

In Our Own Words: Selfhood and Life-Writing by Indian Women

Dr. Sucharita Sarkar

Associate Professor, D.T.S.S College of Commerce, Malad, Mumbai

Abstract

While male writers have shaped the genre of the formal autobiography, women's attempts at life-writing have mostly been private acts of resistance and self-making. The recovery and validation of the sporadic memoirs written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have become a vital feminist project. Women write memoirs for multiple purposes, from the confessional, to the therapeutic to the political; and women's life-writing has emerged as a significant genre in the current century, aided by the democratization and digitalization of publishing. This short paper looks at this emerging terrain of life-writing by Indian women through a feminist lens, exploring—through selected examples—the range, dimensions and impact of life-writing sub-genres, such as the feminist memoir, the subaltern memoir, the culinary memoir, and the maternal memoir.

Key Words: Feminist, gender, Indian, memoir, self-writing, women

Non-fictional life-writing is increasingly capturing the attention of readers and scholars as meaning-making textual (or digital) engagements undertaken for a purpose “that is nothing less than the shaping of the self” (Foucault 211). Significantly, Foucault was writing this while studying the self-writing, the “*Hupomnemata*” (often individual notebooks serving as memory aids) of famous men of the Greco-Roman era. As with other forms of writing, both in the west and in India, the genre of the formal autobiography has been mainly shaped by male writers.

This binary between (privileged) male writing and female silences—a silencing which extends to other subjugated racial, classed and sexual identities—has been sought to be examined and erased by feminist scholars. Attempts at sustained life-writing by women and other marginalised peoples need to be situated within frames of resistance as well as self-making. Helen Buss, therefore, clearly

demarcates and distinguishes between the male-dominated domain of “autobiography” and the “female-gendered life stories” emerging through women's “memoir” writing (Buss 13). Another difference which memoir studies insist upon is the focus on the autonomous self in male autobiographies as opposed to the exploration of the relational self by women memoirists: the self in relation to a network of others. However, the emergence of this female/writerly self has been a slow and often fraught process. Tillie Olsen's seminal work on silences discusses a “range of silences, including ‘work aborted, deferred, denied,’ ‘censorship silences,’ ‘political silences,’ and ‘silences where the lives never came to writing’” (Olsen loc.231-237). Overcoming these silences has never been an easy task.

In India, the segregation of public and private spheres, the lack of access to education, the burdens of motherhood (that make mothers ‘part-time’ ‘part-self’) and

the stigmatization of women's public self-making were the primary barriers to women's writing. With the gradual spread of women's education and consequent emancipation, the genre of women's memoirs began to emerge. Two early examples are Rassundari Debi's *Amar Jibon* (*My Life*; 1876), regarded as the first memoir written by a Bengali woman; and Krupabai Sathianadhan's *Saguna* (1887), described as an 'autobiographical novel.' Rassundari Debi's memoir narrates her intense desire and immense struggle to self-learn how to read and write, hiding her efforts from others because "the fear of exposure was always there" as the "authorities have decreed that this is a cardinal sin for women" (Sarkar 194-196). Yet learn she did: "So I held on to the page. Even though I hardly had the time to glance at it, I would occasionally keep it in my left hand while I was cooking, and sometimes I would steal a look at it from under the veil" (Sarkar 194). The conflicting demands of the private sphere of domestic work and the public sphere of writing were a difficult terrain to negotiate. Many women, not as tenacious or as privileged as Rassundari, wrote intermittently and secretly, but these writings, as Olsen theorized, were lost and silenced. Many others, like Sathianadhan, would thinly veil the autobiographical elements in their writings with a layer of fiction: the fictionalization of life-writing being armour against familial censure and public scrutiny. Recovering and valorising these early, often private or fictionalized or fragmented, life-writing is an ongoing feminist project.

Women write memoirs for multiple purposes, from the confessional, to the therapeutic to the political. Memoir

theorists hypothesise that "the fundamental premise of memoir writing is a belief in the restorative power of telling one's truth" (Murdock 81). Growing sporadically yet tenaciously throughout the twentieth century, women's life-writing has emerged as a significant and popular genre across Indian languages in the current century, aided by the democratization and digitalization of publishing. A brief exploration, through selected examples of life-writing by Indian women (in English or translated into English), indicates the range, diversity and impact of this fascinating emerging genre—and its multiple and fluid sub-genres—through which these writers negotiate with their selves and their private and public worlds.

Since I have been attempting to read women's life-writing through feminist a lens, the first category I would like to mention is the **feminist memoir**. By this I mean the wide range of memoirs written by women, often academics or activists, from a self-identified feminist standpoint. These memoirists write about not only their own lived experiences—making the personal political—but also emplace their own experiences in the larger history of women's lives, memorializing the lives of their mothers and grandmothers. Historian and academic Bharati Ray's memoir *Daughters: A Story of Five Generations* (originally published in Bengali as *Ekaal Sekaal* in 2008; trans. in 2011) is written in a multi-generational, matrilineal format, beginning with her great grandmother and ending with her elder daughter. Her writing is a conscious political act, and Ray says she has "chosen to break with tradition [of tracing family histories through the male line] and tell my story of five generations via the female line" (Ray

xiii). Her deployment of the personal memoir as an entry point for investigating social history as well as a tool for social change is part of second wave feminist strategies that transform the personal into the political.

Sometimes, the metamorphosis of the personal into the political is not the conscious outcome of a feminist training but is affected through the lived experience of resistance to subjugation and the struggle for survival. The growing body of **subaltern memoirs** is testimony of such politics and such struggles which are inscribed on the body of the writer. *A Life Less Ordinary* is one such memoir, written by Baby Halder, a survivor of a broken home and marital violence, a mother of three who worked as a domestic helper. When beset by doubts (“I’m wondering if I will be able to write or not”) she is reassured by the benevolent employer, who also taught her to read and write, “Of course you will be able to write...why ever not. Go ahead: write” (Halder 153). Writing for Halder is therapeutic and agentic: a way of understanding her circumstances as well as a way of overcoming these circumstances. Entangled in domestic drudgery, marital violence and financial hardships, writing is an opportunity for Halder to “transform” her “difficult, hard life...into such beautiful prose” and a more empowered life (Halder 170). A very significant component of subaltern memoirs in India is the **Dalit memoir**, especially memoirs by women writers and activists produced at the intersection of their Dalit and Phule-Ambedkarite feminist identities. Dalit women’s life-writing is a resistance and response to the “double discrimination” they struggle against: discrimination along

the axes of caste and gender (Paik 1-2). Baby Kamble’s path breaking memoir, *Jina Amucha* (translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke*), for instance, situates her personal memories within the relational context of her larger Mahar community. In an interview with her translator, Maya Pandit, which is reproduced at the end of the book, Baby Kamble states, “I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it difficult to think of myself outside of my community” (Kamble 136). This imbricating of the private and the public selves, this politicizing of the personal in their memoirs is key to the Dalit feminist critique of the convergent systems of caste and patriarchy that oppress Dalit women.

Another emerging sub-genre which intermeshes the domestic and the public lives of women is the **culinary memoir**, often described as recipes with stories. However, most such books are embedded in more privileged contexts as compared to Dalit and subaltern self-writing, and neither do they contain a self-aware critique of gendered patriarchal systems or expectations. Culinary memoirs cover a wide and diverse terrain, and they often archive recipes inherited from female relations and foremothers. The very act of remembering the culinary labour and agency of women becomes a tribute to the womanist inheritances that shape the female writers. One such example is Mita Kapur’s humorous memoir-cum-cookbook *The F-Word* (F standing for food), wherein Kapur, through an eclectic selection of recipes “collected over the last two decades” celebrates not only her culinary

heritage but also her family stories spanning several generations and geographies (Kapur ix). When Kapur writes, "Cooking, for me, has always been a very emotional exercise," this direct appeal to the emotion extends beyond the recipes and seeps into the text, drawing the reader into the lives of the author and her large family of eccentric, well-etched characters and their joys and sorrows.

The popularity of memoirs is partly explained by the empathetic response of readers, who often feel as if it is their own lives that are being thus described. This reader response of identification and empathy is perhaps the reason behind the growing popularity of the **maternal memoir** (also called memoirs), which are written by mothers about their lived experiences of mothering. Since this is a considered to be a niche category with limited readership, digital publication has played a big role in the production and circulation of maternal memoirs. Such self-publishing houses provide an accessible platform for 'ordinary mothers', many of whom begin to write through their online blogs, to preserve their life-writing in textual form, and to circulate these writings to a wider audience. *As I Discover My Child* is the memoir of new mother Priti Saraogi, published in hardcover, paperback and e-book formats by the self-publishing house Partridge, wherein Saraogi, a mother of three, writes a collection of her thoughts and "factual experiences," and to share "a few things that I learnt on my journey as a mother" (Saraogi loc.81). Here, Saraogi is writing

not just for herself but to share her experience with other mothers who may have gone through similar experiences.

Thus, it is as important for the memoirist to reach out to the reader as it is to recollect and record her own life. This process of otherising the self is crucial to both writing a memoir and to understand its enduring appeal. Taken in context with the concept of the relational female self, otherising and relationality imbricate to produce the specifically female world of women's writing. To conclude, and to situate this paper in the broader context of emerging literatures in India (and elsewhere), I would like to reiterate the question asked by noted memoirist and memoir scholar, Jill Ker Conway, who asks why are memoirs "the most popular form of fiction for modern readers?" While this points to the intriguing overlaps between fiction and life-writing and the porous nature of autobiographical "truth," it also underlines the enduring appeal of entering another human being's life and mind, and how this experience enhances our own lives and mind. Maureen Murdock explicates, "A memoir that successfully taps the reservoir of universal human feeling resonates strongly with its readers" (Murdock 49). Life-writing by Indian women, thus, have the potential to be vital missives of empathy, inspiration and solidarity for the readers. By documenting and disseminating their own words, these women will hopefully spearhead the breaking of women's silences everywhere.

Works Cited:

Buss, Helen. M. *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women*. Toronto: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2002. Print.

- Conway, Jill Ker. *When Memory Speaks: Exploring the Art of Autobiography*. New York: Vintage, 2011. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. "Self-Writing." *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. 207-222. New York: The New Press, 1994. Print.
- Halder, Baby. *A Life Less Ordinary*. Trans. Urvashi Butalia. New Delhi: Zubaan and Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Trans. Maya Pandit. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2008. Print.
- Kapur, Mita. *The F-Word*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2012. Print.
- Murdock, Maureen. *Unreliable Truth: On Memoir and Memory*. New York: Seal Press, 2003. Print.
- Olsen, Tillie. *Silences*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003. Kindle e-book.
- Paik, Shailaja. *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014. Print.
- Ray, Bharati. *Daughters: A Story of Five Generations*. Trans. Madhuchhanda Karlekar. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011. Print.
- Saraogi, Priti. *As I Discover My Child*. Gurgaon: Partridge Publishing, 2014. Kindle e-book.
- Sarkar, Tanika. *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013. Print.