

# Inscribing the True Self, Re-inscribing Masculinities: Experiments with Gender in Gandhi's Writings and Life Narrations

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**Abstract:** One direction taken by autobiography studies is to deconstruct the term itself and examine the concept of life writings against the theoretical interventions that mediate and modulate it. Thus, we often see it leaning towards anti-humanism, which informs poststructuralist, and Post-humanistic perspectives that take an avant-garde leap into life writing imagined in speculative and almost futuristic terms.

This paper proposes to add to and complicate the field of postcolonial autobiography. A significant area of exploration within the elastic genre of life writing studies has to do with the politics of identities and subjectivities. This paper attempts to analyse a few key moments from the life writings of Gandhi, focusing on his corporeal politics. I argue that there is in Gandhi's "experiments with truth" a series of experiments to do with the body which expresses both a consciously crafted gender ambivalence (his grand-niece, Manu, referred to him as her 'mother') and throws a challenge to the concept of the male body of the coloniser, in order to suggest the idea of alternative masculinity.

This paper argues that Gandhi is consciously deploying his self, his body identity/ies and attendant subjectivities, in order to make a political point. He uses his body and body-politics to establish his difference from the colonially attributed native body and mark his distance from colonial models of masculinity. While, in one sense, this fluid body seems almost gender ambivalent, it is also an invitation to re-imagine the contours of Indian identity and subjectivity.

*Keywords:* Autobiography, truth, experiments, gender ambivalence

In this essay, I look at some key issues and critical events in Gandhi's life, as filtered through in some critical readings, to suggest that Gandhi combined the personal with the political in a unique way to forge moral authority through an evolution of a renunciatory masculinity. One way of approaching his autobiography is see it as an unfolding drama of the self, where moral struggles are revealed consciously to show the aspiration towards a state of sexlessness or 'brahmacharya.'

A common thread that runs through the work and writings of both Tagore and Gandhi, is a critique of existing, culturally prescribed and sanctioned models of masculinity as they prevailed in the eastern (Tagore) and western (Gandhi) extremities of India. Both these great men, as public personages, were aware that they were thought-leaders and role models and that examples set by them would be emulated.

In the case of M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948), India's great national leader who is considered to be instrumental in India's throwing off the yoke of colonialism in 1947, there is a conscious experimentation with the "truth", presumably of one's inner self, to oppose certain culturally sanctioned models of masculinity. It is this search for truth which directs his autobiography, a narrative which details his search for an appropriate identity, subjectivity and being in the world. Gandhi focuses a great deal on corporeal issues like food, dietetics as well as ethics and morality. When we focus closely on his corporeal politics, we see in

Gandhi's "experiments with truth" a series of experiments to do with the body which express both a consciously crafted gender ambivalence and which throw a challenge to the concept of the manly body of the coloniser. Here, my point is that Gandhi is consciously deploying his self, his body identity and attendant subjectivities, in order to make a political point. He uses his body and body-politics to establish his difference from the colonially attributed native body and also to mark his distance from colonial models of masculinity. While in one sense, this fluid body seems almost gender ambivalent, it is also an invitation to re-imagine and re-vision stereotypical notions of gender which circulate in cultures.

The historical conjuncture referred to here is late 19<sup>th</sup> and the first two decades of the twentieth century, when the models of masculinity available can be broadly conceptualized as imperial, colonized, traditional and ascetic masculinities. The imperial masculinity model is based on the white imperial 'master', the civil servant, the 'pukka saheb', the kind extolled by Kipling and criticized by E.M. Forster. Coincidentally, this Kiplingesque masculinity, often caricatured, found its takers in people who extolled the muscular, strong masculinity of imperial cultures. Tagore's niece, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani whose fiercely patriotic and nationalistic feelings led to a belief in the importance of militancy, a belief-system which was at odds with her uncle's faith in a sort of global brotherhood and internationalism, writes in her autobiography *Jibaner Jharapata* ("The Scattered Leaves of my Life") that the English character is moulded in the fields of Eton.<sup>1</sup> The Forsterian view that the English public school culture shaped "well developed bodies, under-developed minds and undeveloped hearts" is not known to her, nor would it presumably, find favour.<sup>2</sup> This model also makes its way into Indian discourses where it becomes linked with questions of national character and patriotism. In an interesting essay, "Final Encounter: The Politics of the Assassination of Gandhi" in his book "*At the Edge of Psychology*", Ashish Nandy proffers the view that the Indian and Hindu elite and many sections of middle class Indians in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century perceived the British as agents of progressive change and accepted the ethos of aggressive imperial masculinities embodied by them.<sup>3</sup> In his reading of the assassination of Gandhi, Nandy reads the caste-class identity of Nathuram Godse, his assassin, as a representative of a social class that felt a sense of emasculation in the contemporary political climate, a discomfort/fact that they held Gandhi responsible for. While Gandhi's moral and political ascendancy was not in doubt, some sections of society felt that Gandhi's counter-intuitive, seemingly irrational politics was a roadblock in the development of a sense of modern 'realpolitik' (Nandy 90).

According to historians and critics like Mrinalini Sinha<sup>4</sup> and Chandrima Chakraborty,<sup>5</sup> there was a developing discourse of de-masculinization and emasculation among the British, where they denigrated the Indian middle class and particularly the Bengali men as weak and effeminate. The British encouraged a stereotyping of colonized masculinities, which dismayed fiercely patriotic nationalists like Sarala Devi, who participated actively in the crafting of militarized masculinities in Bengal. In her autobiography, she recalls the brave and courageous Marathas and feels strongly the lack of a physical culture in Bengal. By instituting some invented rituals like the Birashtami "bratas" commemorating the bravehearts of Bengal, she hoped to instil a sense of nationalism among the youth in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (p.122) She was not the only political leader to move in the direction of defining and conscious crafting of alternative masculinities; the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rise of a militant 'extremist' wave in Indian politics.

Traditional masculinities in Indian society were steeped in caste-based ritual practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although reformist discourse also impacted models of masculinity and conjugality. The ascetic model is available in *Ananda Math* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and "Char Adhay" (Tagore) and real life characters such as Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), albeit delineated with some ambivalence. Chandrima Chakraborty in her book on *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism: Past and Present*

*Imagings of India* highlights the alignment of asceticism and masculinity in Indian political history, in order for its transformation into a strident symbol of Indian nationalism.” (Chakraborty, 2011: Preface)

### Alternative Masculinities

Gandhi's ambivalent and sometimes controversial attitudes towards sexuality have invited many critical responses, both in his times and later, including from scholars such as Tridib Suhrud.<sup>6</sup> ‘Brahmacharya’ or his experiment that failed, which he discussed openly drew forth a whole host of negative responses, given Gandhi's stature and reputation as an icon of unassailable moral integrity, by this time (1940s). As the “father of the nation”, he could not (and presumably ought not) do anything that could sully his unimpeachable conduct or reputation or prove a questionable role model. Rather, his endeavour was to develop and fashion a masculinity which was predicated on a conscious deployment of anti-colonial masculinities. The core of this masculinity is an emptying out of sexual desire and a move towards realisation of brahmacharya and this journey is outlined in his autobiography.

Gandhi's life journey was marked by profoundly personal, agonizing conflicts concerning matters of sex and about his unwavering commitment to liberate himself from the temptations of the flesh in order to be able reach the ultimate transcendent state of a true brahmachari. For Gandhi, brahmacharya was an all-encompassing philosophical/spiritual concept that went beyond the practice of celibacy and continence. His notion of celibacy incorporated moral and spiritual ideas and thoughts that were to be put into action for the liberation of the soul as well as the freedom of the nation. Gandhi believed that sexual love in a marriage was enervating, which produced males who were effete. Thus, for Gandhi, the sexual instinct needed to be controlled in order for men to retain their physical and spiritual power for the higher purpose of serving the nation.

Gandhi took a vow to observe complete celibacy in 1906 when he was 37-years-old. Several scholars, notably, Susanne Hoerber Rudolph and Lloyd L. Rudolph, speculated that the tragic circumstances surrounding his father's death and his profound sense of shame and guilt were actually a “crucial turning point in his gradual commitment to asceticism” (51). In his autobiography, Gandhi writes about his deep sense of shame and remorse because his lust and passion had robbed him of his chance of providing the last service to his father and consequently not obtaining the father's blessing before his demise: “The shame to which I have referred to in a foregoing chapter, was this shame of my carnal desire even at the critical hour of my father's death, which demanded wakeful service [...] It's a blot I have never been able to efface or forget” (Gandhi 26).

In keeping with classical Hindu teachings, Gandhi believed in the power of the semen and retaining it was a sign of strength and virility. In order to be a true brahmachari, Gandhi performed various kinds of experiments on himself to see if he could retain body fluids, thus maintaining his spiritual power. One such experiment had to do with his food. Gandhi was determined to locate the right combination of diet that would keep his libido in check, more importantly, his involuntary nocturnal emissions. He would frequently go without salt or any kind of condiments in his food. There were also periods when he would have “unfired” food with olive oil, and instead of taking sugar he would substitute it with currants and dates. Gandhi was also a firm believer that onions and garlic were bad for a celibate. Thus, they were eliminated from his diet. Gandhi even found cow and buffalo's milk to be detrimental to his cause of celibacy. Clearly, food was an extremely serious business for him as he thought it was inextricably linked to one's carnal desires. As part of brahmacharya, he also fasted regularly. For Gandhi, fasting was not only a source of empowerment in his political struggles, but it also held special meaning for him since fasting afforded him the potential of attaining celibacy.

Many have written about Gandhi's experiments with women as part of his 'brahmacharya'. In his book, *Gandhi and His Women Associates*, Girija Kumar has provided a detailed account of Gandhi's physical contacts with women in his ashram. Young women from the ashram gave massages to Gandhi every day, followed by a bath, which was assisted by young women in the presence of a woman attendant. Girija Kumar reports: "On such occasions, Gandhiji would keep his eyes closed to save him embarrassment" (6). Gandhi's women associates also slept next or close to Gandhi. In 1946, he even asked his own 19-year-old grandniece, Manu Gandhi, to sleep with him in order to ensure that he was successful in controlling his libido. The fact that the participants were not comfortable with these experiments seems to have been overlooked. However, in Manu's diary, translated by Tridib Suhred, she mentions Gandhi's solicitous care regarding her education and refers to Gandhi as "Bapu, my mother." (2019)

There are numerous instances of Gandhi's conflicted relations with his female associates, including Mirabehn or Madeline Slade(Kakar) and Sarala Debi Chaudhurani. Desire for control and tension marked many of these relationships and hint at a latent gender ambivalence. For Gandhi, 'brahmacharya' is the attainment of sexlessness, not impotence, the first being a state in which sexual energy is completely sublimated into spiritual energy. It is tempting to speculate that while impotence suggests a kind of lack of masculine vigour, sexlessness might signify a state of transcendence. So a lack is turned into a positive force, by removing from it any suggestion of failure.

### Embodying the Renunciate

When Mohandas Karamchand initially travelled to England in the 1880s, he was concerned about both social acceptance and wearing appropriate clothes, as befitting an aspiring lawyer/barrister. This was the concern that dictated his preferences and sartorial choices, right up to the time of his South African sojourn in the Transvaal. If we are to access Gandhi's photographs from the early part of his life in the last three decades of the nineteenth century till early 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can observe the changes in his appearance from conformity to rebellion, from sartorial elegance to a minimalistic renunciatory garb. It is tempting to speculate and forward the thesis that Gandhi's experiments with truth relate to his self and life, and the constant traffic of the two on his own terms, measures and initiatives that defined the man and made him a great and effective leader in the cause of India's independence. Through his innovative narrative of brahmacharya and performance as an ascetic, Gandhi was able to transform ascetic disciplines and vows of truth, non-violence, self-sacrifice, simplicity, and poverty into techniques of nonviolent activism. Veena Howard<sup>7</sup> discusses the religious texts that Gandhi selected and interpreted in order to synthesize an ideology of asceticism and activism in his career as a political leader.

A lot of this is recorded in his autobiography, where many details are related to his corporeal practices and focused sharply on his dietary practices, which is linked to his politics. In undertaking a cultural studies analysis of Gandhi's gastronomic practices and experiments, the link with politics transformed and imbued humble objects of everyday use with unique significance. Thus salt, caps charkhas (spinning wheel) were turned into objects with a unique significance and suffused with a symbolic value. Gandhi's experiment with truth extends to his diet, his intimate relations and close relationships and considers what it might mean for his politics. From diet, occupation and activities, self formation and character formation, sartorial choices to sexuality we see a conscious shift, moving him away from one kind of life, aspiration to another, till his life is devoted and subsumed into the course of India's history. As Parama Ray<sup>8</sup> points out in her detailed exploration of Gandhi's dietetics, food practices and the forging of a version of asceticism, "in reading his experiments in dietetics, the details of his vegetarianism, fasting and food asceticism

symptomatically, as it were” she realises the internal consistency and continuity of some of these practices and the gendered dynamics of vegetarianism (62-3) Moreover, these accounts can in turn “illuminate the intimate and unexpected links among meat-eating, modern formations of masculinity and a national-political aesthetics of the body (63).” In this analysis, Ray speculates that Gandhi’s friend in early youth, Sheikh Mehtab, who tempts him to have meat and alcohol, represents, like the bad angel (my simile) in the morality plays, a sort of rite of passage. This is a role in which Gandhi’s eldest son, Harilal, gets cast in later, when he converts and becomes a profligate. He (Harilal) is found in a comatose state shortly after Gandhi’s death and dies soon afterwards. Ray, following Erikson speculates that if Mehtab had not existed in actual life, Gandhi would have been forced to invent him. (68) She further speculates that Mehtab is that part of Gandhi’s psyche which has to be violently ejected for his ‘brahmacharya’ experiment to unfold and succeed (68)

If Sheikh Mehtab constitutes one milestone in Gandhi’s journey towards the forging or formation of an alternative masculinity, his Jewish friends whom he met in South Africa, like Hermann Kallenbach and Pollak, may be considered to be another. Both these personages and their extensive and intensive contact with Gandhi is narrated in his autobiography and their influence, particularly Kallenbach’s, was a vital one in shaping his ideas and developing the contours of a differential non-violent masculinity. The association with Kallenbach was vital to the Tolstoy Farm experiment that Gandhi put into practice in the Natal (Gandhi, *Autobiography* 248-284).

### **A Revolution Based on Truth**

Moreover, Gandhi’s evolution of ‘satyagraha’ literally meaning a revolution based on truth could be seen in the context of ascetic masculinity. Examining the close linkages between ‘satyagraha,’ and psychoanalysis, Erikson discusses how the teleology of truth directs both processes. In his seminal work on Gandhi, the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson traces the unfolding of a “precocious and relentless conscience,” narrated in a confessional tell-all mode. He lays special stress on the way in which Gandhi’s nursing care of his ageing father, a civil servant whose health and career were both declining during his son’s youth, not only served to conceal the wish to replace the father but set the pattern “for a style of leadership which can defeat a superior adversary only non-violently” (Lasch p.1). He examines the effects on Gandhi of his “premature child marriage, which left him with a horror of sexuality” and guilt about his sexual drive, but which also made impossible the monastic retreat to which his developing religiosity might have led. In Gandhi’s case the quest for sainthood therefore had to take political form, and it in this context that he developed the idea of ‘Satyagraha’.

Erikson asserts that ‘Satyagraha’ represents “a better and more expeditious way of righting wrongs,” in Gandhi’s words, than other forms of political action. It seeks to cure men of the “righteous and fanatic moralism” that is the major source, in Erikson’s view, of irrational violence. Moreover, it is the only politics that instead of dividing men seeks to reconcile them (while at the same time pursuing revolutionary objectives) and thus contributes to the struggle for “more inclusive identities” — the sense of mankind as a single species instead of a collection of mutually hostile subspecies. It does this by recognizing the humanity of the adversary and by seeking to shame him rather than to exterminate him — for instance, by forcing him to act in ways inconsistent with his own ideals of decency and honour.

Gandhi’s programme for belief and action towards making a fresh and compelling case for “militant nonviolence” (Erikson, title) found many takers the world over. Gandhi himself wrote, in the aftermath of the Ahmedabad strike, that most of his followers had taken up nonviolence not from a consciousness of their own dignity and strength but “because they were too weak to undertake methods of violence.” For a time, he decided that “we shall not be fit for swaraj [home rule] till we have acquired the capacity to defend ourselves.”

What these reflections suggest is that the political choice lies not between violence and nonviolence but between “the disciplined use of violence”, free from fanatical and irrational behaviour of any kind. Erikson rules out the Western revolutionary tradition as an alternative to nonviolence, partly for the good reason that it has too easily allied itself with cold-blooded violence and terror, but partly because he mistakenly assumes that revolutions are invariably violent. In fact they tend to degenerate into irrational violence only when a self-chosen “vanguard” of professional revolutionaries tries to impose its will on the majority.

The next step in the process is the fashioning of the true revolutionary, who believes that this is his life’s work. In Gandhi’s case, this belief took the form of the demand that the true ‘Satyagrahi’ abstain from sexual relations. “A passive resister,” according to the Mahatma, “[...] can have no desire for progeny.” He reiterates the necessity of abjuring carnal lust and training the mind to forgo all luxuries (Gandhi 275).

What this means in practice is a leadership that has cut itself off from “generativity” and “householdership,” to use Erikson’s terms, and from all the daily concerns connected with the maintenance of life. For this reason it is essential, according to Erikson, that nonviolence no longer remain restricted to ascetics and practical saints; “for the danger of a riotous return to violence always remains at least latent if we do not succeed in imbuing essential daily experiences with a Satyagraha-of-everyday-life.”

It is not likely, however, that a politics in which an exalted ideal of personal heroism plays so large a role can ever become genuinely popular or, indeed, even ought to become popular. “Your duty,” Gandhi wrote to an unfaithful follower, “lay in honouring [your commitment to the movement], even if your entire family were to starve in consequence. “A movement that places such demands on its practitioners is obviously difficult, and even though it may attract a mass following among the weak and oppressed, that following can easily turn to irrational violence if its expectations are too rudely disappointed.

In asking for a Satyagraha-of-everyday-life, Gandhi was being politically astute. He was able to fill a crucial gap or address a weakness not only of the nonviolent tradition but of the socialist tradition as well — their common failure to root revolutionary action in the everyday maintenance of life (Lasch p.1) Many of Gandhi’s experimental attempts were to do with everyday living and its demands. He also attempted to make Kastur, his wife, understand the importance and dignity of all kinds of manual labour, including work that had been traditionally proscribed by Hindu/Brahmanical rules of purity and pollution. In his letters to Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, a fiercely independent nationalist who was also Tagore’s niece, he stresses the importance of physical work and manual labour.<sup>8</sup> (Forbes 79)

Ashish Nandy, in an essay on Gandhi referred to earlier, highlights the cultural significance and implications/ramifications of some of Gandhi’s political moves. He argues that Gandhi’s focus on the importance of work and labour, which had been traditionally viewed as lowly, was a challenge both to Brahmanical hierarchies as well as to paradigms of masculinity, which followed from this Brahmanical “stratarchy” (Nandy 71-2) “Particularly dangerous to the traditional authority system was his negation of the concepts of masculinity implicit in some Indian traditions and in the colonial situation (Nandy 71). Citing critical work on Gandhi from a psychoanalytical perspective, he restates Gandhi’s “deep need to come to psychological terms with his mother by incorporating aspects of her femininity in his own personality” (73). Interestingly he also points out a latent ambivalence that he analyses is evident in Gandhi’s attitude to his mother (73). Further the “aggressive elements of this ambivalence were associated with some degree of guilt and search for valid personal and social models of atonement.” This last point, according to Nandy, is perhaps generalisable for the average Indian who has either “abnegated the feminine or glorified it out of all proportion” (73). The fear arises out of a view which sees woman as a symbol of “irrational nature and unpredictable culture.”

Finally, both Sanskritic and imperial culture derived its “strength from the identification of rulership with male dominance and subjecthood with feminine submissiveness.” (74) This is an equation rejected by Gandhi. He rejected the British as well as the Brahmanic-Kshatriya equation between manhood and dominance, between masculinity and legitimate violence and between femininity and passive submissiveness. He wanted to extend to the male identity-in both colonizer and colonized- the revalued, partly non-brahmanic equation between womanhood and non-intrusive, nurturant, non-manipulative, non-violent self de-emphasizing ‘merger’ with natural and social environments.(74)

In Book IV, Chapter 5, Gandhi also describes his journey into religious discovery. In this chapter of his autobiography, he writes: “Theosophist friends certainly intended to draw me into their society, but that was with a view to getting something from me as a Hindu. Theosophical literature is replete with Hindu influence, and so these friends expected that I should be helpful to them. I explained that my Sanskrit study was not much to speak of, that I had not read the Hindu scriptures in the original, and that even my acquaintance with the translations was of the slightest. But being believers in *samskara* (tendencies caused by previous births) and *punarjanma* (rebirth), they assumed that I should be able to render at least some help (Gandhi 220).

Realising the gaps in his knowledge, in the early years of this century, he starts reading Swami Vivekananda’s *Rajayoga* with some of these friends and M. N. Dvivedi’s *Rajayoga* with others. He also read Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* with one friend and the *Bhagavad Gita* with quite a number. As he narrates, “We formed a sort of Seekers’ Club where we had regular readings. I already had faith in the *Gita*, which had a fascination for me. Now I realized the necessity of diving deeper into it. I committed to memory thirteen chapters.” (221)

However, he continues, “the memorising of the *Gita* had to give way to other work and the creation and nurture of *Satyagraha*, which absorbed all my thinking time, as the latter may be said to be doing even now.”

“What effect this reading of the *Gita* had on my friends only they can say, but to me the *Gita* became an infallible guide of conduct. It became my dictionary of daily reference.” Comparing it to the lexicon I turned to this dictionary of conduct for a ready solution of all my troubles and trials. Words like *aparigraha* (non-possession) and *samabhava* (equability) gripped me. How to cultivate and preserve that equability was the question. How was one to divest oneself of all possessions? Was not the body itself possession enough? Were not wife and children possessions? (221)

He continues to describe his arrival and at and understanding of ideas of renunciation, self-abnegation and renunciation. He proceeds to outline his internal self-examination: “Further, was I to give up all I had and follow Him? Straight came the answer: I could not follow Him unless I gave up all I had.” (222) It was at this juncture that his knowledge of English law helps him find an answer:

My study of English law came to my help. Snell’s discussion of the maxims of Equity came to my memory. I understood more clearly in the light of the *Gita* teaching the implication of the word ‘trustee’. My regard for jurisprudence increased, I discovered in its religion. I understood the *Gita* teaching of non-possession to mean that those who desired salvation should act like the trustee who, though having control over great possessions, regards not an iota of them as his own. It became clear to me as daylight that non-possession and equability presupposed a change of heart, a change of attitude. I then wrote to Revashankarbai to allow the insurance policy to lapse and get whatever could be recovered, or else to regard the premiums already paid as lost, for I had become convinced that God, who created my wife and children as well as myself, would take care of them.

His decision leads to disturbed family relations, as he narrates: To my brother, who had been as father to me, I wrote explaining that I had given him all that I had saved up to that moment, but that henceforth he should expect nothing from me, for future savings, if

any, would be utilized for the benefit of the community. Perhaps needless to state, this move did not elicit a good response from his brother (222).

Gandhi's embodied practice of Brahmacharya was central to his non-violent method requiring a mass mobilisation. Many scholars have directed attention to how his practice of embodied renunciation permeated his politics and became a powerful instrument to influence diverse sets of people and groups divided by ethnicity, language and religion, that too in a society sharply stratified by sharp divisions of caste, class and gender. As Veena Howard, in her study of Gandhi's *Ascetic Activism* points out,

The austere practice of brahmacharya was an essential prerequisite for public service, and it was multi-layered, nuanced and imbued with ethical, religious, mythical, and cultural meanings, all of which allowed him to engage with social, political, gender, and religious issues. Second, through his embodied renunciation, he acquired the status of mahâtmâ ("great soul"), which became a central factor in mobilizing millions of Indians for action. In the Indian context, spiritual leadership has been and continues to be associated with 'brahmacharya'. Furthermore, Gandhi, drawing on the Hindu tradition that ascribes a supernatural value to brahmacharya, sought to validate the ascetic power of self-control and to transform it into an active power for nonviolent resistance. (Howard xii)

She also discusses how through "his personal vow and ethic of austerity, he was able to assert moral power and exemplify self-sacrifice and self-rule." Through his embodiment of a masculinity which was renunciatory, ascetic and non-violent, he was able to convey a "message of autonomy and moral power. mobilizing the masses to make sacrifices for India's independence". Moreover, through his innovative narrative of brahmacharya and performance as an ascetic and renunciate, "Gandhi was able to transform ascetic disciplines and vows of truth, nonviolence, self-sacrifice, simplicity, and poverty into techniques of nonviolent activism, including nonviolent resistance, non-cooperation, self-reliance, fearlessness, the willingness to go to jail, and maintaining commitment despite suffering" (Howard xii).

It is this journey that is detailed in his autobiography that he wrote in his mid-50s between 1926 and 1929, in Gujarati and which was translated mostly by Mahadev Desai, although some chapters were done by Pyarelal. Patterns of sin, guilt and redemption are evident and in fact highlighted and foregrounded by him, as in the episode of Sheikh Mehtab and particularly, his father's death. His sense of self-flagellating, punitive revulsion against the sexual impulse could be traced to that moment, as many critics and commentators have highlighted. That, and the vow to his mother, before leaving for England, ensured that his pursuit of truth would be incomplete, were he to deviate from his mother's injunctions and ignore the pricking of his conscience.

The sexual revolution, which ushered in the belief in the right to sexual satisfaction for women, altered the psychological landscape of sexuality for both men and women. Coming before the sexual revolution, Gandhi lived at a time when sex was viewed as marital duty and as a necessity for the production of children (Howard xiv). From Gandhi's writings, it is apparent that sexuality in his era fit the more stereotypical model of naturalised conjugal masculinity. For Gandhi, "the constant need for male sexual satisfaction could be viewed as aggressive and violent. It could be seen as an endangering women's lives due to the hazards of childbirth; an obstacle to their well-being; and an impediment to their fuller participation in society and emancipation". In this way, his experiments, says Howard, are exploring a kind of feminism." (Howard p.xiv-xv)

It is also important to understand the political challenge that he embodied to the colonial government through an understanding of political masculinities and his mobilization of his inner resources to develop a strong and effective voice against the policies of British rule. The lens provided by postcolonial theory in its conversation with life narrative is useful in this context: "Postcolonial theory, in displacing universalized subjectivities associated with Western thought, wants to emphasize how one (mode of) universalizing

subjectivity has always excluded other modes of subjectivity.” (Huddart 6) The drive or impulse in Gandhi’s autobiography and letters, I would argue, serves to displace the centralizing impulse of Western and bourgeois models of autobiography/life writing. His writings work towards a formulation of what might be termed an alternative version of masculinity, drawing from indigenous and religious discourses of ethical practice. His practice of self formation, self-development and self-documentation could be seen to be formulating the basis of the self which is outside the trajectories of the traditional self, outside the boundaries of the modern, secular, bourgeois self for which autobiographical writings of people like Rousseau, Franklin and others provide a template. Instead, his self-fashioning, both inwardly and outwardly, draws on the idea of the renunciate. Outwardly, he discards western garb as well the outer signs of class and caste identity. He also adopts minimalism in his garb and popularizes the idea of going without. So apart from non-vegetarian food, his dietary practices illustrate his experiments with raw and uncooked food and experimentation with food taxonomies, when he gives up several categories of food—sometimes lentils, cereals, vegetables.

In the conflation of issues of food and identity, Gandhi finds a way of bringing in the socio-cultural within the ambit of the subjective. His experiments could be seen as being a part of and partaking of a discourse of interiority, which is then politically and socially performed and enacted. The identity and subjectivity that he develops is of necessity, an audience oriented one. To understand this idea, one has to understand the essence and efficacy of martyrdom and that, martyrdom as a performance can only be effective when it draws the common people into its ambit. Gandhi’s public and much publicized fasts served to draw common people, irrespective of class and gender, into this magic circle of the ‘mahatma’ that transcended borders of region and language. Being a beneficiary as well as a proponent of proliferating print culture as well as the newly evolving aural and visual media, Gandhi was at once astute and shrewd in his mass mobilization of a rudderless people, who were reverential but undisciplined.

At a time when right-wing masculinities in its various configurations are in the ascendant, it is urgent and imperative to recuperate certain unique modalities in Gandhi’s experiments not only with truth, but also with masculinity. Eschewing imperial, militant models of masculinity, refusing the binary of colonial-colonized masculinities, including its dietary and sartorial choices, Gandhi forged a version of a postcolonial renunciative self which redefined the contours not only of constructed gender roles, but also the essence of personhood.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Chaudhurani, Sarala Debi, “Jibaner Jharapata” (The Scattered Leaves of my Life), pp. 95.

<sup>2</sup> See Forster, E. M. “Notes on the English Character”.

<sup>3</sup> See Nandy pg nos.

<sup>4</sup> Mrinalini Sinha’s book was one of the first full length studies of colonial masculinities, Indira Chowdhury’s *The Frail Hero and Virile History* was another.

<sup>5</sup> Chakraborty, 2011, brings in the question of ascetic masculinities, adding yet another dimension to colonial masculinities.

<sup>6</sup> See Suhrud's 'Introduction' to *The Diary of Manu Gandhi*.

<sup>7</sup> See Howard Preface, pp. xiv.

<sup>8</sup> See Ray pp. 62-91.

<sup>9</sup> See Forbes for Sarla Devi's letters, where Gandhi wrote to her, "Great and good though you are, you are not a complete woman without achieving the ability to do household work", pp. 79-80.

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