

The Subject of Law and
Subject of Narratives

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Habitations of Modernity:

Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies

Pp. 101-114,

Permanent Black, India, 2002.

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The Subject of Law and the Subject of Narratives

It is a problem of political thought that I want to confront in this essay.

I use *confront* because the word carries the dual meanings of “being opposite to” and of “being face-to-face with.” I want to test certain critiques of citizenship/rights/the state that some of us have been developing by bringing this spirit of opposition to the state/law/citizenship face-to-face with narratives and representations of cruelty/suffering to which most academics in the humanities would react precisely with citizenly outrage (recall Alasdair Macintyre’s description of *indignation* as a very modern sentiment).¹

The cruelty that I want to discuss is that often inflicted on Hindu widows of Bengali *bhadralok* families (*bhadralok* refers to respectable people of the middle classes). I could have chosen some other group (e.g., domestic servants) cruelty toward whom is often a licensed activity among the more privileged classes of India. But the widow in the *bhadralok* household is a figure of which, having grown up in a middle-class Bengali family, I have some personal—albeit, as a man, second-order—knowledge, and I can, therefore, bring my position as analyst into dialogue with my position as native informant.

There are, from my point of view, certain analytic advantages in making these moves. I personally react, as I expect my readers will, to these harrowing descriptions of oppression with a mixture of emotions: sadness and horror (that the familial and familiar structures of pleasure could harbor within them such everyday possibilities of cruelty) mixed with anger (I want to punish the oppressors; I think of the police, the law, the state!). Together with these emotions arise a desire and the will to intervene and do something (even if that something is only to produce a critique of the family as I know it). The state and the question of the law, thus, figure as part of my affect and desire. How do I square this reaction with my knowledge of the violence on which the nation-state and its laws are founded, the violence of the same modernity that teaches us to think of the law as the key instrument of social justice? (I realize that some people would argue that it is not the same modernity in every case, that there can be good and bad modernities. I am skeptical of these arguments, but let me leave it at this for the time being.)

Confront seems to be the right term. I recognize that my citizenly outrage on confronting Bengali widows' oppression has something in common with the reactions of nineteenth-century Bengali reformers like Rammohun Roy and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar—and their fellow travelers in other parts of the country, M. G. Ranade, B. M. Malabari, Viresalingam Pantalu, and G. Subramania Aiyer—who were moved, as the story goes, by the plight of the widows to act on the question and whose actions, endlessly retold in school histories, helped mold me in the cast of the citizen of a modernizing nation-state. I am modern in thinking that the answer to cruelty in family life is in rights, in law, and, therefore, eventually, in the legitimate violence of the state. What set the nineteenth-century reforms apart from anything that might have happened before the British ruled India was their protocitizenly character, for the instrument that these reformers used in their effort to stop this oppression was the colonial state and its power to legislate.

The state, however, is only part of the story. In Bengali public narratives of social reform, people like Rammohun or Vidyasagar are said to have confronted this cruelty in another sense, that is, not only in the sense of being hostile to it, but also in the sense of coming face-to-face with it, in knowing it with some degree of intimacy. Available accounts tell us of their coming across instances of cruelty within the world that they personally and concretely knew. Their recourse to an abstract and transcendent law was rooted in concrete emotions that sprang directly from their sense of personal involvement with someone who was a victim of domestic violence and/or cruelty.

Rammohun's revulsion toward the idea of sati (widow burning), we

are told, first arose when he learned of a close female relative being forced to this fate by the men of the household: "The custom of burning widows with their husbands first roused his horror before he was much known. While he was at Rangpur in 1811, his brother Jugmohun died, when one of his widowed wives was burnt alive with him. Rammohun held this lady in high esteem, and the news of her cruel death gave such a shock to his feelings that [tradition has it] he took a vow never to rest till this inhuman custom was abolished."²

This seeing of the concrete is what I call being *face-to-face* here. Vidyasagar is legendary for the way in which he would allegedly cry at the sight of young or child widows. In the words of one of his biographers:

Vidyasagar's naturally gentle and compassionate heart was moved at the sight of the tender-aged, young widows suffering rigorous hardships, and he firmly resolved to devote his life to the cause of the remarriage of these widows. . . .

This resolution had sat deeprooted in his mind from his early years. It is said that Vidyasagar had a girl play-mate at Birsingha. He was very fond of her. After he had been separated from her, and had come down to Calcutta for education, she was married at an early age, but, in a short time, her husband died, and she was a widow. When Vidyasagar next went home during one of his college-vacations, he was deeply sorry to hear that his dear play-mate had been married and had lost her husband. He immediately called at her house to see her, and there learnt that she had not eaten anything that day, because it was the eleventh day of the moon (which is a day of fasting for Hindu widows). He felt so much commiseration for the little girl that he, there and then, resolved that he would give his life to relieve the sufferings of widows. He was at that time only 13 or 14 years old.³

In both Rammohun's and Vidyasagar's cases, then—at least in the Bengali recounting of their lives—this flow of compassion and upwelling of horror combined with their determination to get the colonial government to pass laws that they both thought would be the answer to the problem. (That they then mobilized *shastric* [scriptural] arguments is something that I do not discuss, for the problem thus raised—that of constructing tradition for a modern India—has been raised elsewhere.)⁴

One must separate the capacity for compassion, that is, the capacity to be horrified by cruelty and to be moved to action, from the historically particular solution of the law. We know that this capacity existed in India; contrary to some eighteenth-century European observers, the

Enlightenment had no monopoly on the idea of cruelty. The attempts of Akbar and other Muslim rulers to stop sati are well-known. There is also indirect but obvious evidence in the fact that most widows did not have to become satis. Similarly, we know of attempts before Vidyasagar's to get young widows remarried. It cannot, therefore, be argued that people had to wait for the coming of either the British or Western/modern ideas of cruelty in order to attain the capacity to be revolted by torture and oppression.

We should note, however, that Rammohun and Vidyasagar proposed significantly different solutions. Rammohun sought the solution in property (his position being that, if widows were given the right of inheritance, people would treat them fairly), Vidyasagar in remarriage (his position being that widows should be given a renewed claim on the male power of protection). Another way in which to view the difference is that Rammohun sought a proscriptive law (banning sati), Vidyasagar a permissive law (allowing remarriage).

Two types of history are being enacted here. First is the history of modernity, of the public sphere, of modern ideas of cruelty, which is encapsulated in the move toward legislation. Then there are the histories embodied in the feelings of compassion that Rammohun or Vidyasagar felt when personally confronted with the horrors of Bengali widowhood. These other histories are what they, or I, would share with others before and after them who felt horrified by torture but did not necessarily think of the law or rights as the remedy. I am not fixing for eternity these structures of feeling, nor do I want to equate law with history by suggesting that the nineteenth-century legal reforms represent a sharp divide in the history of our familial emotions, separating some "medieval" callousness from a "modern" sensitivity. I am simply applying something like a process of elimination. First there were pre-British histories and structures that were perfectly capable of producing compassion in people. What comes after the British is a specific connection between such sentiments and the more citizenly dispositions (including the desire to legislate). I want to isolate the two groups of histories to raise—but not necessarily solve—a problem about representation and political intervention.

In raising this problem, I use women's testimony rather than men's. What men—Rammohun or Vidyasagar—wrote was already addressed to the law. They provided the language in which the state could hear and understand, as well as intervene in, the expression of suffering. What women, on the other hand, wrote, is not always addressed to the state. It is true that testimony from the widows themselves does not in any way guarantee unmediated access to their experience of oppression. Decon-

structionists have argued for a long time that voice is no indicator of direct presence. But the very act of listening to people orients us—opens us up—to their presence, however elusive the matter of *presence* may be from a philosophical point of view. This orientation is what I have called here the act of confronting suffering, of *facing*. Writing couched in the legal and universal language of rights and citizenship erases the history in which acts of facing the sufferer, confronting the scene of oppression, occur. Yet, without such a process of confrontation of oppression, the idea of the rights-bearing citizen cannot become a reality. I turn toward widows' own testimony in order to see how these testimonies were produced and collected in a specific period in Bengali history so that the widow could one day be subsumed into the figure of the citizen. For there to be an effective history of citizenship, the gesture of facing the particular, I argue, must supplement the fixed and universal gaze of the law. The recording of widows' voices—by publishers, readers, critics, investigators—allows us to see the many different social spaces from which the citizen-subject of modernity emerges in this particular history.

LISTENING FOR VOICES

While widows were and are part of the everyday experience of Bengali kinship and were made the subject of legal-social reform and fictional writing by progressive thinkers of the last century, there are very few generally available testimonies from the widows themselves. I discuss here a small number of cases—those of Saradasundari Devi (1819–1907) and Nistarini Devi (1832/33–1916), both of whom left autobiographies, as well as some others reported in Kalyani Datta's "Baidhyabya kahini" (Tales of widowhood), which consists of a few brief and anecdotal life histories collected in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵

There is, of course, no question of this small sample being in any statistical sense representative. Nor do I want to suggest that the sad stories discussed here would have been true of every Bengali widow. Widowhood has long been glorified in the patriarchal myths of Hindu Bengali middle-class culture as a path of extreme self-renunciation, and many widows have earned unquestionable familial authority precisely by subjecting themselves to the prescribed regimes (Rammohun Roy's mother herself being a well-known example). The nature of Bengali domesticity has also changed (influenced by such factors as women's education and entry into public life, the subsequent decline in the number of child brides, and the advent of the institution of the love match, among other things), a fact of which these cases and my analysis here do not take adequate account.

Yet there is no question that widowhood exposes women to some real vulnerability in a patriarchal, patrilocal system of kinship where they remain, until their sons marry and they achieve the status of mother-in-law, symbolic outsiders to the bonds of brotherhood that they enter as wives. Widowhood marks an absolute state of inauspiciousness in a woman (who has brought death to a member of the brotherhood). Potentially malevolent, she is considered to be an outsider who can be redeemed only by the lifelong performance of rituals of extreme atonement. This is particularly true of a widow who has no son to protect her. While the rituals of widowhood are glorified in the scriptures and in much of Indian literature as self-renunciation, and while they may, indeed, in many cases, express, on the part of the woman, a capacity for self-abnegation, the stories recounted here reveal the torture, oppression, and cruelty that often, if not always, accompanies the experience of widowhood. As a Bengali widow herself said: "A woman who has lost her father, mother, husband, and son has nobody else left in the world. It is only if others in the household are kind that a widow's life can be happy. Otherwise, it is like being consigned to a hell pit."⁶

Fundamentally, whatever their theological significance, the rituals of Hindu Bengali widowhood are aimed at achieving one effect: the denial (or renunciation) on the part of the widow of enjoyment or pleasure, whether material, physical, or emotional. The most obvious expressions of these rituals are remaining celibate, not eating meat, fasting frequently, and marking the body (by, e.g., not wearing jewelry, shaving one's head or wearing one's hair cropped, and wearing white saris with no, or just a black, border).

A graphic case of a woman robbed of her possessions is that of Indumati (born ca. 1872), a young widow of a zamindar (landlord) family who decided to live in Banaras on a monthly allowance from the estate and was cheated out of her inheritance. In Indumati's words (the accuracy of Kalyani Datta's reportage is not really an issue):

I gathered that my monthly allowance was Rs 250. But the manager of the estate put only Rs 50 in my hand, saying that Rs 200 were being credited to my account in his office every month. . . . Six months had barely elapsed when my allowance began to shrink. Too many lawsuits [he pleaded], too much revenue unrealized. At last I defaulted on the house rent. The monthly allowance kept shrinking . . . until it reached the figure of Rs 10. I left the large room I had been renting for a room that cost Re 1. . . . In the early days I was highly conscious of the danger of pollution. I used to go about all twenty-four hours in a *tassar* sari, wearing rosary

beads, and carrying my [own] *kamandulu* [sacred water pot]. . . . Now I eat at almshouses . . . [and] accept invitations from anyone.⁷

The deprivation caused by the denial of pleasurable food is captured in the testimony of one Gyanadasundari, whom Datta met sometime in 1965. A child widow who had, in fact, never met her husband, she was sent to her in-laws to spend the rest of her life as a widow. "I entered the kitchen," she says, speaking of her daily round of activities,

immediately after my morning bath [to cook for] this large family. By the time I was finished, it would be late afternoon. A room full of cooked food—I cannot describe how hungry the smell of rice and curry made me feel. Sometimes I felt tempted to put some in my mouth. But my [deceased] husband's aunt told me the story of how once the wife of so-and-so became blind from eating stealthily in the kitchen. Stories of this kind helped me control my hunger. Every day I would pray to Kali: Mother, please take away my greed. Perhaps it was through the grace of the goddess that I gradually lost any appetite I had.

Widows, she added, were allowed only one meal a day, a meal that could contain at most only a certain few fried vegetables: lentils, pulses, and spinach. "Cauliflower, beetroot, eggplant," and "half the winter vegetables" were disallowed as "foreign."⁸

What stands out in these narratives is the close connection between the cruelty that they exemplify and the question of entitlement to affection/protection in the Bengali extended family. Being a widow often entailed a distinct loss of status and a consequent loss of this entitlement. Nistarini Devi, a child widow of the last century who depended on her late husband's brother for survival, reports how even the servants "followed my brother's wife" in treating her with disdain: "I was given no food at night. If I asked the servant to chop some wood for me, he would say: 'Do it yourself.'"⁹

The entitlement to affection/protection is, however, not in the nature of a general claim; it is not an entitlement to just anybody's affection or care. Whether such a general claim can be sustained anywhere is debatable, but it is clear that the Bengali widow's testimony does not evince a desire for the kind of treatment that, say, either the state or the market can accord. The entitlement to affection is claimed from a particular, and in that sense irreplaceable, source—the late husband's family. It should not, however, be assumed that the particularity of this claim arises from a modern sense of individuality. The quality of affection/

protection sought has, in fact, very little to do with a modern, individualistic, "expressivist" construction of sentiment or affect, one in which the sentiments are characteristically regarded as deeply authentic and nonhypocritical expressions of one's own self.¹⁰ The widows' discussion of entitlement to others' affection operates in the context of the kinship-based rules of emotional transactions in the extended family. The question of whether affection given is an expression of somebody else's deep individuality is foreign in this context. The demand for caring or tender behavior arises within kinship.

An example of this point can be found in Datta's relations with one of her informants. Datta last saw Indumati in 1955 in Kashi (Banaras). Indumati had, by then, reached the depth of her penury and was living in an institution. "I did not recognize her," says Datta:

Our aunt, the wife of a zamindar family with a 50 percent share in the estate, sat naked in a dark room without windows, muttering curses aimed at . . . God. She could not see very well. Feeling helpless, I started yelling out my father's name and mine. She recognised me then and immediately started crying. . . . After a while, she asked me how long I had been in Kashi. When she realized that I had been there for twenty days and had come to see her only a day before my departure, her tears returned. "Here I am," she said, "hoping that I would [now] be able to shed some tears and spend some days in the comfort of your company, and all you offer me is this fake [perfunctory] sense of kinship. I don't even want to see your face." So saying, she turned her back to me.¹¹

That the agent who withdraws affection/protection is a particular agent, and that it is this particularity that is a factor in the resulting distress, comes out clearly in the narrative of Saradasundari Devi's autobiography as well. When Saradasundari's husband dies, leaving her with young children (some of whom do not survive for long), her description of the hurtful treatment that she receives at the hands of her late husband's brothers represents an attempt to reinscribe her place within the network of her in-laws. The following quotation will clarify how property *as such*, that is, the simple fact of possession (which is something that the law can address), is less the issue here than is property as a language with which to express a domestic dispute about entitlement to affection and protection. Saradasundari writes:

Within a fortnight of my husband's death, his (third) younger brother began to behave toward me in a hurtful manner. He forced his way into the room . . . where my husband slept and took

away the large bed he used. I cried, not out of greed for possessions, but at the way they began to treat me as soon as my husband was gone. . . . He [her husband] had left some shawls in his safe. . . . His younger brother took them all. . . . I asked if I could keep a couple as mementos; he gave me only one. I said nothing and avoided all arguments. My oldest daughter died within a year of my husband's death. . . . I became absolutely restless with grief. Close on the heels of this loss came my mother-in-law's death. Struck such blows, one after another, I lost all sense of calm and felt seized by a feeling of madness. I decided to leave for Sreeksheeta [Puri].

I thought of ending my life. Nabin, my eldest son, said: "Mother they will settle the property now, don't leave yet." I replied, "Whatever happens, and however unfortunate it may be, whether you lose your property or not, I will not stay here." . . . I prayed to God so that I might feel no sense of attachment.¹²

What hurts at this moment is nothing short of Hindu Bengali patriarchy and the utterly vulnerable place assigned to women within its phallocentric order. Becoming a widow meant the possibility of being exposed to this vulnerability. At the same time, the struggle to maintain one's self-respect, to find a code of conduct proper to one's state of widowhood, entailed working through this structure. On the one hand, then, Saradasundari is reminded by her brother-in-law's behavior that she is, without her husband, what she was before her marriage, an outsider. She even seeks solace in this thought: "Why should I cry? I asked myself. Why should I grieve if they took what belonged to *their* brother. After all, these were not possessions I brought with me from my father's household. But I also developed a fear over time. Where would I go if they turned me out with my children?"¹³

At the same time, however, Saradasundari seeks to restore her standing as "auspicious wife" by fashioning herself in her autobiographical narration as someone committed to the social standing of her husband's family, even to the extent of actually resisting what would have been her legal rights. Her husband's older brother divided up "all movable property" about the time she left for Puri. Her sons won part of their share back later through court cases initiated by one of them, the famous Bengali social reformer Keshub Sen. Saradasundari writes: "Keshub said to me . . . , 'Mother, if you want, I can get your and Krishnabehari's [another son] shares, too, by getting a lawyer to write.' I replied, 'No. Is money the most important thing? Should *your uncle* go to jail for the sake of money? Let it be; there is no need [to claim the money] at pres-

ent'" (emphasis added).¹⁴ What is at stake here is Saradasundari's relationship to this particular family, that is, her entitlement to *their* affection and protection. The family as such was not replaceable within that relationship.

Because it operated through the same connections that generated affection, this was cruelty that constantly proliferated both its agents and its victims. Consider the not uncommon case of a mother who, herself still married, finds herself forced to ensure that a daughter who has been both married and widowed while still a child, often without ever meeting her husband, observes all the rituals of widowhood. Gyanadasundari thus described her own experience to Datta: "How could I remember anything about my husband, dear? I never saw him more than two or three times. He killed himself by hanging within a few months of our marriage. When I was told the news, it did not make any sense. . . . My mother used to break down into tears if I ever wanted to eat fish [considered a great delicacy in the cuisine of riverine Bengal but not allowed widows] with my meal. So I stopped asking for fish. I cannot even recall now how fish tastes."¹⁵

Or consider the punishment that another mother took on herself when her daughter, a six- or seven-year-old child, became a widow. We have the story in Datta's telling: "Her mother used to feed her widows' food. The boys of the household would sit on another side of the room and be served fish. They said one day: 'How come you haven't got any fish?' Her mother pointed to fried lentil balls and said to her: 'This is your fish.' The mischievous boys would suck on fish bones and ask the girl: 'How come your piece of fish doesn't have any bones?' The girl would ask her mother, 'Mother, why doesn't my fish have any bones?' . . . The mother would later break off bamboo slips from baskets and stick them into the lentil balls, and the girl would proudly show them off to the boys [as proof that her fish had bones]. . . . It was long before she even realized the deception."¹⁶

NARRATIVE AND LAW

What kind of intervention is possible here? I will discuss two kinds, and they are not mutually exclusive. First, there is social intervention through the law (i.e., through legislation regulating social practice). Second, there is social intervention through narrative itself—biography, autobiography, and fiction.

The connection between narrative and social intervention has always been present in the history of our becoming modern. Kalyani Datta's search for widows' testimonies was itself inspired by fiction. According

to her introductory statement: "Widowhood has figured endlessly in Bengali literature. . . . My interest in the lives of widows was aroused in my childhood as a result of meeting at close quarters characters in real life who resembled those encountered in stories and novels."¹⁷ Widows, it has been pointed out, "play a significant role in the short stories and novels of Rabindranath Tagore," whose concern was not unconnected to nineteenth-century attempts at social reform.¹⁸ Tagore himself sometimes saw fiction as his contribution to the same nineteenth-century project of social improvement that was embodied in colonial law. He wrote in a letter of 1894: "I have had this surprisingly happy thought in my head since yesterday. I decided after some deliberation that one may not necessarily succeed in being of direct use to the world even if one has the desire to be so. Instead, if I could simply accomplish what I was good at, the world might automatically derive some benefit. . . . Even if I did not achieve anything other than writing some short stories, they would at least cause me happiness and, if successful, provide some mental enjoyment to my readers as well."¹⁹

It would obviously be artificial to separate law from narrative, particularly when the administration of justice itself requires people to tell stories in court. Yet there are interesting differences between lawmaking as part of social/political intervention under (in this case, colonial) modernity and the production of narratives as an instance and instrument of such intervention. Rammohun sought a solution to the problem of cruelty to widows by giving them the right to inherit property, Vidyasagar by giving them the right to remarry. The classic problem of the *differend* separates the widows' narratives that we have considered here from the language of rights—the legal solution.²⁰ Because law is the embodiment of the "truth" of the theory of rights, one can argue that, between theory and suffering, that is, between the plaintiff and the victim, the *differend* would emerge. This is another way of saying that theory/law can never address the victim here in her own language as narrative does. Narrative places the reforming subject face-to-face with cruelty, alongside everyone else who faces the widow—the torturer, the mother, the in-laws, the children. Part of the argument here, then, concerns the inadequacy of theory to provide us with forms of intervention in our affective lives in ways that speak directly to the affects concerned.

To restate the question, Can theory that justifies the law-state combine ever provide us with a form with which to intervene in the politics of affection/cruelty? Can, for example, the welfare state (admittedly, a somewhat distant example in India's case) be the answer to the politics of familial cruelty that I have documented here?²¹

The law-state combine, or modern political philosophy itself, finds its

justification in European Enlightenment thought. The problem with Enlightenment thought is not that it gives us visions of emancipation/freedom that cannot be realized for everybody (this is, indeed, a problem—this is, in a sense, the problematic of distributive justice—but not a crucial theoretical one in this context as it produces, as a solution, only the noble, but predictable, effort to generalize the benefits to all). Situated in colonial modernities, our response is more complex. We cannot ignore the ideas of justice and freedom that are contained in the political theory of rights and citizenship, for, whether or not these rights can be enjoyed by all, the emancipatory visions underlying them form ethical horizons that, for all their problems of global claims and universalisms, shape all conversations within the academy, which remains my immediate audience. One always speaks within these visions.

Colonial histories, however, sensitize us to the paradox that has attended all historical attempts to ground in the violence of the modern state the Enlightenment thinkers' promise of happiness and justice for all. This paradox is the fact of imperialism, the fact that the modern state has always operated, whether inside or outside Europe, by producing its own colonized subjects whose consent to its rule is never won by pure persuasion; violence or coercion always has a role to play. Whether it is the law or theories of citizenship, they all work by abstracting and synthesizing identities and do not allow for the radical alterity of the other.

The Bengali widows' cry for affection is not a cry for general affection, that is, affection from anybody and everybody. The problem of the state is solved by a theory of general affection such as Gandhi's repressive, and remarkably Christian, doctrine of universal love. The very same entitlement that causes the widow to ask for affection from her in-laws makes her vulnerable to their acts of cruelty. The call is neither for rights nor for a self-denying universal emotion. As Levinas says: "The relationship between men is certainly the non-synthesizable *par excellence*. . . . Interpersonal relationship . . . is not a matter of thinking the ego and the other together, but to be facing. The true union or true togetherness is not a togetherness of synthesis, but a togetherness of face to face." He continues: "Politics must be able in fact always to be checked and criticized starting from the ethical. . . . This would be a responsibility [for the other] which is inaccessible in its ethical advent, from which one does not escape, and which, thus, is the principle of an absolute individuation."²²

The hurtful and cruel withdrawal of affection, then, can take place only within relationships that bear this duality of which Levinas read the face as a classic expression. In other words, affection can be withdrawn only in those very particular networks that also allow it to be generated

and given. What makes the hurt unbearable is that the giver of affection is not a generalizable, homogenized entity. In other words, it has none of the structure of abstract, general homogeneity that makes the question of the production-distribution of a commodity (think of Marx's notion of *abstract labor*) or even of such a bourgeois concept as *right* something amenable to the rule of either the state or the market. That is also why law or theory cannot address it directly as law itself is based on the idea of the abstract, general, homogenized citizen and his rights and duties.

Affection works on a contrary principle, that of radical individuation. Let me hasten to add that I am not necessarily universalizing any extreme form of individualism. The irreplaceable, concrete *other* whose affection is sought by the sufferer is not necessarily an individual in any modern sense. It could be, as I have said before, a concrete, specific kinship connection, a particular network of relationships that is addressed in the widow's complaint. Indumati's hurt at Kalyani Datta's behavior—visiting her only a day before she was to leave Banaras—was not dependent on Datta's individuality. The narrative of their meeting produces compassion here only if we imaginatively inhabit the affective field of kin relations within which Indumati and Datta met. Dialogic narrative, the telling of a story, whether biographical or fictional, thus works on the principle of the irreplaceable social rather than the general abstract social of the law or theory and, in this way, positions the reader face-to-face with the victim of cruelty whose face always carries the injunction: Thou shalt not kill. This is what makes narrative a political force in a sphere that law or theory can never reach. Let us listen to Levinas again:

The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill. . . . The first word of the face is . . . "Thou shalt not kill." It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a "first person," I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call.²³

Narrative, rather than theory/law, reproduces us as this first person. Tagore's letters and interviews explaining and justifying his literary efforts connect knowledge/intervention to themes of intimacy and love. Referring to his short stories as expressing a knowledge of Bengali lives, he spoke of the "intimate hospitality" that he had once enjoyed in the Bengal countryside. "People say of me," he complained in his old age, "He is the son of a rich family, . . . what would he know of

villages?’ I can say that the people who say this know even less than I do. What do they know? Can one ever know from within the inertia of habit? Real knowledge comes from love. . . . I have looked at Bengal villages with unceasing love, and it is that that has opened the door of my heart.”²⁴

I do not mean to deny the importance of law and theories of citizenship. They help create new spaces for human struggles for dignity. Also, as I have already said, there was a certain complementarity in the social functions of the law and the novel in Bengali modernity. My purpose is to contemplate narrative, as distinct from abstract theory, as a form of political intervention. The law-state combine has a history, and it is the history of imperialism, of the arrogant invasion of the other. There may be particular contexts in which such invasion may, indeed, seem justifiable. In most cases, however, this invasion will produce intractable problems of ethics. The Gandhian solution of absolute love, on the other hand, works on the assumption of an abstract equality of human beings for whom love must be felt universally and equally. That this requires certain kinds of cruelty-torture—the renunciation of enjoyment both by the self and by others—is something borne out by Gandhi’s life itself.

The politics of cruelty/tenderness takes us into face-to-face relations, where identities are radically individuated and therefore irreplaceable. Narrative points to a sphere of modernity that seems more compatible with the ethics of being face-to-face with the victim of suffering. Yet we build civil-political spheres on theories that view the social in terms of abstract, homogeneous units. While these theories do make formal equality possible either between commodities or between citizens, they will never be adequate to the demands of the politics of cruelty/affection that define and dominate the life processes of family and kinship. The question is, Can we imaginatively bring into being modern civil-political spheres founded on the techniques of the dialogic narrative even as we live and work through those built on the universalist abstractions of political philosophy?