ABSTRACT

Auto/biographical narratives, particularly women's autobiographies, begin with a conscious recognition of a "self" that is con-scripted by the world around it, not just through formative influences but also through political interpellations. In other words, a "self" is a social and a cultural construction. However, auto/biographical narratives that begin with the burden of an identity marked particularly by gender or caste or religion inaugurate a writing that calls into question the universal category of a "self."

I argue in my thesis that such autobiographies, therefore, inaugurate moments that question the premises of earlier frameworks of thought. These texts, as I seek to demonstrate through my analyses, written against certain norms, script a "self" not merely conscripted into an always-already present logic but weave and institute new logics. Furthermore, the re-cognition of such local specificities enables a writer/reader to understand the material and ideological compositions of the structure of agency, of an "identity," and I contend that such a genealogical enterprise will enable us to have a better handle on the meaning and consequences of contemporary contests over identities.

The "Introduction" is a survey of the explosion and proliferation of autobiographies in the publishing market during the twentieth century, a century also marked by widespread political movements. The idea of an autobiography is closely enmeshed with the concept of "identity," for it is in the logic of identity that a "self" frames itself as citizen, actor or agent. Given that identities are

inherited, assumed as well as questioned, I argue that the process also involves an interrogation of these impositions alongside identification, which may in certain cases be a strategic identification. I survey the notion of "identity politics" as it emerged during the twentieth century and lay out the ground for the concept of "identity" to be understood as a concept that operates "under erasure." Identity, I stress, is more of a strategic, positional concept, constituted across different, even intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. Hence, "identity" is constantly in the process of transformation, or, in fact, institution.

Next, I begin with the premise that women's autobiographies, theoretically, are "failures" in that even when they adhere to the norms of the genre, they fall into the gap between liberalism's universal individual—marked as white, male, bourgeois, able-bodied, and heterosexual—and their own lived, social and material, realities. I argue that women's autobiographies are marked as "failures" because they lie, on the one hand, between the promise of democracy that divests all citizens, conceptually, of all specific identities or affiliations in order to make rational decisions about social welfare and on the other, a structural, systemic experience of social and historical oppression. I emphasize that it would be reductive, nonetheless, to read this experience of subjugation as premised on an empty homogenous category of "gender" alone.

I contend that the "failure" as genre and the "failure" to "become" a liberal humanist subject are built into the framework of the genre of "autobiography." I therefore read the genre of autobiography itself as not only operating under the regime of identities that are discursively imposed from without, but also as being

constantly interrogated by imposing identities that push at understood meanings of terms through menacing questions. Autobiographical texts declare and affirm the "difference" of their life-worlds, and in such moments inaugurate a different logic that cannot be understood or subsumed in earlier genres, history or cultural meanings.

My study of auto/biographical narratives for a negotiation over the imposition, and a simultaneous menace re-turned, of identities proceeds in four chapters. In chapter one, "Autobiographics: Structures, Sutures, Subjectivities," I track a history of the history of the genre. I do so in order to lay the ground for understanding the shifts in meanings that have organized the genre over time, and have in turn been interrogated across spaces. The chapter looks at strands in the history of the writing and theory of women's autobiographical narratives as well as later research that theorized women's writings as not just an inversion of dominant traditions or a recovery of a lost tradition, but rather as an understanding and analysis of historical negotiations. This chapter also examines certain recent critical interventions on autobiographical texts by scholars in India, such as the editorial introductions of Tanika Sarkar, Rimli Bhattacharya and the work of Uma Chakravarti.[1]

In chapter two, "Questioning Woman: Leila Ahmed and Nawal El Saadawi's Takes on Race and Religion," I investigate the critiques by Black feminists of the deployment of "woman" as a category for analysis. I read the autobiographies of

[1] Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of "Amar Jiban": A Modern Autobiography* (Delhi: Kali, 1999); Rimli Bhattacharya, ed. and trans., *Binodini Dasi: "My Story" and "My Life As An Actress"* (Delhi: Kali, 1998); Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (Delhi: Kali, 1998).

two non-Indian Muslim women—Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage: from Cairo to America, A Woman's Journey* and Nawal El Saadawi's *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi*[2] to tease out the implications of "Muslim" in very different discursive formations of economic, social and power relations within a particular society.

My third chapter, "Contra-dictions: Nationalist Conundrums and Caste/Gender Narratives," reviews the genre of gender and of caste that have to understood, scholars have argued, as relational categories that need to be culled out of a pre-discursive or sociological framework. I analyze the autobiographical narratives of two Dalit men— Sharankumar Limbale and Vasant Moon[3]—both of whom belong to the Mahar caste of Maharashtra, regarded earlier as an "untouchable" caste. I also explore the autobiographical narratives of two women—Bama, and C. K. Janu[4]—a Tamil Dalit and a tribal from Kerala. I read the texts for the strategies deployed from the margins to stage a "self" that raises concerns from a "different" angle. Thereby, I argue, such autobiographies quiz the identity of a Dalit or tribal as defined by generical conventions as well as by the genre of autobiography itself. In other words, my analyses demonstrate that such autobiographies threaten even as they conform in their re-citations of generical norms.

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[2] Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: from Cairo to America, A Woman's Journey* (New York: Penguin, 1999); Nawal El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi*, trans. Sherif Hetata (London and New York: Zed, 1999).
[3] Sharankumar Limbale, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, trans. by Santosh Bhoomkar with an Introduction by G. N. Devy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); Vasant Moon, *Growing Up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography* (Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 2002).
[4] Bama, *Karukku*, trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom (Chennai: Macmillan, 2000); C. K. Janu, *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu*, as told to and written by Bhaskaran, trans. N. Ravi Shankar (Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004).

In chapter Four, "Purdah/Parliament: Modern Muslim Woman and the Political Oblique," I focus on the autobiographies of two Muslim women from the Indian subcontinent. I examine Ayesha Jalal's critique of Partha Chatterjee's thesis about the nationalist resolution of the women's question.[5] According to Ayesha Jalal, Chatterjee's thesis fails to take into account binaries of "secular nationalism" and "religious communalism." I map her argument about the fraught nature of the idioms of religious identities, idioms that cannot be accommodated in a frame of equal citizenship of inclusionary nationalisms and a homogenizing narrative. I then read the two texts—titled in both cases, *From Purdah to Parliament*[6]—by Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah and Begum Qudsia Aizaz Rasul for their negotiation of the disjuncture of being "Muslim women" in "private"/"purdah" and "secular citizens" in "public"/Parliament. I contend that, in fact, both texts have to be read for strategic uses of the identity "Muslim" woman; that instead of considering the category in essentialist terms, it would be more productive to consider the questions the texts are returning. In fact, I make a case for the autobiographies actually working at bringing to the fore questions that complicate imposed identities and raise imposing questions of their own; in other words, I argue that such a questioning framework dismantles the very genre of autobiography itself.

In the "Conclusion," I review the results of my readings in the previous chapters. I point out that it might be useful to think about identity as something that is an excess, that which is subsumed under the genre of the "private," the gendered

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[5] Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850.* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[6] Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *From Purdah to Parliament* (London: Cresset, 1963; Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998, 2000); Begum Qudsia Aizaz Rasul, *From Purdah to Parliament* (Delhi: Ajanta Books, 2001).

religious, caste "identity," in order to establish the "public," "secular," citizen. I draw on the distinction made by Partha Chatterjee between the notion of "civil society," though not deployed by Chatterjee in Gramscian terms, and "political society" where he suggests that a separation of civil society-modernity and political society-democracy will allow a working out of "new forms of democratic institutions and practices." Thereafter, I read the autobiography of Ziauddin Sardar[7] for his preoccupation with individual and collective forms of becoming and belonging. I attempt an analysis that weighs the feasibility and pragmatics of Sardar's praxis of an activist search for immediate solutions while retaining a vision and a questioning of the frameworks of thought in order to live his life as a Muslim man in twenty-first century Europe.

In the end, I consider the suggestions of the autobiographies I have read for what a "self" becomes, how it has been represented, and how that bears on how it represents itself. I attempt to draw together the implications of experiential questions of identity raised by those living them for normative genres of autobiography, or public, or secular or citizen.

[7] Ziauddin Sardar, *Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim* (London: Granta, 2004).