



Pandora Agonista: Unlocking the I, Me and Us of Women's Reading and Writing

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My first ever academic paper outside of my university had been on Mary Shelley's grim retelling of Prometheus. In my blinkered preoccupation with the monster and Victor Frankenstein, I omitted engaging with Mary Shelley herself, their creator and *agonist*, the real Pandora. This essay is not about Prometheus, nor his *alter ego*, Epimetheus; and thus brings me full circle, as it were.

To me, Pandora stands for the spirit of curiosity and probing. It is the desire to unbox, unpack, and deconstruct, without which no progress is realisable. The spirit of discovery and exploration is usually located in masculine agency and somewhere this gendering is predicated upon the idea of spatial mobility. The concluding line from Tennyson's *Ulysses*, "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield", for instance, is clearly a manifesto of sorts for the overwhelmingly masculinist credentials of the British imperial project. The mention of Ulysses should naturally have segued into talking about Penelope, as a contrapuntal exemplar of feminine genius *in situ*. Yet let me steer you towards Prometheus and Pandora, who present a telling instance of the gendered reception of curiosity. Prometheus is hailed for stealing fire while Pandora is vilified for opening



a box and releasing the kind of evils that Keats mourns – “the weariness, the fever, and the fret”. Both therefore may be said to have gifted mankind complementary forms of knowledge: the one technological and self-preservative, and the other ethical, political, civilisational. Since this essay is about intellectual, imaginative and creative practices by women, I am concerned here with choice in respect of modes of knowing. I would like to submit here that all knowing is ultimately, ideally androgynous: a combination of intellection and intuition, the empirical and the ratiocinative, a gaze in which the masculine and the feminine ways of seeing coalesce. My essay is not divisive in intent. It is militantly inclusive.

If we take note of the nexus between spatiality and *discovery*, Prometheus’s transgression entailed physical infiltration of divine spaces; while his punishment reverses the trajectory through everlasting confinement and torture. Pandora, on the other hand, is pre-fabricated out of earth to act *unthinkingly*, or so Hesiod tells us.¹ Once her scripted part has been served, her functionality, indeed her presence itself, is quickly erased, except for the posthumous trail of notoriety. Pandora, I submit, is the female *pharmakon*, the proverbial scapegoat in mankind’s deeply conflicted, Faustian self-mimesis around the quest for knowledge. It may not be coincidental at all that I should have coincidentally found mention of Pandora in Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792:

Man has been held out as independent of his power who made him, or as a lawless planet darting from its orbit to steal the celestial fire of reason; and the vengeance of heaven, lurking in the subtle flame, like Pandora’s pent up mischiefs, sufficiently punished his temerity, by introducing evil into the world.²

The pandemic that we are currently living through alerts us to the resilient legacy of Pandora’s name and fame.

Significantly, Pandora and Epimetheus are both said to have suffered the stings of the escaping evils. She becomes a suffering, mediating participant – an agonist, unlike the detached, remote controlling agent Zeus. Here is Robert Graves’ account, which clearly triangulates Zeus, Prometheus and Pandora in a drama of rivalry and revenge:

g. Prometheus at once went to Athene, with a plea for a backstairs admittance to Olympus, and this she granted. On his arrival, he lighted a torch at the fiery chariot of the Sun and presently broke from it a fragment of glowing charcoal, which he thrust into the pithy hollow of a giant fennel-stalk. Then, extinguishing his torch, he stole away undiscovered, and gave fire to mankind.

h. Zeus swore revenge. He ordered Hephaestus to make a clay woman, and the four Winds to breathe life into her, and all the goddesses of Olympus to adorn her. This woman, Pandora, the most beautiful ever created, Zeus sent as a gift to Epimetheus, under Hermes’s escort. But Epimetheus, having been warned by his brother to accept no gift from Zeus, respectfully excused himself. Now more grieved even than before, Zeus had Prometheus chained naked to a pillar in the Caucasian mountains, where a greedy vulture tore at his liver all day, year in, year out; and there was no end to the pain, because every night (during which Prometheus was exposed to cruel frost and cold) his liver grew whole again.

i. But Zeus, loath to confess that he had been vindictive, excused his savagery by circulating a falsehood: Athene, he said, had invited Prometheus to Olympus for a secret love affair.



j. Epimetheus, alarmed by his brother's fate, hastened to marry Pandora, whom Zeus had made as foolish, mischievous, and idle as she was beautiful—the first of a long line of such women. Presently she opened a jar, which Prometheus had warned Epimetheus to keep closed, and in which he had been at pains to imprison all the Spites that might plague mankind: such as Old Age, Labour, Sickness, Insanity, Vice, and Passion. Out these flew in a cloud, stung Epimetheus and Pandora in every part of their bodies, and then attacked the race of mortals. Delusive Hope, however, whom Prometheus had also shut in the jar, discouraged them by her lies from a general suicide.³

In my perception, Pandora's adventure is of profound anthropological significance. She is what the Cuban American anthropologist Ruth Behar calls the "vulnerable observer", an empathetic enquirer ready to co-opt and be co-opted into the hazards of experiential cultural learning.

TO WRITE vulnerably is to open a Pandora's box. Who can say what will come flying out?⁴

In Gaston Bachelard's seminal *Poetics of Space*, as well as in the works of select feminist architectural historians, the idea of the woman is somewhere engraved upon the spatiality of a house.⁵ The house here is the core structural unit of a community, of what Cicero and Italian Renaissance humanists after him would have called *civitas*. The home or house is the intended metonymic containment zone within the concentrically arranged, walled units that culminate in the Aristotelian construct of the walled state, walled, i.e. literally, symbolically and metaphorically.

This notion of the home ("domus" translates both as house and home, as "dwelling, that is) essentially as a walled space, a box, a cell, if you like, of containment for the female subject is extended to a moral spatialisation of a home's interior – the bedroom, or boudoir, the kitchen, the pantry or the *ante* room, *and* the attic, in the case of aberrant, deviant, rebellious specimens of either gender. (Readers of *King Lear* will recall Lear's declamation of rising hysteria as mother, i.e. of uterine ascent rather than andrological imbalance.)

O, how this mother swells up toward my heart!
Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow,
Thy element's below! Where is this daughter? (II.iv.56-8)⁶

The domestic architecture of moral containment engenders in turn a converse paradigm of disobedience and transgression when the notional woman strays or steps out of the walls of a house, of the neighbourhood, and wherever applicable, of the town or city. Allegorically speaking, Pandora's volitional lapse in the opening of the box is comparable to opening a door or a window to look out of the house from. The transgression entailed here is in a straying of the gaze, though the direction of that gaze had been a dis-covering one, an excavatory one, of finding without the stimulus for seeking within. Chapter 9 of Manu Samhita reads:

10. No man can completely guard women by force; but they can be guarded by the employment of the (following) expedients:

11. Let the (husband) employ his (wife) in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in keeping (everything) clean, in (the fulfilment of) religious duties, in the preparation of his food, and in looking after the household utensils.

12. Women, confined in the house under trustworthy and obedient servants, are not (well) guarded; but those who of their own accord keep guard over themselves, are well guarded.⁷



I would submit that the house is a fortification not only of the woman's mobility but also her sensory experience, a means of restraining her gaze. The implied subjection of the woman to object-hood in the gaze dynamics, as Laura Mulvey has shown after John Berger,⁸ requires careful unpacking: women may be seen only when a legitimate visitor enters and passes through successive thresholds of access. Women too may only *see* when a visitor enters, and not without, except through morally discriminated filters, such as the curtained or glass-paned or slatted window, the door, the inner courtyard or the Western balcony. Juliet, Shylock's daughter Jessica, Corvino's wife Celia in *Volpone*, or closer home, Charu in *Charulata*, are notable window gazers. For a very long time in Kolkata, for instance, a woman lingering on the balcony was deemed idler. The one childhood scene that keeps coming back in my dreams is that of the busy thoroughfare I used to look out on from the long, wide verandah at my parents' first rented accommodation. In our dreams, we return to the homes we have had to vacate.

The stories of women's gaze reveal or betray an anxiety to rein in a woman's sensory agency, especially sight, in order to stem their natural progression towards empirical knowledge and thence choice. I disagree with those who consider this to be a motivated clampdown on desire. Rather, it is a means of augmenting desire and desirability, and minimising the female subject's scope for discerning, empirical choice.

How was Pandora to know what the box held? Why give her a box if not to allow her the freedom to unclasp it? Or, worse still, why precondition her to exercise curiosity, provide her with due fodder and then condemn her for exercising it? Was it not devious of Zeus to shut the box before letting out Hope while imputing to Pandora the blame for letting out everything except Hope? Pandora's story is a case of male sovereign agency implicating itself in successive acts of entrapment rather than a straightforward act of female trespass. Pandora is divested of the agency of informed choice either in opening or shutting the box entrusted to her un-knowing, as opposed to *un-thinking* care. It is a testament to her *thinkingness* that she is drawn towards opening it. Tragically, then, women are made custodians of the secrets, not habitually auto-generated, but often inseminated externally. Wollstonecraft writes,

Rousseau was more consistent when he wished to stop the progress of reason in both sexes, for if men eat of the tree of knowledge, women will come in for a taste; but, from the imperfect cultivation which their understandings now receive, they only attain a knowledge of evil.⁹

Likewise with Eve in *Paradise Lost*, whom Milton's verbal iconography reinvents as

more lovely than Pandora, whom the gods

Endowed with all their gifts, and oh too like

In sad event, when to the unwiser son

Of Japhet brought by Hermes, she ensnared

Mankind with her fair looks, to be avenged

On him who had stole Jove's authentic fire. (IV.714-19)¹⁰



Eve is distanced from the unfolding discourse of creation between her consort Adam and Raphael and shunted off to talk to flora and fauna while she waits for a deferred hand-down from Adam.

So spake our sire, and by his countenance seemed
Entering on studious thoughts abstruse, which Eve
Perceiving where she sat retired in sight,
With lowliness majestic from her seat,
And grace that won who saw to wish her stay,
Rose, and went forth among her fruits and flowers,
To visit how they prospered, bud and bloom,
Her nursery; they at her coming sprung
And touched by her faire tendance gladlier frew
Yet went she not, as not with such discourse
Delighted, or not capable her ear
Of what was high; such pleasure she reserved,
Of what was high: such pleasure she reserved,
Adam relating, she sole auditress;
Her husband the relater she preferred
Before the angel, and of him to ask
Chose rather; he, she knew would intermix
Grateful digressions, and solve high dispute
With conjugal caresses, from his lip
Not words alone pleased her. (VIII, 39-57).¹¹

In both cases, Pandora and Eve, the agency for temptation and entrapment does not lie with the woman, as it is made out to be (PL IV.714-19), but a power play between the divine Pater and the male follower turned rebel, both outside of her. Robert Graves notes:

3. Similarly, in the Talmudic version of the Creation, the archangel Michael— Prometheus's counterpart— forms Adam from dust at the order, not of the Mother of All Living, but of Jehovah. Jehovah then breathes life into him and gives him Eve who, like Pandora, brings mischief on mankind.



4. Greek philosophers distinguished Promethean man from the imperfect earth—born creation, part of which was destroyed by Zeus, and the rest washed away in the Deucalionian Flood. Much the same distinction is found in *Genesis* VI. 2—4 between the 'sons of God' and the 'daughters of men', whom they married.¹²

You will remember that Eve's initial impulse for spatial segregation from Adam at work had been a progressive accent on efficiency. Eve presents herself as the true Miltonic Protestant, in that she argues in favour of spatial segregation and prioritises work over pleasure (IX.205-25).¹³

Again, if Eve had been duly warned of her tempter's credentials by being allowed into the conversation between Adam and Raphael, she would probably not have been taken in by the sophistry of Satan. But no! She, like Pandora, is tempted at the level of her un-nurtured nature, while Adam has been putatively nurtured out of his moral vulnerability through messianic intervention. This exclusion of the woman from normative Christian messianic discourse is what may have created a compensatory trend of subaltern women claiming for themselves inspirational, messianic, communicative powers. It is high time the much-married Wife of Bath, who has been systematically hogging the curricular limelight in traditional "Eng Lit" readings, made room for Margery Kemp, the mystic autobiographer.¹⁴

The box given to Pandora, indeed any kind of box, then, and its variants – the jar, the pots and pan that populate the quintessentially feminised space of the kitchen, the almirah, the pantry then is entrusted to the woman for safe keeping. Think of the little "kouto" of vermilion Hindu women are asked, in emulation of the Goddess Lakshmi, to hold in their hands on the day of their ritual wedding. The anthropological coding in this *habitus* is that women are keepers of secrets, their entire biological functionality being predicated upon the ability to hold life in their wombs, in their persons. I would submit further that the entire functionality of women, either biologically or oikonomically, is founded upon the matrix of custodianship and surrogacy rather than authorship or ownership. Not just surrogate mothers; in fact, all mothers are projected as surrogate caregivers and their qualitative appraisal is made in terms of the disciplined timeliness of the act of release and renunciation. Neither act is to be confused with expulsion or eviction. That is for the Frankensteins and the Prosperos of this world. My readings in Italian Renaissance humanist social pedagogy alerted me to the initial centrality given to the mother as preparatory educator who then turns the child over to the father or father-figure for intellectual apprenticeship.

I think the very construct of the box betrays the masculine conceptualisation of the story of the box. Notably, Robert Graves testifies to the absence of the Pandora story in any text outside Hesiod's *Works and Days*,¹⁵ which incidentally was a major source for Milton's epic. My research in the iconography of the ideal Renaissance city, after Helen Rosenau, alerted me to Renaissance Italian Humanists' anxious quest for the square and its evenly polygonal variants as the ideal geometrical alternative to the medieval staple of an encircled, round city.¹⁶ This broad transition, I submit, is the equivalent of Renaissance Humanists' transformative intervention in theories of urban fortification, a conceptualisation that entailed re-gendering. Parallely, the Reformation had sought to erase the earlier dominance of Virgin Mary in medieval religious practice by privileging God the Father and Christ.¹⁷ One only needs to remember Henri Lefebvre's seminal *Production of Space* to understand the structural fundamentals of the parallel growth of mercantilism, prosperous early modern cities, military fortification, repressive state apparatus and city-centric civil and foreign warfare:



City walls were the mark of a material and brutal separation far more potent than the formal polarities they embodied, such as curved-*versus*-straight or open-*versus*-closed. This separation had more than one signification – and indeed implied more than any mere signification, in that the fortified towns held administrative sway over the surrounding countryside, which they protected and exploited at the same time (a common enough phenomenon, after all).¹⁸

The growing necessity for containment of subject-persons, male and female, rose in proportion to the growth of self-hood itself from the close of the sixteenth century and onwards.

It sets me thinking about the gendered credentials of the box as a container. Early etymology indicates interchangeability with the cylinder or jar, as Graves also vouches, mimicking the female womb.¹⁹ Today, though, the box has increasingly come to be re-imagined as a four-sided contraption, certainly going by online dictionaries and search results on Google images. Female custodians of boxes then need to be contained in turn in boxes so that their ability to absorb and contain does not end up threatening the exteriority of the free-willing subject. All hell breaks loose, though, when they either opt out of the responsibility or resist taking it on in the first place, or exercise exclusion and inclusion in judicious exercise of such custodianship.

I am reminded here of Arindam Chakraborty's penetrating analysis in the essay "Amar e ghor bohu jatan kore" in taking cue from that evocative Tagore song, "aaj jyotsna rate shobai gecche bone" so evocatively applied by Ritwik Ghatak in *Komal Gandhar*.²⁰ Chakraborty offers a deeply sensitive reading of women's inflicted and thence internalised compulsion to keep their homes in perfect order as they wait for their errant, and sometimes *erring* menfolk. The house then is that box, too, which we are given to guard at the dispensation of the intermittently visiting male. And then when the home begins to take on an autonomous entity and value of its own, threatening notionally to dispel, or displace the visitors from their sense of control and ownership, then the custodian is made to feel aberrant, fixated, deviously, unlawfully proprietary and ungenerous. In other words, the male is impelled to inscribe his ownership in order that he may forestall and neutralise his own perceived fear of redundancy.

Let me introduce a different cluster of texts closer home to explicate this: Leela Majumdar's *Padipishir Barmi Baksho*, made into a film by Arundhati Devi in 1972; Tagore's *Monihara*, part of Ray's *Teen Kanya*, and Aparna Sen's *Goynar Baksho* (2013), based on a short story by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay. Padipishi dies sole custodian of her secret, until it is discovered afterwards by her intended heir. Monimalika comes back from the land of the dead to reclaim hers and the third, Rashmoni, too undertakes a ghostly casket trial of sorts to select a worthy heiress.

Incidentally, when small, the casket is a repository of jewels, a miniature treasure chest, like the deep pigeonhole vaults or lockers tucked away in the recesses of Indian banking establishments. I was surprised though to find that the internet read it as a synonym for the coffin, the sepulchre or the sarcophagus, suggesting in turn an interesting overlap of Eros and Thanatos, the desire to pass on life and property to one's progeny vying with the looming *memento mori*. I may not be misled in reading Milton's allegory of the birth of Sin and Death in Pandemonium (II.871-967) as a reworking of Pandora's opening of the box.

Thus saying, from her side the fatal key,

Sad instrument of all our woe, she took;



And towards the gate rolling her bestial train,
Forthwith the huge portcullis high updrew,
Which but herself, not all the Stygian powers
Could once have moved; then in the key-hole turns
The intricate wards, and every bolt and bar
Of massy iron or solid rock with ease
Unfastens: ...
She opened, but to shut
Exceeded her power; the gates wide open stood ...²¹

It is no wonder then that the rectangular or square box bequeathed to a Pandora or a Portia or Monimalika is deeply implicated in the giver's desire to *en-grave* female curiosity by diverting and displacing it towards objects. It is a burial of sorts, a burial of their searching spirit, their need to know. No less in the 1611 King James' Bible, than in John Donne's *Elegy 20* hailing his mistress's body as "O my America, my New-Found-Land", the sexualisation of the act of knowledge acquisition not only renders, as we already know, the woman a passive object of knowing – sexually, intellectually and geographically – but also renders her own, intrinsic desire to know into a desire to know sexually. Much of women's reading and writing is sexualised. Intellectual forwardness is misread as sexual forwardness.

Each of the female custodians of boxes is perceived as fixated upon conserving or preserving possessions, at least nominally material, and subjected to comic or diabolical portrayal for their zealotry or slackness in doing so. We know of the Freudian uncanny as a most subversive overlap of the homely and the alien, the familiar and the occult.²² Women's canniness in these stories is reduced to their zealous guarding of their material possessions, where in actuality, the material fixation is only a compensation for an irremediable affective void. In *Monihara*, for instance, Moni's obsession with her jewellery is largely an endowment of her errant husband's, along with the actual jewels. The materialism imputed to them, like the box entrusted to Pandora, is a compensatory gift, even as it subsequently invites her, as custodian, not owner, to prove her custodial worthiness through a blind trial of moral agency. Aristotle speaks of virtue as an act ensuing from knowledge, as will Milton in *Areopagitica*.²³ Interestingly, any attempt on a woman's part to then claim the agency for knowledge acquisition is relegated to the domain of transgression: moral, material, social or spiritual. The cerebral nature of engagement required in the sheer exercise of that custodianship, in addition to the instinctual and the physical, remains to be acknowledged with due equivalence, even though Mary Wollstonecraft alerted us to its indispensable civilisational value all those centuries back:

Novels, music, poetry, and gallantry, all tend to make women the creatures of sensation, and their character is thus formed in the mould of folly during the time they are acquiring accomplishments, the only improvement they are excited, by their station in society, to acquire. This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature



useful to others, and content with its own station: for the exercise of the understanding, as life advances, is the only method pointed out by nature to calm the passions”²⁴

All these texts, like Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, are interpretable in ways that confirm or question affirmative agency in women. To me, though, the texts are implicated in the reductionist anthropological stereotyping of the feminine – i.e. as matter or material. I certainly see a progressive entrenchment of this stereotype in successive phases of European social and cultural history. It is as though the entire dynamics of gender identity and gender relations was unfolding through a polemical mechanism of mutual resistance and counter-engagement. It is possible to say that misogynist writing and women’s revisionist writings in resistance intensify in response to each other. For instance, the seventeenth century not only saw Bacon flagrantly deploying the mind-matter dyad in his clarion call for plumbing nature in the name of science, but also parallelly the emergence of Mary Wroth, Katherine Philips, especially Dorothy Osborne, and many other female voices wresting the onus of writing themselves in. Virginia Woolf writes at length of Osborne and her delightful correspondence with Sir William Temple.²⁵

I must also bring in the remarkable counter-discourse around Maitreyi in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. She was not only engaged in an equal intellectual partnership with her husband, as evidenced by the dialogue on the nature of love and souls, but also renounced the material bequest of her dying husband on the plea that wealth would not secure immortality for her. He acquiesces in her choice and passes the bequest over to his other wife, Katyayani. Having said that, I encountered only a Maitreyi in Radhakrishnan’s *Ten Principal Upanishads*.²⁶ Ashapura Devi’s *Pratham Pratisruti* (1964) is a case in point. Opening a book to read as well as opening a diary to write were acts comparable to a Pandora opening a treasure chest of forbidden knowledge.

The actual historical moment of this encounter between societal delimitation and female resistance, active or passive, and the ensuing dynamics of female intellectual, cultural, social and economic emancipation differs from continent to continent, people to people. It is absolutely important to do nuanced readings in the particularities of these experiential trajectories. That is where the politics of “intersectionality” becomes a major leveraging factor, after that path-breaking article by Chandra Talpade Mohanty.²⁷ Tagore in his own, conflicted way helped expose how feminine self-fashioning in Western modernity and in Indian reality may not always be the ideal answer.²⁸

An important disclaimer has long been going missing in this discussion. I know I have been speaking in broad, mythic, structuralist paradigms, zooming in and out of texts from disparate historical time-spaces in Jungian terms. I do understand that I seem to be time-travelling from Greek myths to the Upanishads, from Shakespeare and the early moderns to Bengali literature and cinema of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. But then, there is something to be had from such a methodology too. One must know the mettle of the wood to then cut and carve them into consummately intricate artifacts. I admit that somewhere my methodology in this essay is along the lines of creative anthropology, a creative engagement with the semiotics and semantics of the act of opening a box, and therefore with the “boxness” of boxes, and the “womanness” of women successively opening them.



As Robert Graves maintains, Pandora is but a variant, an avatar of Rhea, and the jar she uncovered would have been a motif for the all-encompassing fecundity of the Earth. If we unbox and unpack Pandora's coming into being out of the riches of Earth, we realise that the gifts Pandora, literally all-giving, is believed to have let out into the world are the inevitabilities of the terrestrial condition or earthly life. She probably only helped give mankind a reality check. This is what Milton reworks into the idea of *felix culpa*, or the happy fall, to underline the ineluctable necessity of Adam and Eve's journey out of Eden into the human condition, where good and evil are equal choices for humans now made aware by their cataclysmic first fall of the fact of successive choices. In Miltonic terms, not to have fallen is to have forfeited the ability to actually stand.

To the portmanteaux label of a woman writer or the corresponding category, women's writing, as I have addressed this in class, there are several liminal constitutive segments: woman who writes, writer who happens to be a woman, woman who writes about being a woman, woman who writes to women, woman who writes for women but not necessarily to women. And the relationship among these constitutive possibilities is neither one of alternation nor easy supplementation.

How interesting the word subject is! Subject-hood is suggestive of personhood, selfhood, of the ability to act, react and respond. Subjection, on the other hand, entails an abduction of that agency. I would say that writing has been my mode for a very, very long time for attaining and retaining agency. Speaking I have arrived at only lately. Writing is the one I have accessed longest. Writing is resistance.

Much of my natural argumentation, both in my doctoral work, and other academic writing, has tended to be about discovering inter-habitations and porosity, either of later times in earlier ones, or of purportedly discrete cultural and generic texts. The dangers and pitfalls in this methodology that I would designate as rigorous, restrained comparatism have to do with steering clear of sweeping generalisations and approximations. That would entail a practice of taking things out of existing boxes and putting them in new ones rather than leaving them out in creative disarray. In other words, a strong element of declassification and recategorisation is entailed in this methodology, except that it is not exclusionist in motivation. It would not be an exaggeration to say that *oikonimokos*, notwithstanding Xenophon's conceptualisation, is an inclusive practice, not an exclusionist one. To cite just two instances from his book *The Economist*,

Soc. Well, then, we agreed that economy was the proper title of a branch of knowledge, and this branch of knowledge appeared to be that whereby men are enabled to enhance the value of their houses or estates; and by this word "house or estate" we understood the whole of a man's possessions; and "possessions" again we defined to include those things which the possessor should find advantageous for the purposes of his life; and things advantageous finally were discovered to mean all that a man knows how to use and turn to good account. Further, for a man to learn all branches of knowledge not only seemed to us an impossibility, but we thought we might well follow the example of civil communities in rejecting the base mechanic arts so called, on the ground that they destroy the bodies of the artisans, as far as we can see, and crush their spirits.

But at present there is our house here, which belongs like to both. It is common property, for all that I possess goes by my will into the common fund, and in the same way all that you deposited (15) was placed by you to the common fund. (16) We need not stop to calculate in figures which



of us contributed most, but rather let us lay to heart this fact that whichever of us proves the better partner, he or she at once contributes what is most worth having.²⁹

Inclusiveness demands commensurate engagement with taxonomy and classification, concepts associated with the Enlightenment knowledge system of disciplinary demarcation. In other words, synthesis has an analytical investment written into it.

I have always set store by the conviction that true writing, honest writing, is implosive. It pierces through received moulds in order to assimilate new stimuli demanded by the life of the unfolding text itself. Texts and genres are always already in a contest, with the latter trying to delimit and the former trying to *a-limit*, for want of a better word. I am not necessarily suggesting that all women's writing is necessarily hybrid. I can only say that mine has been so, and that hybridity is a mode of writing that can ensue from spatially delimited excavatory curiosity such as I am trying to glue to the archetype of Pandora and the female urgency to empower themselves both in spite of confinement and in the breach of confinement within and without.

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded-which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate.

If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse signifier that has always referred back to the opposite annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this "within," to around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent language to get inside of. And you'll see with what ease forth from that "within"-the "within" where once she so drowsily crouched-to overflow at the lips she will cover with foam.³⁰

If I were to look for a visual metaphor, it would translate into the action of opening a box from below rather than from the top, or the kind of subterranean probing that generated a text like Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland*, which I had the occasion to talk about a little less than a year back. I am reminded of Alice's phrase, "curioser and curioser". Curiosity then is a two way concept, suggestive both of the nature of the undiscovered – alien, strange, unfamiliar – and the interest on the subject's part to unravel this alien, strange, unfamiliar entity. Curious is an attribute both of mind and of matter, of both the empirically and rationally engaged subject, human or non-human (I have been struck for a very long time, for instance, by the extraordinary curiosity of pigeons), and of the subject in the sense of thing, object or matter that generates curiosity. It is so telling that Alice's curiosity is not punished because she is a child in a doting Lewis Carroll's subjective perception and because her subterranean, excavatory experiences can be relegated to fantasy and dream. That final zoom out at the end of the book neutralises the implosions unleashed by Alice's journey down the rabbit's hole in a way that unboxes the branding of Pandora as an unworthy quester, a female proto-Faust.

I have always wanted to read on my own terms. Reading, to me, then is an experiential phenomenon, not a purely cerebral one. Reading does things to me. Like listening to music, or watching a film. I respond to it, intuitively, keenly, actively, half-way, and must therefore moderate and modulate the stimuli in accordance with my ability or leisure to process them. I



cannot read when my head is full, any more than one can eat when one's stomach is full. By extension, then, I cannot compartmentalise reading. I cannot read with only one part of me. There is a need to break it down and metabolize it, make it mine own, and then respond to it by writing back to it, writing into it. So, it is difficult to talk about one's writing without also addressing its fraught, conflicted relationship with one's reading history, the gaps, the stumbling blocks, the detours, the roller coasters and the lumps in the throat, as it were.

Reading has been my attic since early childhood, my cocoon, my surrogate womb, a place I go back to in order to heal, to nurse wounds, real *and* imagined, actual *and* actually felt, and then to learn to cope and reconnect. This need for reconnection is as compulsive as the withdrawal, and this re-connection to me has always been through the medium of writing. Writing for me is not only a mode of self-explanation and self-expression, but also a means of working my way through the maze. This is also borne out in the way in which my writing needs several drafts, for I think as I write, just as I think as I speak.

The identities, of being a woman, and a woman who writes a little here and there, remain work in progress. It is partly an environmentally imbibed or absorbed resistance that prompts me to see both these identities as work in progress, and tends to set off an almost Faustian conflict between these two aspirational projections. I.e. I have somehow struggled to take clear cognizance of the power and strength entailed in being either and both at the same time. I have tended to see them as contrary, divergent aspirations all these years, even as I have been drawn to writing as a means of unravelling precisely this conflict. In other words, I have struggled with the fear of being less of a woman if I devote myself to writing, in terms of the necessary "deviation" it will entail from more defined womanly, care-giving or pragmatic, utilitarian occupations that will reinforce the very womanly need to be needed.

Over the years, like any other woman, I have taught myself to turn my purported disadvantages, in terms of mobility and freedom, into vantage points for an inwardly empowered, enriched gaze. I think writing by a woman, not necessarily for women (and that would be a seriously restrictive, inhibiting exercise), can be about any one or all of these avenues: writing as explanation, writing as protest, or writing as resistance, writing as self-amelioration or progressive, objective, communitarian melioration, advancement, or simply and purely contributing to world knowledge. To quote Ruth Behar,

...it does require a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied. Efforts at self-revelation flop not because the personal voice has been used, but because it has been poorly used, leaving unscrutinized the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed. Vulnerability doesn't mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake.³¹

To conclude, writing this essay itself is a statement, an exercise in women's writing, rather than an exercise in engaging with writing by women. I urge everyone here to write, but write without a thought to drawing mileage from it. It is possible to write politically, honestly, sincerely, and in a deeply personal, authentic vein, without trying to turn that into a political tool for any kind of self-aggrandisement.

Notes

¹ Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, transl. M.L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988; repr.2008), 39-40.

² Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, The Online Library of Liberty, http://oll-resources.s3.amazonaws.com/titles/126/Wollstonecraft_0730_EBk_v6.0.pdf, accessed on 16 August 2020.

³ Robert Graves, *Greek Myths*, 88. https://www.24grammata.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Robert-Graves-The-Greek-Myths-24grammata.com_.pdf, accessed on 15 August 2020.

⁴ Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 19.

⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) & Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality and Space* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁶ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R.A. Foakes, Arden Edition, Third Series, <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/lear/lear.2.4.html>, accessed on 24 June 2021.

⁷ Manu, *Manu Samhita, The Laws of Manu*, transl. George Buehler. Sacred Books of the East (New Delhi: Banarasidass, 1984), <http://oaks.nvg.org/manu-samhita.html>. Accessed on 15 September 2021.

⁸ “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.” Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, 15. <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/architecture/ockman/pdfs/feminism/mulvey.pdf>. Accessed on 29 July 2020.

⁹ *Vindication*, 20.

¹⁰ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler. Second Edition (Harlow: Longman, 1998), 263.

¹¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 431.

¹² Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, http://www.24grammata.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Robert-Graves-The-Greek-Myths-24grammata.com_.pdf. Accessed on 15 August 2020, 23.

¹³ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 481-2.

¹⁴ See <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-book-of-margery-kempe#>. Accessed on 25 June 2021.

¹⁵ Graves, *Greek Myths*, 90: “Hesiod’s account of Prometheus, Epimetheus, and Pandora is not genuine myth, but an antifeminist fable, probably of his own invention, though based on the story of Demophon and Phyllis. Pandora (‘all-giving’) was the Earth-goddess Rhea, worshipped under that title at Athens and elsewhere (Aristophanes: *Birds*; Philostratus), whom the pessimistic Hesiod blames for man’s mortality and all the ills which beset life, as well as for the frivolous and unseemly behaviour of wives.



¹⁶ Helen Rosenau, *The Ideal City in its Architectural Evolution in Europe* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 23-67.

¹⁷ Frances E. Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1999), Introduction, 5-8.

¹⁸ These apparati would correspond to Lefebvre's second level of space. See Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. and ed. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991.

164.

¹⁹ Graves, *Greek Myths*, 91, "Pandora's jar (not box) originally contained winged souls", 91.

²⁰ Arindam Chakrabarty, *Deha Geha Bandhutva: Chhati Sharirik Tarko* (Kolkata: Anustup, 2008), 29-62.

²¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 152-9.

²² Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), 2-3. <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>. Accessed on 25 June 2021.

²³ Aristotle, *The Nicomachian Ethics*, transl. F.H. Peters (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Truebner, 1906), Book I, 2. https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/Nicomachean_Ethics_0.pdf. Accessed on 26 June 2021.

²⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 51.

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New Delhi: Fingerprint Classics, repr. 2018), 67-8.

²⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* (London: Harper Collins, 2016), 195-201.

²⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', 53; <https://www.sfu.ca/~decaste/OISE/page2/files/MohantyWesternEyes.pdf>, accessed on 18 August 2020.

²⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, *Europe-Jatrir Diary* (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 1908), 40-54.

²⁹ Xenophon, *The Economist*, transl. H.G. Dakyns, Project Gutenberg EBook, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1173/1173-h/1173-h.htm>. Accessed on 19 August 2020.

³⁰ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', transl. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>, 883 & 887. Accessed on 19 August 2020.

³¹ Behar, 25.



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