

## **Flesh as the Missing Link: Cross-cultural Reflections on Robert Weimann's Concept of the Divided Authority in Performative Texts**

Anway Mukhopadhyay

*This paper seeks to present cross-cultural reflections on the idea of divided authority in performative texts, an authority divided between the pen of the author and the voice of the actor. It seeks to place Adriana Cavarero's theorization of the vocal ontology of uniqueness and the Levinasian idea of the fleshly face of the Other presenting a vision of concrete alterity on the same spectrum as Robert Weimann's theorization of the authority of the actor's voice in the performance of a play. Extending these theoretical paradigms to the issue of the absent maternal body which can be seen as the source of the corporeality of the actor's voice and face (that Cavarero would underline), this paper stages a dialectic friction between writing and performance, presenting "flesh" as the indispensable middle term in this dialectic. Besides, in the context of a film director's perception of the indispensability of certain actors in enacting certain kinds of literary characters, we need to focus on the incompleteness of the authority of the author's pen, its inescapable dependence on the body of the actor which comes, as a gift, not from the phallic authority of the pen but from a maternal body. This paper seeks to foreground this apparently absent maternal body as a hidden source of authority in the context of the double authority of the performative text. Finally, seeing performance as the fleshly fruition of the scripted text, this paper focuses on the play of the audience's desire for the actor's body in the complex context of the cross-cultural adaptations of literary texts into performative genres.*

Robert Weimann has time and again sensitized us to the divided nature of the authority propelling the centrifugal energies of Shakespearean drama. To put it otherwise, in a performative art form such as drama, the artistic authority is "divided against itself," divided between the "author's pen" and the "actor's voice," thus emanating from a "hybrid source of authority" (Weimann 27-28). While Weimann concentrates on Shakespearean drama and the early modern age, the

---

**Anway Mukhopadhyay** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Indian Institute of Technology-Kharagpur, West Bengal, India.

significance of his observations, it goes without saying, is far-reaching. Since Shakespeare, the performative art forms have evolved so multifariously as to present a maddening spectrum of medial and structural variations, and, especially after the advent of films, TV serials and now the web series, the Weimannian notion of the divided authority has become extremely pertinent, because, the pendulum of authority now dances more unpredictably between the author's pen and the voice of the actor. However, in this essay, I would like to underpin the missing link between the author's pen and the voice of the actor, the third term which is the matrix of making and breaking authority: the flesh. I would like to raise the question: is it just the actor's voice or rather the *history* of his/her flesh which makes authority unstable in the flesh-dependent artistic domain of film and theatre? Simon Shepherd points out that Weimann focuses on the interdependence of the body and the text in the dramatic form (17). However, we need to focus on the deeper existential implications of the body in the context of performance, especially in those contexts where the body's materiality offers its richest symbolic resources to the interpreter. Shepherd suggests that, in the performative context, the body and the script can be seen as "both an opposition and a mutual dependence" (14). He says:

A body exists prior to the dramatic script it enacts. That script disciplines and shapes it. Within that shaping the individual body insists on its own characteristics. (14)

However, whereas Shepherd's main focus is on the scripting/inscription of the body, I would like to see the body as engaging in a body writing that not only enfleshes the script but also invokes an apparently absent authority: that of the history of the actor's body which "exists prior to" the script. Besides, I will not see the body-in-performance as a scripted body but would rather investigate whether it can be seen as a *scribing* one, presenting something that can be compared to the body writing in *l'écriture féminine*.

Brianne Waychoff, while exploring the structural and functional connections between *écriture féminine* and the feminist "devised theatre" or "postdramatic theatre" (à la Hans-Thies Lehmann)[1-4], says:

Devised performance, as a reaction against the traditional process, involves the collaborative creation of a performance work by two or more people starting from their own experiences rather than a script. (1)

Waychoff argues that she has attempted to "articulate performance examples and practical exercises that function like *écriture féminine*" (3). However, I think that even in "dramatic"/traditional theatre/performance, we can find a mode of body writing that always transcends the delimiting factors generated by the "script" and is thus, at a deeper level, akin to *écriture féminine*. I would argue that we can reach

this proposition from the perspective of Weimann's theorization itself, if we link that theoretical framework with Adriana Cavarero's underscoring of the essentially corporeal nature of the "voice". If we modify our critical orientation, then, even within the conventional dramatic performance, we can listen to the hidden voice of the maternal-feminine element that has always been erased from the configuration of "authority" in the performative text. We need to remember that it is not just female bodies but *all* human bodies—male as well as female—that are born of mothers. Hence, all the voices—male as well as female—have maternal origins. It is a re-orientation to this maternal origin which can change our view of "authority" in non-"postdramatic" theatre as well as in innovative performative modes.

In the context of Weimann's focus on the actor's voice, one may be reminded of Adriana Cavarero's insistence that the voice of a speaker "dethrones the "subject" of traditional metaphysics", "renders this subject ridiculous", by foregrounding the *who* of the act of saying: the voice reveals *who* is speaking (Cavarero 30). She dwells on Emmanuel Levinas's engagement with the visual nature of alterity: according to Levinas's theoretical framework, the unique Other is present before me, as a fleshly presence, through the face I see in front of me. As Cavarero says, for Levinas:

The face of the other is "this dear piece of flesh with forehead, nose, eyes, mouth," which is "neither sign which tends toward a signified, nor a mask that hides it." There is therefore nothing to reveal. The unique human is already here, in the face. He, she, is in proximity, in front of me, face to face. The face of the other signifies itself, before and beyond every system of signification. Or, as Levinas says, the face of the other speaks to me. (Cavarero 27)

However, Cavarero would like to move towards "a vocal ontology of uniqueness" (173), even though she does not insist on "a rigid distinction between the vocal and the visual" (27). If we integrate the insights of Levinas and Cavarero to the Weimannian frame of thinking about theatrical representations, and extend that frame to the other media of performative arts such as films or TV serials, we can move towards a flesh-centric theorization of such performative arts. For Levinas, the visual uniqueness of the Other is located in the flesh; for Cavarero, the vocal uniqueness of the Other, too, is located in the body. Both the face and the voice are enfleshed objects, markers of the uniqueness of an "embodied existent" (Cavarero 173). This existent is marked by its "radical finitude" (Cavarero 173)—it is present before us, within the contours of the flesh. Cavarero writes:

From the maternal scene onward, the voice manifests the unique being of each human being, and his or her spontaneous self-communication according to the rhythms of a sonorous relation. In this sense, the ontological

horizon that is disclosed by the voice—or what we want to call a *vocal ontology of uniqueness*—stands in contrast to the various ontologies of fictitious entities that the philosophical tradition, over the course of its historical development, designates with names like “man,” “subject,” “individual.” (173)

We need to acknowledge that the “philosophical tradition” Cavarero speaks of has been slavishly followed by the tradition of literary criticism as well, and the literary critics have always read the “characters” in dramas as well as novels as disembodied subjects, individuals or figures. To borrow the vocabulary of Wolfgang Iser, the *ideative* (Iser 51-52) nature of our reading of the “characters” has always bracketed off the density and depth of their flesh. We have, precisely, seldom engaged in fleshly thought while reading characters “critically”. The characters in a written text, we need to notice, often project the illusion of fleshless entities. As if, their fleshliness, the density of the muscles and bones of their bodies, is only hypothetical.

On the other hand, when we look at the performative dimension of a text—a Shakespearean play, for instance—we are forced to focus on the flesh of the “character” who is now enfleshed in the actor—in the actor’s voice as well as in his/her face. However, if we ponder over the ontology of literature afresh—from the philosophical perspective provided by Cavarero and Levinas and through the critical lens lent by Weimann—we may begin to raise a number of questions which have still not been concretized in a “fleshy” way. Are there real embodied beings lurking behind the “characters” with hypothetical flesh? Is a writer—the novelist, dramatist or poet—extracting the fictitious ontology of a “character” from the body of a unique, real being? If we concur with Mario Vargas Llosa that literature “annihilates the real with symbols” and creates “an artifice built with materials always plundered from life” (Llosa 226), then we may begin to suspect that the characters in any fictional text are not merely the products of the creative “consciousness” of the author whose pen “puts into words” the abstract character emerging in his/her brain and invites us to dissolve the hypothetical flesh of that character into its originary abstraction. Rather, it is quite possible that the author extracts the uniqueness of the being s/he knows and transforms him/her into a fleshless character whose ontology we try to decode in terms of the “fictitious” entities Cavarero mocks—the embodiedness, the vocal and visual uniqueness of that being is eaten up by literature, by the written sign that always dissolves the density of flesh.

However, when the author’s pen loses its authoritative monopoly over a text and has to give way to the actor’s voice—and the actor’s face too—the “character” is enfleshed once again, or rather re-enfleshed. Maybe the actor’s body and the body of the “real” human being who got abstracted into the literary figure are quite different, maybe the voice and the face of the actor are very different from what the author could ever think of. It is possible that the author would object to

the voice and face of the actor as they are totally different from what the former had imagined. Alternately, the author may recognize in the face and the voice of the actor what s/he has been waiting for. His/her pen may be rid of its incompleteness, its insufficiency, through its surrender to the actor's voice/face. The author may find that the body of the actor fulfils the dream of his/her pen. On the other hand, it is also possible that the pen was all the time thinking of *this* body, that *this* body gave rise to the character the author presented in his/her fiction. Is it not possible that a theatre director or the auteur of a film, in certain contexts, prepares a performable script with a particular actor in his/her mind?

Let us now move to the ruminations of a filmmaker par excellence, Satyajit Ray, the legendary Bengali auteur from India. In his Bengali book, *Bishay Chalachchitra*, he explicitly says that, after the demise of certain actors, he can't think of making films with characters which could be enacted only by those actors (68-69, 108). It is evident that Ray, acknowledged as a supremely gifted filmmaker, muses over the limitations of the authority of the auteur in the case of a performative art form. Let me explain further. He says that an actor like Chhabi Biswas was so essential for him, that, in the absence of Biswas, he can't think of making a film of any Bengali text which features a zamindar or an elite Anglophile Bengali with a grave personality, such as could be enacted only by Biswas (69). Here, the author's (and also the auteur's) pen is ineffectual in the absence of the face and voice of the actor whom Ray has in his mind. Ray admits that when he reads a fictional text with such a character in it, he cannot help lamenting its unperformability in the cinematic medium, due to the unavailability of Biswas (69). In a way, the actor's body here determines the performability or unperformability of a written text — half of the life of the text. While the flesh is the missing entity in the crowd of written signs, it is, in terms of the economy of presence, the crux of the performative art — without the flesh there would be no theatre, no film, no *enactment* of a narrative.

Ray, in the same book, mentions another instance of the indispensability of a particular actor in the context of a particular kind of film narrative. Ray had cast Chunibala Devi, an old actress, in the role of Indir Thakrun, a very important character in his legendary film *Pather Panchali* (*The Song of the Road*). However, while working on *Pather Panchali* (the film adaptation of the famous novel of the same name, written by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay), Ray came across a short story of Bibhutibhushan, "Drabamayiir Kashibas" (Drabamayi's Dwelling in Kashi), with Drabamayi, an old woman as the central character. He wanted to cast Chunibala in Drabamayi's role and she too was enthusiastic about it. However, after the death of Chunibala, Ray could not proceed with the adaptation of the short story, because he could not imagine any other woman enacting the role of Drabamayi (108). Here too, we must acknowledge, the author's pen is ineffective without the actor's voice/face, the actor's fleshly presence. Drabamayi as the frozen sign coming out of Bishutibhushan's pen remains confined to an incomplete

circle which could have been completed only through the fleshly presence of Churnibala. The products of the author's pen would remain ghosts without the flesh of the actor(s). The author's pen remains a constant here, but its authority oscillates between fecundity and barrenness, between the successful *Pather Panchali*, a great contribution to world cinema, and the aborted plan of *Drabamayir Kashibas*.

Now, can we say that the author's pen produces the spirit and the actor's flesh only obeys the order of that spirit? That the author produces spectral souls that are in search of enfleshed actors? Is it the case that the actor's body is handcuffed to the "character" created by the author? Even if we follow the critical paradigm presented by Weimann, the fact remains that the actor is not totally independent of the script presented to him; s/he cannot challenge the authority of the script. Or can s/he? How far is s/he allowed to become the co-author or co-auteur?

Let us approach the problem from a different perspective. What is certain is that the body of the actor is *not* the creation of the author/auteur. In terms of his/her fleshly identity, the actor would always remain independent of whatever script is handed to him/her. His/her flesh is the creation of some other being. At this point, we get to touch another missing link—the maternal body which produces the body of the actor. The actor, in other words, can't help being "of woman born" (*a la* Adrienne Rich). Hence, the moment we foreground the dynamics of flesh in the context of the divided authority in a performative text, we need to acknowledge the fact that the author's pen, even though it has often been symbolically linked with the phallus, is—at least in the context of performance—never able to enjoy an exclusive phallogocentric authority that would deny the maternal entity. The maternal body would always lurk on the horizon, as the actor's body that completes the process of the fleshification of the text, and hence extends its semantic and functional horizon, is born out of a maternal body. In short, the author's pen as phallus is ineffectual without the body of the actor which has come, as a gift, from some mother who never appears as a claimant for authorship/auteurship. However, without that maternal body which produces the indispensable body of the indispensable actor, the author's pen would remain barren forever. If the actor shares the authority of and in the performance text with the author, then s/he is able to do it thanks to the history of his/her physical birth as an embodied existent.

As Cavarero points out,

To separate, to oppose, and to subordinate—the work of the phallogocentric tradition consists in nothing other than this. In this tradition, language is presented as a system of signification that uses and controls the vocalic, forgetting its origins. The source of the vocalic lies, for Cixous, in that maternal time of pleasure in which the voice is mixed with milk according to the sweet and generous rhythm of sucking. (139-140)

It is this history of the maternal origins of vocality which ultimately lends authority to the actor's presence in the fructification of the seed that the written text is, be it a drama or a screenplay. Cavarero reminds us that in *l'écriture féminine*, the performativity is embedded in the written text itself:

Like the “writing from hearing to hearing” that the Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano also evokes when she speaks of the “remote song” that comes from a maternal, vocalic source, *l'écriture féminine* maintains the vocal rhythm of the *langue*. With the taste of mother's milk still in her mouth Cixous “writes with white ink”—that is, as she often repeats, she writes with flesh, with the body. (141)

However, even when we are not concerned with feminine writing per se but the written, performable text in general, we need to underpin the hidden maternal dimension of the performance of the scripted text: the “rhythm” of performativity, vocality, musicality that is operational in the body of the actor, “of woman born”. The feminine writing can—as argues Cavarero—effectively question the binarization of voice and writing, as “the opposition between voice and writing, which comes to the fore in studies on orality, is thus dissolved into a soundtrack, written in words, where vocal rhythms decide the movement of the text” (141). However, if the text-to-be-performed is not a piece of feminine writing, then the vocal rhythms are not embedded in the text, but, the text, nonetheless, does await them. Hence, in the context of a performative text, the system of signification—which Cixous would assign to the patriarchal cultural codes—is forced to expose its lacunas, its *lack*, its dependence on the vocal rhythms supplied by others (the actors) who are the enfleshed existents with the maternal rhythms singing in the hidden depths of their moving bodies.

Can we, then, redefine drama as a genre that is built on a structure of signification awaiting the authority of the hidden force of the rhythms of the body - all bodies - that are essentially gifts from *mothers*? Do we find here a system of codes which forever waits for the intervention of rhythms, of bodies, voices, faces? Is it then a question greater than the issue of authority, is it rather a matter of the peculiar *ontology* of the performative text?

As Cavarero notes, for Levinas, “Saying” is essentially linked with the body and bodily sensations. Besides, “there is an essential bond between Saying . . . and Giving. . .” (Cavarero 30-31). The actor who speaks, whose voice completes the circle of authority in drama, in cinema, in any kind of performance that makes the written text bear bodily fruits, is one who gives him/herself to the audience. It is not the authority of *creating*, the authority that we would associate with mastery, but rather the authority which gets figured through a peculiar sort of self-giving. S/he does not merely present but rather *becomes* the bodily fruit of the scripted text, and invites us to savour the taste, the voice, the face. Embodied, the actor appeals to our bodies, and not just to our “intellect”. S/he completes the circuit of

the text's bodily fruition. The author's pen is forced to bear the fleshly fruit, the performance itself, in effect re-enfleshing the author, or rather decentring and scattering the authorial self across the rhythms of the acting, moving bodies, their voices and faces. The reader, too, is forced to acknowledge his/her fleshiness. While the text in non-feminine writing may be concerned with codes and not rhythms, signification and not *jouissance*, the performance forces the text to succumb to pleasure, to the body writing that performance is. Here, do we hear the chuckle of the absent mother who caused the embodiedness of the actor's voice/face? Can we see in performance a body writing that is impossible without the hidden feminine, the history of the maternal body that gave rise to the corporeality of the actor?

When the actor becomes the fascinating, beloved body for the audience, we are faced with another aspect of the dynamics of performance as body writing: the play of desire. When I fall in love with a "character" I am in love with the abstract, but when I fall in love with the actor playing that character, I am in love with a concrete body, a beloved body and not just an abstract "individual" (a la Cavarero). The beloved "character" is faceless. I can place any face on its fleshless body. On the other hand, the actor has a definite face, s/he forces his/her face onto my consciousness, determining the dynamics of my amour to a great extent.

When we think of the cross-cultural adaptations of literary texts within the performative cultures of theatre and cinema, we need to understand the complex interplay of the body and the ideated "character", in terms of the culture-specific desirability of the body of the enacted character that the reader/audience has fallen in love with. If I "love" Romeo, my love will continue to ideate that character in the intermediary domain between an adventurous orientation towards radical cultural alterity and the desire for the familiar face. For instance, in an Indian adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, my beloved (*Indian*) actor may enact the role of Romeo; I may fall doubly in love with the body of my already beloved "hero" when my love for the abstractly ideated "Romeo" (whom I, from my Indian vantage point, may not consciously ideate as a *white* boy) and my *already* established desire for the beloved actor's *brown* body—the body which is *already* erotically imprinted on my consciousness—crisscross, overlap and become one. There is the intimation of a certain kind of erotic surplus here: my beloved actor *is* Romeo; but he is *more* than that. My desire for the Romeo whom I have ideated from my reading of the Shakespeare play is concretized through my beloved actor's body, but it can't surpass my desire for *that* body—the body which has always been there, in other films/dramas, on the posters, in the world of glamour and advertisement. Here, the author's pen fails; what triumphs is the body of the actor which works independently of the author's imaginative world. Besides, if we remember Levinas's idea of saying as giving, we may say that the beloved actor's body always offers itself to us through its speaking face and floating voice, and our desire is intensified in the hollow valley of the impossibility of receiving it. Between the



inaccessible, mystic entity—the ideated character—and the unattainable body of the beloved actor enacting that character in the bodily fruition of the script, there is a similarity—somewhere, flashing in the crevices of what is inaccessible in life.

Would Toni Morrison have called this the process of language’s “reach(ing) toward the ineffable” (Goulimari152)?

### Works Cited

- Cavarero, Adriana. *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Trans. Paul A. Kottman. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.
- Goulimari, Pelagia. *Toni Morrison*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Print.
- Llosa, Mario Vargas. *The Language of Passion*. Trans. Natasha Wimmer. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. Print.
- Ray, Satyajit. *Bishay Chalachchitra*. Kolkata: Ananda, 2012. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1995. Print.
- Shepherd, Simon. *Theatre, Body and Pleasure*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Waychoff, Brianne. *Composing a Method: Ecriture féminine as Performance Practice*. Diss. Louisiana State University, 2012. Web. 5 Jan. 2019.  
<[https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_dissertations/2076](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/2076)>
- Weimann, Robert. *Author’s Pen and Actor’s Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare’s Theatre*. Ed. Helen Higbee and William West. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.



*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA*