

Writing Self, Writing Resistance: Women's Life Writing in India

MUKUL CHATURVEDI

I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read... Anyway, I was pleased that I was able to perform this impossible feat at least in a dream. My life was blessed!

Amar Jiban

Published in 1868, *Amar Jiban* records the long and difficult struggle of Rasasundari Debi to acquire literacy in a society that prohibited women's learning and education. *Amar Jiban* is the first autobiography written by a woman in Bengali language, perhaps the first in any Indian language. To achieve this impossible feat "at least in a dream" sets Rasasundari on an effort where she steadily and stealthily learns to read the alphabet, becomes a 'jitaakshara' (winner of letters) and goes on to write her autobiography. A landmark text to explore the key concerns of women's life writing in India, it is fortuitous to begin with an exploration of Rasasundari Debi's account as it outlines not only how women's life writing serves as an archival source of their lived experience but also how life narratives have impacted feminist research, scholarship and given a vocabulary to women's activism. Forbidden to read and write as it would bring widowhood, Rasasundari's life is confined within the ideologies of domesticity and femininity. As she writes about her experiences of being a wife and mother there is an emergence of voice that hesitates to question the societal norms, yet her account demystifies the figure of the mother and housewife and presents domestic duties as laborious and unfulfilling. Rasasundari's act of learning to read is an act of transgression against established social norms and by publishing her autobiography she also enters the public domain that was forbidden for women in her time. Feminist historians like Tanika Sarkar have examined in detail how Rasasundari acquires means of self-representation by using the tropes of spiritual autobiography and legitimising her desire to learn the alphabet by dreaming of Chaitanya Bhagwat. Women's life writing thus offers a crucial site to examine questions of subjectivity and agency as it makes visible the often-neglected world of women's experience and their complex negotiations to become a 'speaking subject'. Rasasundari's lament that "Wasn't it a matter to be regretted, that I had to go through all this humiliation just because I was a woman?" marks one such moment when exclusion and neglect are foregrounded as part of women's everyday experience.

Historically, the life writing of the Indian women can be traced back to the latter half of the nineteenth century in varied forms like autobiographies, memoirs, journals, letters, diaries, and travel accounts that allow us to reclaim their voices in their own words. However, women's writing can be traced back to 600 B.C, as has been shown by K. Lalitha and Susie Tharu in their path breaking two volumes of *Women's Writing in India*. The two volumes retrieve writings that had been relegated to the margins of history and attempt to build women's literary tradition by including fictional, non-fictional, and autobiographical pieces by women. The larger purpose of the volume is to reconstruct "the changing ideological configurations in which women wrote and were read" (38) and to read women's writings "as documents that display what is at stake in the embattled practices of self and agency, and in the making of a habitable world, at the margins of patriarchies

constituted by the emerging bourgeoisie of empire and nation.” (39) Tharu and Lalitha’s archival work makes significant intervention by compilation of literature produced by women from Buddhist Therigathas to contemporary times. Also, if we are to examine the questions of women’s selfhood and agency as is the focus of this special issue, then it is also imperative to understand that the sites of resistance “cannot be separated from the specific historical political conjectures that constituted their world”. (ibid. 153) Women’s containment within the ideologies of femininity and domesticity, their lower levels of literacy rather exclusion from access to education, and a demarcation between the spaces of home and world, resulted in a near absence about the knowledge of their lives and their struggles to carve out a space for themselves. Early nineteenth century autobiographies of women like Rasasundari, Krupabai Sattianadhan, Pandit Ramabai Saraswati, and Lakshmbai Tilak foreground many such transgressions that came to define women’s life writing. Not only it made visible the world of women’s experience but also gave a new vocabulary where the language of spirituality, religion, intimacy, and domesticity is used to articulate negotiations with everyday life. As women gained access to education and entered public domain, the twentieth century saw well known autobiographies by famous figures like Cornelia Sorabjee, Savitri Devi Nanda, Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam and Nayantara Sahgal who left an indelible mark of growing feminist consciousness in their autobiographies. Other than women in public life and well known writers, actresses like Binodini Dasi and Hamsa Wadkar also wrote autobiographies. More recently, life writing by Dalit women have emerged as a powerful field that includes a vast body of literature across different Indian languages. These narratives offer a useful corrective to understanding women’s resistance practices and their collective action towards social change despite the oppression and victimization that define their daily lives.

Any exploration of life writing forms takes us back to its roots in autobiographical discourse. The argument that autobiography is fundamentally a Western discourse (Gusdorf), and if at all it exists in other cultures is shaped by the legacy of the West is called into question by broadening the parameters of the genre, something that the emergent form of life writing has done. (Smith and Watson 1998) Theoretical and critical reflections on life writing gained momentum at the intersection of feminist and postcolonial studies that had the explicit agenda of retrieving historically marginalized voices and locate moments of resistance and agency. To a large extent the emergence of life writing as a robust area of research has to do with these recent interventions that tried to include writings by historically marginalized subjects that were excluded from the realms of representation. The existence of autobiographical literature by women asserts to a rising preoccupation with the self and the and the emergence of varied life writing forms to reclaim voice and agency that is denied to them. Life writing also becomes a way of entering public domain as it collapses the traditional the binary between personal and political that shapes women’s everyday life. Early scholars like Malavika Karlekar, Ranjana Harish, Uma Chakravarti, Tanika Sarkar and Kumkum Roy have undertaken interdisciplinary research on women’s writing and brought these debates into the mainstream. Drawing on a spectrum of life writing forms like such as dairies, memoirs, collaborative life writing, prison writing, Dalit autobiography, folk songs, disability life writing, biographies of devadasis, and sex worker, this special issue argues that life writing by women has expanded the autobiographical discourse to includes those subjects that have been historically marginalized. By examining the intersections of caste, class, religion, culture, gender, language, ability in women’s life writing texts, this special issue focusses on possibilities of reconfiguring mainstream history writing that often ignores women as social and political actors and undermines their agency and activism in bringing about change. The diverse essays in the volume are drawn from different regional languages and show how life writing foregrounds the construction of female subjectivity in very act of narrating the self.

The earliest women’s auto/biographical writings can be traced back to the nineteenth century when the reformist discourse gained momentum in India. Focussing on women’s life writing from that period reveals that while women’s subjectivities were shaped by the discourse of social reform

movements they also contested the ideological moorings of the reformist discourse that set boundaries for women. The first essay in the collection by Mohd. Afzal focusses on the biographical compilation by Muhammadi Begum (1877–1908) of Asrafunnisa’s life titled as *Hayat-e-Ashraf* (1904, *The Life of Ashrafunnisa*) one of the earliest biographies of an ordinary Indian Muslim woman, who went on to become a teacher in a semi-government school. Ashrafunnisa’s (1840–1903) record of the difficulties she encountered in learning to read and write in a patriarchal society was originally published in two instalments in March 23 and 30, 1899 in *Tehzib-e-Nisvan*, edited by Muhammadi, the first Muslim woman to edit an Urdu journal. The essay traces the lives of two extraordinary women who carved a space for themselves despite the strictures of patriarchal society against women’s education and paid work. Examining the challenges faced by women, the essay offers an engaging analysis of how the genre auto/biography is appropriated by Muslim women to enter the public domain and negotiate the conflicting demands of respectability and economic hardship as they move beyond the confines of home.

Contextualizing the texts within the larger debates of reformist politics demonstrates how the life writing by women is an act of transgression, an effort to reclaim voice, no matter how conditioned it is by dominant discourse. The gaps and silences in these texts also speak eloquently about women’s lives. Shilpi Basak’s essay on Manada Devi’s memoir *Shikshita Potitar Atmochorit* (1929) in Bengali, (translated as *An Educated Woman in Prostitution: A Memoir of Lust, Exploitation, Deceit* in 2021 by Arunava Sinha) focuses on the condition of women in the backdrop of the contemporary social, political and moral situation of colonial Bengal. While the Bengal Renaissance saw a movement for *strishiksha* (women’s education) widow remarriage, and deliberation on ‘woman’s question’, the paper shows how patriarchal double-standards and the hypocritical liberalism effects the condition of women across class and caste in late 19th and early 20th century Bengal. The narrator, an educated prostitute, negotiates respectability by using her literacy as a tool to comment on the social and political condition of women in society thereby challenging the reformist discourse on women’s upliftment. By talking about participation of ‘fallen’ women in Gandhi’s movement, Manada Devi, claims how the marginalised and socially outcaste women contributed towards the freedom movement. In South India, the question of the devadasi was quite centrally located within its reformist discourse. Paromita Bose’s essay on the biographies of female performers who belonged to the devadasi community traces the effects of anti-nautch movement and the abolition of devadasi system on the lives of practitioners. Focusing on the biographies of Veena Dhanammal, Bangalore Nagarathamma, M.S. Subbulakshmi, all belonging to devadasi community, the paper demonstrates how these women negotiated their identities amidst the shifting attitudes of society towards dance and music. Being criminalised by the law, the devadasi was seen as evil and hence had to be removed from the society. Interestingly, while the art form was moved away from the ‘monopoly’ of hereditary families rendering the families impoverished, it now began to be taught to the children of ‘respectable’ communities, which not only would learn dance but also take it up as a profession. Thus, life writings by women who faced social ostracism highlight how they acquire a sense of self-worth through the act of writing.

One important aspect of life writing is that it helps us to think critically about the diminished economic, political, cultural, and interpersonal rights of women and how it enables them claim recognition of their struggles. Reshma Jose’s paper focuses on the emerging field of life writing by disabled women and highlights multiple marginalization suffered by them. The essay examines the intersection of disability, gender and sexuality and argues that disability life narratives posit an active desiring sexual subject and contests the stereotype of disabled women as asexual. In contrast to the passive and objectified view of disabled women’s lives Jose’s paper offers an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural, historical, and political context of these narratives. Like disability life narratives, Dalit women’s life writing across regional Indian languages has emerged as a powerful body of writing that moves beyond the narrative of victimhood and offers an intersectional analysis

of caste patriarchy and how it undermines their contribution to Dalit discourse and activism. Tejaswini Deo's examines three Dalit life narratives written in Marathi by Urmila Pawar (*Aidan*), Kumud Pawade (*Antasphot*), and Mukta Sarvagod (*Mitleli Kawade*) that foreground the emancipatory struggles of Dalit women in post Ambedkarite era. As representatives of an emerging Dalit middle-class in Maharashtra, the self-reflexive tone of their narratives articulates the tensions embedded in Dalit discourse that confine the women to the caste hierarchy despite all attempts at moving beyond it through acquiring education and working towards betterment of their family and community. The narratives of women who exist on the margins of society have found life writing as an empowering genre that enables them to validate their experience of exclusion and oppression. Also, translation of Dalit writing into English has played a key role in wider circulation of these texts across Indian languages and it has even acquired transnational appeal.

Women's oral subcultures also offer a window into their everyday lives and are an important source of information about their community and related social and cultural practices. The non-literate oral world of these reveal how women negotiate patriarchal power structures through their folk cultural practices that are communitarian in nature. Sumadhura Roy's paper examines one such tradition of folk songs by Rajbangsi women of North Bengal that are subversive in nature as they challenge normative assumptions about female sexuality. Focussing on oral songs of *bhawaiya* and *chatka*, as narratives of their lives, these songs offers space for articulation of desire and dissent and are an importance source of documenting women's resistance practices in a society that attempts to contain female sexuality. Also, through their songs reclaim spaces for assertion of their choice and agency.

One of the defining aspect of women's life writing is how women's role as agents of change and their contribution to society gets inscribed in their writing. Madhumita Roy's essay on the memoir of Gretchen Green, an American paramedic nurse, who came to Shantiniketan when Rabindranath Tagore was in dire need of a dedicated medical worker to serve the villages that came under his project of rural reconstruction. In her memoir, Green provides a detailed picture of her stay and work at the poet's rural reconstruction project. The essay reconstructs a history of science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Santi Niketan whose discursive contours were largely defined and constructed by eminent male teachers as well as prolific writers of science. Santiniketan becomes a microcosmic representation of the larger scenario of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal where science was largely considered to be a male prerogative and women were systematically kept at the fringes as far as scientific education was concerned. Focusing on Green's memoir brings to light the lesser-known aspects of women's lives and their interest in science which was considered an exclusive male domain.

Many life writing texts are collaboratively produced and pose methodological as well ethical challenges as the final production of the text might involve an oral subject, transcriber/editor, and a translator. Gayatri Spivak has already alerted us to the pitfalls of speaking for the subaltern subject because one may misrepresent her and appropriate her voice. (Spivak) However, even in life writing texts authored by the subject themselves, the gap between the narrating and the narrated subject has been dealt extensively in autobiography criticism. (Lejeune) The question of a singular, transparent autobiographical voice has been subject of debate and autobiographical writing has been read as a performative act. Keeping these theoretical issues in mind, Natasa Thoudam's paper focuses on the ethical and political aspects of collaboration in Mary Kom's collaborative autobiography, *An Autobiography: Unbreakable*. The paper makes an important contribution to women's life writing in India by examining the autobiography of a sports woman from Manipur and makes a nuanced analysis by addressing the politics of identity formation. While Mary is constructed as a 'national hero' and her narrative is co-opted in the national imaginary, women like Irom Sharmila from Manipur are relegated to the margins. Addressing the question of authorship that inform this collaborative narrative, the paper draws attention to the fissures in Mary's account and her silent refusal to be co-opted thus. Also, the paper draws attention to the gendered violence that accompa-

nies construction of Mary's heroic narrative. Written over a long period of time with family and professional support, Bilquis Jehan Khan's collaborative autobiography, *A Song of Hyderabad* (2010) stands out for its frank exploration of intimate aspects of her life. Nazia Akhtar's essay examines the crisis of subjectivity in Bilquis's narrative while addressing two important events in her life; consummation of marriage and menstruation, subjects that were considered taboo to be spoken about publicly. Given Bilquis's royal lineage and the multiple collaborators who were responsible for creating the final text, one can read several tensions in her account and a layered negotiation with familial and social circumstances that shape her experience of these events. Bilquis's autobiographical performance marks many such moments, where despite the radical act of defiance as she discusses these important events in her life, the narrative also lays bare the limits of such performance. The autobiographical endeavour also involves an element of self-censorship as the narrator is careful in representing a self that breaches the social conventions and yet remains contained within the bounds of propriety.

One important dimension of life writing is how it negotiates the question of individuality with representativeness of the times in which it was written making the narrative have a larger social, political, and cultural value. Shubra Ray's paper examines this crucial aspect in Dilara Hashem's *Kaktaliyo* (Coincidences) and explores the unique trajectory that her self-expression takes given the hegemonic presuppositions which exist about her identity as a Bengali Muslim. The paper argues that the representation of South Asian Muslim women in the diaspora has been marked by certain predetermined themes related to Islamic religious practices and veiling. Despite her diasporic location Hashem, refuses to be appropriated by such discourses and this is done through the delineation of her childhood in undivided Bengal, which she has called fairly representative of her class. The narrator does not posit herself as a victim or a reactionary and this stands her in good stead in both critiquing the gender oppression and espousing her identity as a Bengali Muslim. Dilara Hashem's account critiques a monolithic perspective on Islam through the depiction of a life steeped in rationality and non-conformity, where religion is only one component of one's identity. Thus, life narratives disrupt homogenous assumptions about women's lives and agency as they speak from multiple subject positions. Paramita Purkayastha's traces the lives of two such women who do not fit in the category of 'birangona' or 'muktijoddha' in the context of Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. The paper examines Lily Halder and Sanchita Roy's varied experience of migration and border crossing from East Pakistan to West Bengal during the war years, as female adolescents, even as they are tied together by the same religion and caste. The paper attempts to retrieve those gendered experiences that have been marginalized in the dominant heroic narratives of the war. A critical examination of women's narratives also brings to light that the romanticization of women as brave heroines or as hapless victims does not yield a complex understanding of their agency. The task of constructing autobiographical subjectivity becomes even more daunting when examining women's experience of incarceration as the female body becomes a contested terrain within the institutional apparatus of the state and rendering bodily autonomy even more problematic. Shayantani Das's paper examines one such prison narrative by Minakshi Sen's *Jeler Bhitor Jel* (1994), an account of her involvement in Naxalite movement, where she was arrested on false charges and detained without trial. The subject-narrator uses aesthetic and political strategies to document the lives of other female inmates and elaborates the physical and psychological torture aimed at breaking their sense of self. The text foregrounds the challenges of constructing the autobiographical self and it is only by receding and distancing herself from other inmates that the narrator becomes a speaking subject.

Despite a steady rise in the publication of life writings by women across regional languages in India, there is scant autobiographical literature by women in Hindi, despite its supposedly dominant status, both as a widely spoken tongue and also as an official language along with English. However, there is a vibrant print culture in Hindi that has shaped the literary discourse and inspired creativity across genres, including life writing. Shubhra Dubey examines well-known Hindi writer, Maitreyi Pushpa's two part autobiographical undertaking *Kasturi Kundal Basai* (2002) and *Gudiya Bheetar*

Gudiya (2008). The paper draws attention to the exigencies of the autobiographical endeavour in both the volumes and Pushpa's negotiation with the vibrant world of Hindi print culture that launched her as a writer and continued to shape her persona to the larger reading public. With her commitment to *streevimarsh* (feminist discourse in the Hindi sphere) that is invoked several times in the two texts to reflect on *streejeevan* (life of a woman), Pushpa makes an important contribution to women's life writing by positioning the autobiographical act as an *instance* and example of a gendered life opened up to public scrutiny. Thus, an analysis of women's life writing highlights that while there social and norms and conventions that limit women from rendering their individual experiences of subordination, they are not always acted upon, rather they re-act as women and emerge as agentic beings. The essays in this special issue argue that women's life narratives do not foreground 'essential' and 'unitary' selves, instead, women speak or are spoken into existence only in terms of available discourses. Women's resistance practices emerges from the multiple subject positions available to them, through which they are constituted, and through which they constitute themselves. The essays demonstrate that life writing does not aim to celebrate individual acts of heroism or struggle for personhood, rather how women as writing/speaking subjects move within and between discourses, challenging, co-opting, modifying both in terms of her own subjectivity and in relation to the subjectivity of others. Women's life writing advances our understanding of how agency is discursively constituted and their role as responsible social and political actors in bringing about change.

*Zakir Husain Delhi College
University of Delhi*

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