning of the text in general. To him, the negation of authorial authority over the text is not to bring out any ‘spiritual renewal’ in the text. However, this active process supplies a production apparatus and changes the process. To delineate this creative process, an actor on the stage should have a political tendency to have an extraordinary development in production techniques. Thus, bringing down the close barriers of the production apparatus is necessary to develop the text creatively beyond the printed pages. Benjamin argues (1988),

In other words, intellectual production cannot become politically useful until the separate spheres of competence to which, according to the bourgeois view, the process of intellectual production owes its order have been surmounted; more precisely, the barriers of competence must be broken down by each of the productive forces they were created to separate, acting in concert. (p. 95)

In a similar line to Benjamin, Barthes also propounded a performative dimension of writing and the contours of authorship. Barthes calls the act of writing a *performance* where the author is “born simultaneously with the text, and there is no other time than that of the enunciation, and every text is eternally written here and now.” (Barthes, 1978, p. 145) The *birth of the author* is a result of a creative process where the text gets its shape in the process of writing. Shifting the dynamics from the printed pages to the stage, the actor has similar responsibilities as the author on the paper. Like the modern author, an actor becomes a character on the stage, a here-and-now who actively writes a ‘text’ on the stage. Therefore, similar responsibilities like the writers also fall primarily on the actors who perform on the stage. According to Benjamin and Brecht, it is an extension and shifting of the authorial responsibility, which is “the demand to think, to reflect upon his position in the production process.” (Benjamin, 1988, p. 101) As an active ‘writer’, the actor must also examine the character’s position on stage, which narrates critically, creates, or re-creates the text. In this process, the ‘author’ becomes a shifting agent, and simultaneously, the authorial commitment also shifts. This re-location in meaning-making capacity to the actor temporarily negates authorial authority over the text and shifts the power dynamics towards the actor with equal or possibly more dramatic responsibilities. It is

not to negate the authorial presence in the text but to critique the total authority. It is neither to give the authority to the actor nor to negate the authorial power, but to position a dramatic text on a shifting ground, a flux that delves more into the process rather than the product.

However, the possibility of the relocation comes from an interruption in the earlier relationship between text and author, stage and audience, and production and actor. The melting down of the production apparatus and the ‘new objectivity’ (to use Benjamin’s term) parallels with what Brecht looked at in his Epic Theatre. In Epic Theatre, the idea of alienation or estrangement and the breaking of the fourth wall also give liberty to the actor to embody the character. This *epic* approach of dramatic construction comes with a political possibility, which uses one significant *tendency* of the theatre: to get away from the illusion of reality to the natural conditions of life and create an interruption in the earlier dramatic technique, which is more imitative. While commenting on Brecht’s *Epic Theatre*, Benjamin (1988) argues,

Epic theatre discloses and uncovers conditions newly. This uncovering of the conditions is effected by interrupting the dramatic processes, but such interruption does not act as a stimulant; it has an organising function. (p. 100)

The tendency behind the re-location of authorial authority is not only to liberate the organising function from the finished work of art but also, to provide it partially to the actor on the stage. It helps create a distance from how the author has curved the character and establish a new connection. So it is an attempt of alienating not to disassociate but only to reconnect in a new fashion, alienating to identify it again. It is a search for a progressive technique of art which breaks it from the barriers of the already defined work or image by adding a revolutionary value to it. So, the meaning is being expanded by adding another dimension to the work and emphasis is given to the competence of the art object. This is the reason; real-time acting, the here and now of it, can be the site of this revolutionary possibility which is both ‘demonstrative’ in action and ‘transformative’ in nature. The present time of the play refers to the temporal time and space where the actor acts. It is the here-and-now of theatrical reality where the presence of the actor breaks or deconstructs the text of the play. This is a theatrical device where the actor’s presence refers to the reality being constructed on the stage rather than creating an illusion of reality as described in the drama text. This, according to Paul Binnerts, is a turning back to the earlier idea of playing in the game rather than looking at the rules of the game. Binnerts (2012) calls it the “ability to embody a fictional character without becoming that character in real.” (p. 16) This capacity of embodying is a vital instrument which liberates the actor from the shackles of total authorial authority and positions him as a tool which can question the earlier production apparatus and simultaneously become a creative force. Before that, the actor remains a ‘paper character’ that ‘waits patiently on the pages of the script.’ An actor embodies and animates a character and brings it to life. So, the moment of performance is also a moment of creation, a process of creating a text. The actor is both experiencing and creating. Once the performance is over, the creation becomes a part of his experience. Thus the dramatic text created by the author went through a regenerative/creative process by the actor, and thus, it is a way of presenting, not only re-presenting. As Joseph Chaikin (1972) says, “The actor has to be present in the role he plays so that he can mean what he says.” (p. 6) The creative synthesis of the text within the actor and his subjective dimension takes the text to a different terrain where the embodying process of acting becomes the narrative formulation. The text speaks through the actors, but it never translates the voices. Instead, it engages in a technique of formulating a *self* which can speak for itself and hold authority over the narrative at the moment of performance. This is a critical juncture in the production apparatus of the ‘text’ where feminist autobiographical narrative and the process of writing it come as a significant tool in defining and redefining the boundaries of a text as well as its *boundlessness*.

### Self-Writing and Writing of the Self

The rise of feminism and autobiographical writing problematises the understanding of the author and text significantly. Several feminist scholars look at how female subjectivity and agency are ideologically constructed. Along with the historical baggage of discrimination, female subjectivities are often negotiated under a broader rubric of written texts. Feminist autobiographical writings come as a counter-narrative to it, establishing a voice of their own, expressed in their own words. According to the cultural theorist Mieke Bal (2002), autobiography is a *processual* narrative, a process of performing narratives, which is almost like acting on the stage. He named this aspect of self-writing "Autotopography (a *place of fictional self*)," where the here and now of *-topos* is significant. (p. 182) Autotopography is a process of writing where not only the narrative content is important but also the experiencing self who narrates is crucial. Thus it is a way of writing about the self both in the written form as well as in the symbolic, which refers to the here and now of performance and then and there of memory and experiences. Focusing on the visual medium of 'writing' autobiography, it distanced itself from the earlier text-author way of writing autobiography. It negates the idea of *biographism* to refer to a spatial, situational, and local way of writing about the self. As in matters of acting, the actor's temporality and the 'bodiliness of the specific present' produce and shape the meaning; similarly, in autotopographical writing, the temporality of the narrating/writing self plays a significant role. Therefore, the one who writes an autobiography is also a self-expressive and experiencing artist who 'narrates.' If we can take the character in the text as constructed in the past, the actor in action or the autobiographical writer is "narrative present-ing: the making present." (Bal, 1993, p. 191) An actor in the presentational movement breaks away from the task of representing the world as designed by the author in the dramatic text. While addressing the audience with a specific action, they are not enacting a prescribed character; instead, they are experiencing the character within. Two elements are significant here. The 'auto-', refers to the self and '-graphy' means writing. In writing an autobiography and acting, these two elements are in a creative synthesis, and the meaning is created and interspersed between the presentation and the response. So, any autobiographical or performing narrative based on the maker's past without giving importance to the *-topos* or 'the work's presentational present' is limited as it only looks for the exteriorisation of what is already there. Nevertheless, surrendering the autobiographical voice at the presentational moment can effectively bring the functions of the processual narrative as articulated and express in the meanings. As Bal (1993) argues, "It would require [the] surrender [of] autobiographical voice in order to be effective as a character on the auto-topographic stage." (p. 187) It is a process of re-invigorating the narrative outside the strict boundary of the pre-established narrative. It is a way of co-existence of different individuals (the narrating self and the experiencing self) and collective (the audience or the readers) part-taking in the interplay of meanings.

So, constructing characters within several discursive patterns ascribes somewhat to a different method of character building than the author presented in the text. The actor's association with life plays a significant role in it. Thus, the presentation of a character on the stage is a process of self-articulation, which is subject to his/her social self, memory, and different inter-subjective experiences. The acting on the stage is not an expression of the narrative mind of the author or the visual 'body' but rather an interplay of both the 'mind' and 'body' of both the actor and author in a specific time and place. The actor becomes an active performer rather than just a character in the play's plot. This idea is quite akin to Benjamin's understanding of the readers, who are not passive recipients but active correspondents in meaning-making. (Benjamin, 1988, p. 90) Foucault (1980) also defines the active role of the reader/audience as a performer who actively assigns himself to the practice of meaning-making. Describing the functions of a reader and audience, he says, "The comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusion we practise - [all contribute]." (p. 124) The elevation that a reader gets at the decline of the bourgeois press also suggests a similar

elevation of the actor and the audience as a correspondent to the dramatic text and its meaning. Referring to this shifting dimension of authorship and the inter-relationship among writer, actor, and reader, Benjamin (1988) argues,

The reader is always prepared to become a writer in the sense of being one who describes or prescribes. As an expert - not in any particular trade, perhaps, but anyway an expert on the subject of the job he happens to be in - he gains access to authorship. (p. 90)

Similarly, in presenting a role on stage, two 'selves' are involved: the 'imagined' character by the author as prescribed in the dramatic text and the actor's self-construction of the character on and beyond the stage. Unlike the 'mimetic' process of acting, the emphasis is on the presentational, not the re-presentational. The processual, the creative, and the ideational merge into a composite whole where the process of autobiographical writing or acting portrays a process of *becoming*: a self-making and meaning-making process which is simultaneously co-creative, co-constitutive, and co-dependent. In the presentational moment, the actor does not represent the world within a play; instead, he plays in the world, crafts a world. In the process of writing an autobiography, the author, in the moment of writing, goes through a creative process of formulating a narrative, re-living a part of her life, and articulating that through the *performance of words*. In the first case, the author of the dramatic text, and in the second, the experienced self of the autobiographical writer remain passive. In contrast, the performing actor on the stage and the writing self of the author, respectively, remain active.

Feminist criticism and the process of autobiographical narrative are quite significant in this respect because, at the deconstructive turn, feminism did not look for the complete death of the author from the text. However, at this epistemological juncture, feminists relied more on an 'author-function'<sup>1</sup> as in the face of identity politics, women had a different historical relation to origin, institution, and knowledge production. Feminist autobiographical writing proposed a new concept of authorship which did not ascribe to any genius-like agency of the author but situated the author in the more extensive process of history formation. Moreover, this new positioning addressed women writers' sensitive influence on different cultural contexts. So, it was a repositioning of the author to re-contextualize different power and identity politics embedded within the full authority of the author. As Cheryl Walker (1990) argues,

Feminist critics pay attention to those theorists who, in liberating the text from the authority of a presence behind it, released it 'from the constraints of a single and univocal reading,' making it available for production, plural, contradictory, capable of change...unfixed, a process. (p. 554)

In writing an autobiography, imbibing the experience and the events in the very temporal construction of the present is a significant process. In his text, "Conditions of Self-Writing (2016)", Udaya Kumar proposes the idea that the construction of the self within the very autobiography is a process of social inter-relations and different dynamics of power relations, and also the here and now of writing. Quite in a similar fashion, an actor, while enacting a character on the stage, goes through a process of interlinking experience with the character structure of the author and re-animates it in the present. The experience of different social inter-relations of the actor in the past influences the presentation in the present. So, acting, in a way, is a process of writing an autobiography where it is impossible to differentiate between the 'self' of the character in the text and that of the actor on the stage. This is where the earlier boundary between the author and the actor melts. To quote Mills (1970),

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In this view, the actor could not hope to present himself before an audience with the “right” look and sound of the character until he [sic] had first succeeded in reproducing in himself [sic] at least an analogue of the complex pattern of thought and feeling which motivated the character's verbal and physical behaviour. (p. 65)

So, writing and acting both come as an internal process, an order of things, defined not by authority or boundaries but by a processual nature which is in flux. The self-narrating and experiencing author and actor are both active and passive in their self-narration. As Udaya Kumar (2016) said, “Self-narratives are not solely about one's actions in the world; they also present oneself as an experiencing subject, in an attitude of receptivity.” (p. 16) An actor like the self-narrator also gets affected by his/her own presence, and this presence in response influences the self-articulation on the stage. As Kant (1999) would say, “We intuit ourselves only as we are inwardly affected by ourselves.” (p. 166) So, the actor on the stage is simultaneously a ‘creator’ and ‘imitator’. Presenting the self is an active process, not only a passive imitation of the specific action of a written play. Instead, the actor re-writes the play with active involvement, participation and by experiencing the text. Furthermore, this process brings meaning to the text, which does not necessarily match entirely with the authorial intention. This active process helps re-interpreting the text in a new light and brings new possibilities for meaning-making.

### **Conclusion: The World within a Play and Playing within the World**

Thus, in this context, the negation of the author is not aimed at over-powering the actor but opening up the text's horizon and meaning by synthesising the text with the actor. The author's voice within the text is re-imagined and re-animated through the actor's voice and performance on the stage. An actor is not a passive representative but an active interpreter who engages in self-writing and self-construction. He partakes in destabilising the production apparatus and thus opens up new possibilities of meaning and interpretation. It is not negating the subjective space of the author or the actor but aims at more of an objective epistemological endeavour which liberates meaning. The paper does not look for the death of the author. However, it looks into the text for a commitment, a tendency which is not only a literary tendency but a political tendency which ascribes responsibility to creativity (Benjamin, 1988). It tries to establish the text as not a rigid isolated object like a book, novel, or work but an active interpreter and living component of diverse social relations. It attempts to position work within the production relation of its time - to examine how it underwrites, reacts, overthrows, or establishes with a *tendency*. In the theatrical sphere, it brings a fundamental change in the theatre architecture and acting style where the presence of the actor brings possibilities of innovation outside the confines of the traditional theatre. Moreover, the actor becomes an active part-taker in the meaning-making process and, thus, a tool of enormous political possibilities. Performance comes as an epistemic process based on a democratic perspective which anachronistically looks for discovering. It is not a historical search for origin but a beginning of a revolutionary possibility of contemporary epistemology.

### **Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> Foucault looks at authors as a function of discourse. Towards the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a system of ownership and a copyright system was established, where the question of authenticity was most important. Foucault talks about the idea of author function, which is a complex operation for establishing the author as a rational entity. In this system, what we call authors is a projection. Foucault, with his discourse analysis, looks for a more systematic functional aspect of the author within the text. He looks

for a pattern where the reader constructs the author. With his idea of ‘author-function’ a different inter-connective wave between author and text is being established. See Foucault, Michel. (1969). “What is an Author?” pp. 113-138.

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