CHAPTER ONE

Autobiographics: Structures, Sutures, Subjectivities

This chapter will focus on some of the given definitions of the genre of "autobiography," through a selective history of its history and a brief examination of certain significant texts. My aim in Section 1 is to examine selected texts and track a history of the genre, in order to lay out the contours of a "self" that is set up as a suitable subject for the writing of a "good" autobiography. I track the shifts, if any, in the shaping of this "self" and then focus attention, in Section II, on early feminist interventions in the West on the genre of autobiography. The section traces 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 mere inversions of dominant traditions, but understandings and analyses of historical negotiations. Section III will concentrate on autobiographical writings in India, particularly by women, and explore the demarcations of a "self" in such writings. The primary aim is to question the hegemonic inflections of the "self" and of "identity" through the genre.

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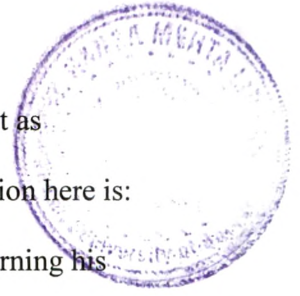
The Canonical "Self"

A survey of the shaping of the history of autobiography as a genre will help place the critical exercise of a canonical identification of key autobiographical texts in terms of theoretical interventions on the genre. The term "autobiography" is usually attributed to Robert Southey in 1809, though an earlier usage is also traced to a review of Isaac D'Israeli's *Miscellanies* (1796). By the 1830s, the term

acquired wider usage. Felicity Nussbaum, focusing on a range of eighteenth-century autobiographical writings, argues that definitions of it were nonetheless still under debate.[1] The concept of a unified and unique self, adopted by critics in the twentieth century with reference to a few "classic" texts, is put together with a more prescriptive approach to autobiography. Laura Marcus delineates the alignment of autobiography with the value attached to authorship in the nineteenth century.[2] Autobiography, according to her, comes to be the site where genius, particularly literary genius, could be established as "internally" valuable, with a vocation determined not in terms of "outside" judgments and having reference only to the self. Authorship, established through a signature, signals the text as belonging to the author. Concurrent to this generic distinction is also tied the notion of who can, is authorized to, write an autobiography as well as to the idea of fulfillment of an achieved version of a self. Therefore, Marcus points out, only public figures of historical importance and fame could have something to say in their autobiography (31-32).

A cursory survey of the history of formative critical writings on autobiography in the 1960s and the 1970s demonstrates that certain basic prerequisites were posited for a text to be granted the status of autobiography. In a wide sense, if an author and a text, a life and a work, are enmeshed, then any writing (I restrict myself to literary texts for the purposes of this dissertation) can be read as autobiographical. Following the debates over intention as fallacy in the 1930s and 40s, critics

[1] Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore, MD, and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 1.
[2] Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).



identified a concurrence between an author, narrator and the protagonist as primary to the definition of autobiography.[3] A quick and useful definition here is:

> A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality.[4]

The unquestioning validity of an author with whom he says he is, the protagonist, and his authority over the text also carries with it the promise of an unmediated, "truthful," access to the self: an autobiography is a

> consciousness, pure and simple, consciousness referring to no objects outside itself, to no events, and to no other lives; . . . as participation in an absolute existence far transcending the shifting, changing realities of mundane life; . . . as the moral tenor of the individual's being."[5]

Georges Gusdorf argues that the consciousness of self upon which an autobiography is premised is the sense of an "isolated being," a belief in the self as a discrete, finite "unit" of society.[6] Autobiography therefore does not develop endemically in cultures where

> the individual does not oppose himself to all others; [where] he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community . . . [where] lives are so thoroughly

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[3] See, Brian Finney, "Introduction" in his *The Inner I: British Literary Autobiography of the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 11-17. For a more comprehensive "history" of autobiography prior to the 1980s, see, James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction" in Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3-27.
[4] Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Contract" in Tzvetan Todorov ed., *French Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
[5] James Olney, "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of *Bios*" in Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).
[6] Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" [1956], trans. James Olney in Olney ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 28-48.

> entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being. (29-30)

Man, it is implicit, must be an island unto himself. Then, and only then, is autobiography possible.

This teleological and singular self is nonetheless atemporal, "committed to a vertical thrust from consciousness down into the unconscious rather than to a horizontal thrust from the present into the past."[7] Although Olney argues that the autobiographer creates a self in the very act of seeking it, he nonetheless invokes Plato in positing the self as a "teleological unity" whose metaphors of circularity represent "the isolate uniqueness" of the individual:

> What is . . . of particular interest to us in a consideration of the creative achievements of individual men and the relationship of those achievements to a life lived, on the one hand, and an autobiography of that life on the other is . . . the isolate uniqueness that nearly everyone agrees to be the primary quality and condition of the individual and his experience.[8]

An autobiography projects "a single, radical and radial energy originating in the subject center, an aggressive, creative expression of the self, a defense of the individual integrity in the face of an otherwise multiple, confusing, swarming, and inimical universe."[9] It is the "vital impulse" of life that is "transformed by being

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[7] James Olney, "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of *Bios*: The Ontology of Autobiography" in Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 236-267.
[8] James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 20-22.
[9] James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 15.

lived through the unique medium of the individual and the individual's special, peculiar psychic configuration." Autobiography, according to Olney, is a

> consciousness, pure and simple, consciousness referring to no objects outside itself, to no events, and to no other lives; we can understand it as participation in an absolute existence far transcending the shifting, changing realities of mundane life; we can understand it as the moral tenor of the individual's being.[10]

Critics have argued that similar individualistic paradigms underlie other critical approaches to autobiography such as the historical, generic, poststructuralist and psychoanalytic.[11] For instance, psychoanalytic critics share this presumption of a self as distinct from all others, though psychoanalysis focuses on the development of the self as it forms through intense interaction with others, particularly with the mother and the father. A healthy ego is defined in terms of its ability to separate itself from others. While Freud's theory delineates ego formation as a separation between a child's self and the external world through the emergence of the "reality principle," the Lacanian symbolic systems, pre-eminently language itself, constructs a self that is false, as the image in the mirror. The break is in the inherent falseness; however, the assumption remains that the ego results from a process that moves away from fusion and toward separation. Therefore, psychoanalytic critics decode autobiographical narratives as the ego's movement away from early fusion with the mother and toward the establishment of sharp boundaries between the self and the others. In a similar line of argument, it is

[10] James Olney, "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of *Bios*: The Ontology of Autobiography," in Olney, ed., *Autobiography*, 236-267.
[11] See, for instance, Susan Freidman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice" in Benstock, ed., *The Private Self*, 34-61.

contended that Lacanian and structuralist concepts of the self as a fictive entity constituted in images or words that cannot refer back to the "real" world because of an inherently non-referential nature of all signs continue to presume that this false entity created in the text is distinct from all others.

A Suitable "Self"

Given the primarily individualistic paradigm of early definitions of the genre, this section traces the early history shaping the reading of an autobiographical "self" in some key texts, beginning with Saint Augustine's *Confessions* written during 397 to 398 C. E. to William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* in the early nineteenth century. My intention is to plot the various trajectories deployed to track the genre up to and around the beginnings of a significant presence of British colonial rule in various parts of the globe as well as in the Indian subcontinent in early/mid-nineteenth century. I do this in order to lead, in Section 2, into one strand of the genesis of the genre in "other" lives/worlds, and in Section 3 particularly into the Indian subcontinent, in order to examine its life in the socio-political context of these regions.

The project of an auto/biographical narrative is, loosely, to tell the story of one's life, one's "self." Rooted in the ideologies and ideas of European Enlightenment, early canonical writings in the history of the genre contain an implicit hierarchy of values in relation to self-representation that ties in with the generic definition of autobiography as a formal construction, with a deliberate, developmental narrative, unlike memoirs, journals or diaries that are usually regarded as more "personal," "incoherent," "inconclusive" or even lacking in integrity.

The historical beginnings of autobiography are generally traced in the dominant tradition of canonical English literature to Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (397 - 398 C. E.). The text is accepted as marking the beginnings of modern Western autobiography as well as setting up a model for later writings. The story of Augustine's conversion to Christianity is enacted over the 13 books of *Confessions* through his journey from a young age to adulthood, from a life of hedonistic pleasures through painful indecisions to conversion and thereby a Christian salvation. Augustine's confessional text reveals, according to early critics of the genre, in contrast to earlier writings of a similar nature, a primary requirement of the definition of autobiography—an awareness of a "self." Moreover, this self is grasped and grappled with, shaped and cast, through a conscious narrative of struggles, of a succession of experiences. As a classic critical study puts it, Augustine's narrative design establishes incidents as crucial moments in the evolution of a personality.[12] However, later critics have read in Augustine a unified subject of modern liberal ideology allegorizing its own history.

The history of the history of modern autobiography records a second turn with the 17th century memoirs and autobiographies; this is held to be on account of the civil war in England, a breakdown of civil authority, and the onset of print technology. John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) also deals with spiritual conversion, though unlike Augustine, Bunyan lacked both institutional sanction and formal education. The popularity of *Grace Abounding,*

[12] Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, M. A.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 22-23.

in Bunyan's lifetime and later, is attested to by the number of editions and translations it underwent. His personal account of a journey towards grace, while very different from Augustine's in tone, detail and historical context, nonetheless documents his painful struggle for salvation, in the separation of the soul from the contamination of sin. This fight of a unified private self, in its Puritan relation of the individual to the One, draws on the "unmediated" nature of his writing (as Bunyan states in his Preface) and on personal and "ordinary" experiences. It is, as Felicity Nussbaum points out, a recognizably secular self of an emerging middle-class, with coherent claims to an identity in the place of its contemporary ideological conflict; framing an individual as a free agent with a unique access to his own inner self.[13] It is also a conscious technique for drawing out policies as well as policing the self.

This history of autobiographical narratives regards the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the age of diaries and journals in England, during a time when the authority of the Church and State receded and literacy expanded. In such private and secular forms of writing, an individual could explore everyday life instead of attempting to transcend it, and harness memory to record and regard life. James Boswell's monumental *Life of Johnson* (1791) attended to details, not only to preserve experience but also to constantly review "character." While contemporary wisdom relegated the minutiae of the domestic and private spheres to women, and the pursuit of public narratives of history and philosophy to men, Boswell claimed for his journal a serious—read, masculine—self-reflection. A subsequent nodal point in this canonical chronology of autobiographical texts is

[13] Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore, MD, and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 37-38.

Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (completed 1770; published posthumously between 1781 and 1789).[14] In place of the earlier spiritual models, Rousseau is said to exemplify the Romantic autobiography, where he claims an originality and a singularity for himself and his task:

> I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself.
>
> Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different. (17)

Furthermore, though Rousseau does address God at the beginning of his autobiography, God is not a turning point, nor a judge of truth. So the power to know or see that resided earlier in God is now reassigned to "man" and to a self-knowledge. Nor is it an attempt to remember, to safeguard through memory. Rather, more of a cautionary tale that aims to reveal to others the inner truths about himself which he already knows: "Throughout the course of my life, as has been seen, my heart has been as transparent as crystal, and incapable of concealing for so much as a moment the least lively feeling which has taken refuge in it" (415). Rousseau's autobiographical staging of his inner self, his natural self, has been read by poststructuralist theorists as an exemplar of the dilemmas of representation itself, by language which carries within unpredictable "meanings."

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[14] Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. and intro, J. M. Cohen (New York: Penguin, 1953; [1781]).

Another text marked as a seminal Romantic text is William Wordsworth's long autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, begun in 1799 and completed in 1805, though only published posthumously in 1850. The poem was addressed to his friend and mentor, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and constantly revised between its completion and publication. The poem is a remembering of past events, though not in chronological order, recomposed in the time of writing and attempting a journey back to "wholeness"; it has also been read not as a quest back for a beginning but as a series of interruptions while on the subject of the poem, the poet himself. While the debate over Rousseau's influence, if any, on Wordsworth remains open, both texts are held to share a common vocabulary of senses, memory, imagination, a reverence for Nature, an attempt to recover childhood and, according to poststructuralist critics, a self fundamentally aware of its divided-ness throughout its rhetoric of a unique self and its quest for an originary self.[15]

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The Fiction of "Women"

This section tracks the feminist critiques of the canonical biography of the genre of autobiography. It has been pointed out that in the hi-story of autobiography,

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[15] This self, based on notions of the organic development of an inherently male subject, is premised according to Gayatri Spivak on the repression of sexual difference. See, for more, Spivak, "Sex and History in *The Prelude* (1805)" in her *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 46-76.
In this context, it has also been noted that the most powerful story written in the Romantic period by a woman—Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)—is the story of a deviant creation in the first-person accounts of three men. Though not an autobiography, the text, Barbara Johnson argues, could be read for what it means to create a life in one's own image—Shelley turns away from autobiography, from the impossibility of crafting a life on the model of men, and the monstrousness of the desire then assumes a life of its own in her text. See, for more, Johnson, "My Monster/My Self" in her, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987).

classic western autobiographical texts by men—Augustine or Rousseau—do not admit to rifts or ruptures, gaps or fissures. Rather, the effort is it to seal and cover gaps in memory, dislocations in time and space, insecurities, hesitations and blind spots. Or, if they are admitted to, it is to show the development of the consciousness of the narrative "I," which however—as the "I" it supports—remains stable. The self is called as witness to a self. It is a subject made into an object of investigation; the self is the present moment of narration and the past on which it is focused. Any hint of the disparate, the disassociated, is overlooked and enfolded into a narrative of synthesis. And yet, studies of the "founding mothers" of the genre in English literature reveal a very different "self." Women's experiences of the social and political, unlike those of men, are categorized under the terms of another law, that of gender.[16] Contesting the canonical exclusion of certain texts, Susan Friedman states:

> Application of theories of women's selfhood [grounded in a recognition of historically generated differences between men and women] to women's autobiographical texts—particularly those by women who also belong to racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities—illuminates the unfolding narratives of women's life writing and thereby revises the prevailing canons of autobiography. (35)

Or, to state this as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson do, writing and theorizing of women's lives works with an emphasis on collective processes, implicitly and explicitly questioning the sovereignty and universality of an individual self.[17]

[16] I discuss the critical shifts in conceptualizing the term "gender," understood as biology early on, from a social to a cultural construction in my next chapter.

[17] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices," in Smith and Watson, eds., *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, 3-52.

It will be useful, however, to first briefly map the diverse strands of the history of the writing and theory of women's autobiographical narratives. An early collection of excerpts from British and American women's autobiographies that broadly sketched a canon of women's autobiographical writings traced its origins to four key texts.[18] These texts, according to the "Introduction" of *Journeys: Autobiographical Writings by Women*, include Dame Julian of Norwich's *Revelations* or *Showings* (14/15th century), Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1432), Margaret Cavendish's *True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life* (published 1656) and Anne Bradstreet's "To My Dear Children" (17th century). While Julian's *Showings* or Margaret Cavendish's *True Relation* may not be "strictly" autobiographies—because of scant self-disclosure or narrative content in the former and the brevity of the latter (twenty-four pages initially published together with sketches in verse and prose)—Margery Kempe's *Book*, argued Mary Mason in a later essay, is the first full autobiography in English by any person, male or female.[19]

These four texts claimed Mason and Green, composed and articulated a self-identity of women. Julian, an anchoress who spent over twenty years of her life in an anchorage in Norwich, a recluse who chose a life of contemplative withdrawal, focuses on a single divine figure, Christ, and her own being realized through a relationship to that figure. Margaret Kempe—a pilgrim/mystic who had fourteen children, tried her hand at various businesses, experienced a spiritual conversion and journeyed the world—focuses on her dual vocations, on the two separate,

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[18] Mary G. Mason and Carol Hurd Green, eds., *Journeys: Autobiographical Writings by Women* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979).
[19] For more details, see, Mary G. Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," in Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, ed., *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 19-44.

secular/religious worlds. Margaret Cavendish, second wife of the Duke of Newcastle, pairs her image with that of her husband. Anne Bradstreet, a migrant from England to the American colonies, a member of the Puritan community, addresses her story to her children, focusing on a harmonious merging and identification with the collective consciousness. The strategy of alterity, of a self that emerges and grows in relation to an other, is very different, as Mary Mason pointed out in "The Other Voice," from the Augustinian dramatic self, which is the stage for a battle between opposing forces, or the egoistic unfolding and self-discovery of a Rousseau. Mason's work was useful for later scholarship that drew further on her argument of relationality by way of psychoanalytic theory and multiculturalism and elaborated on it. Mason's argument nonetheless has also been critiqued for its notion of an essentialized "woman."

Early feminist scholars in the area also tended to primarily draw on gender, uninflected with class, race or the later awareness of ethnicity, region or religion as crucial to the composition of any life. However, it was important to understand that while men's lives were "success stories" that bore witness to their times, with a focus on "public," professional, lives women's writings centered on "personal" and domestic details, with a stress on connections and relations to other people. Furthermore, men's narratives shaped into coherent, linear, orders while women's writings were disconnected, fragmentary, diffused, and identifiably similar to the discontinuous patterns of their lives.[20] That is to say, the ruptures of women's lives are reflected in their writings.

[20] Estelle C. Jelinek, "Introduction," in Jelinek, ed., *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 19.

As has been noted subsequently, such a theorization bestows, one, coherence to men's writings which too became untenable by the end of the twentieth century. Two, this understanding of women's writings similarly ascribed a mimetic form and, therefore, a problematic "real," a readable "real" as well, captured transparently through language and voicing the truth of an experience. Third, such a conceptualization early on premised an essentialized category, "woman." So, not only was there an ahistorical, transcultural "patriarchy" to be battled and opposed by all women, there was also an undifferentiated collectivity of sisterhood that was blind to its own subordinations.

Later research turned to theorizing women's writings as not mere inversions of dominant traditions, but understandings and analyses of historical negotiations. For instance, Nancy Miller called for a gendered reading of genre while Domna Stanton theorized in terms of multiple differences of the subject, calling for an "autogynography."[21] While the debates also turned attention towards diaries, journals, oral histories and so on in order to expand the canon of women's writings, these discussions drew attention to the notion of authorization. The fictionalization of woman, her ahistorical absence from a public sphere and from canons of writings were all issues explored by various scholars. Sidonie Smith, for instance, posed several key questions on authorization, the gendered fictions of self-representation, sexuality as a subject of her life-story in her *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (1987). Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck's *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (1988) expanded the rubric of women's

[21] See, for more, Nancy K. Miller, "Towards a Dialectics of Difference" in Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, eds., *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 45-61. See, also, Domna C. Stanton, *The Female Autograph* (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1984).

autobiography to include women's films, paintings, poetry, theorizing for a wider concept of women's writings and called for an "imperative situating of the female subject in spite of the postmodernist campaign against the sovereign self" (14).

Susan Freidman's essay, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice" published in the 1988 collection *The Private Self* edited by Shari Benstock focused on relationality in women's autobiographies.[22] Susan Freidman argues that Gusdorf's emphasis on the individuality of the autobiographical selves constructed in the writing processes does not apply to culturally imposed group or gender identities in the case of women and minorities. Drawing on the historical and psychological feminist theories of Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow, she argues that women, for both social and psychological reasons, are less separated from others and experience themselves as bonded to and in community with others. According to Freidman, the very sense of identification, interdependence and community dismissed in the theories of, among others, Gusdorf, are the key elements to the development of a woman's identity. She alters Gusdorf's definition to read:

> . . . the individual does not feel *herself* to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community . . . [where] lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being. (38)

[22] Freidman, Susan. "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," in Shari Benstock ed., *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (London: Routledge, 1988), 34-61.

Women's double consciousness then results in autobiographical forms that are not only individualistic, but also collective.

While the various theoretical perspectives outlined above have worked basically in generic terms, researchers have also investigated women's writings in specific historical periods as well as critiqued the erasure of race and ethnicity in earlier work. The intellectual directions opened by postcolonial, postmodernist and poststructuralist studies have reframed issues of genre and gender in terms of political locations and subject positions as well. The theories and analytical tools of each of this mode (l) s have contributed to a shift from a humanist view of autonomous unified selves to more nuanced formulations of approaching women's writings. Thus, by the end of the twentieth century, feminist scholarship primarily originating from the West asserted that autobiographical writing by women, at least in its self-conscious beginnings, proceeds from the recognition of a self that is mediated and embedded; this self is always already framed by the male gaze. A woman is not an individual or subject whose self can be romanticized in the manner of male biographers; it is a self that can be voiced only after the hierarchical relationship to her social, economic, perhaps most importantly, marital, status is repeatedly and firmly established.

Autobiographical writing by women is a genre that begins with the recognition of a self imbricated, delineated and limited by the fabric of the world around it, defined in relation to it not just as formative influences but as political interpellations. The texts prefigure the notion, substantiated much later following the various discussions and debates in literary theory, especially in the second half

of the twentieth century, that no subject/self or text can be read outside its relations to other already extant subjects/selves or texts. Second, this self is not only woven into its society, it is structurally constitutive of and constitutes the categories of its world, be they race, class, community, or caste. On the one hand, autobiographical writing focuses on a primary locus of feminist theory, the female subject and on the other, foregrounds the problematic status of this self, lays out its composition by and of material and ideological arrangements.

Signaling towards a truth shared by "everyone" establishes a liberal, humanist, male view of the individual as transcendent and universal. This ideological thrust simultaneously makes seamless the realizing of a self and the representation of a self. Further, scholars have argued that such early generic perspectives on autobiography do not take into account the phenomenon of non-Western autobiographies and neither do they recognize the importance of early Christian autobiographies for the later secular genre.

The revisionary goal notwithstanding, feminist critiques have drawn on important interventions from psychoanalysis and poststructuralism to problematize issues of subjectivity, representation and narrative. Western feminist scholarship has dealt extensively with the familiar absence of women's texts from the accepted canon of autobiographical writing, the phallocentricity of language, but it is the question of who the subject is and how she is constituted which raises interesting issues. Moreover, the proclamation of the death of the author forecloses, according to Nancy Miller, the question of agency since, for women, the relations to origin,

institution, and production have not had the same historical moorings.[23] Feminist scholarship has also noted the political necessity of recognizing the plurality of women's lives; this does not mean foreclosing the question of identities, for as Barbara Johnson puts it, "Just because identities are fictions does not mean that [they] have not had, and could not have, real historical effects."[24] More importantly, as feminist scholars have pointed out, insofar as these early definitions carry the connotation of the subject as universal, they are also central to the shaping of this subject as masculine—which shaping has to be read more rigourously in terms more complex as one begins to interrogate the finer strands of race, region and religion of texts and contexts.

3

Indian Women's Writings

Let me now attempt to draw a brief history of the genre of autobiography nearer home. A recent Indian anthology of nineteenth and early-twentieth century women's writings in English, *Women's Voices*, brings together "pioneers" and "achievers" from literary, social and political fields, "formidable" women who traveled and published extensively.[25] These were "formidable people" from various fields—literary and social—and included political activists, diplomats, legislators, doctors, writers, and so on who took "risks" in their personal and professional lives (xi).

[23] Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
[24] Barbara Johnson, *The Wake of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 72.
[25] Eunice De Souza, ed. and intro. "Introduction," *Women's Voices: Selections from Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Indian Writing in English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), i-xxii.

While the anthology is a collection of extracts from various kinds of writings—letters, diaries, magazine articles, speeches, autobiographies, short stories, novels, biographies—that aims to draw attention to both the wide range and quality of writing, the "Introduction" notes that each one of these women writers took "more than a documentary interest" in the subject of their writing. It is a writing that is "alive," "observant" and "sharp." At times their prose is an "economical, readable" prose while some writers are "stylistically brilliant." The writings have an "urgency" that "speaks to the reader directly" (xii).

In other words, the editorial framing of the fragments follows the logic of an individualistic, creative development of a self. Yet, the "Introduction" notes that the autobiographical writings tend to focus more on the public life than the inner person (xix). So, for instance, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay speaks little or not at all of her first marriage, widowhood, second marriage or its breakdown later. Instead, she writes extensively about legislative proposals and proceedings she was involved with, and we are invited to interact indirectly with the authorial self.

At another level, the "Introduction" traces the "astonishing freedom" with which women have written back to "Vedic times" and continuing through to "Buddhist nun, bhakti saints and so on" (xiii). However, following Partha Chatterjee's argument about the nationalist resolution of the women's question, the Introduction notes that the colonial organization of social relations during the nineteenth century also included a "reaffirmation of patriarchy in the name of nationalism" (xvii). Simultaneous to the narrative move involved in this maneuver of drawing a historical continuum, the Introduction also mentions the difficulties

the editor faced in piecing together biographical information about the authors included in the anthology. She details some "fortunate" coincidences in a couple of cases: for instance, one is a case of how the mother-in-law of a good friend put Eunice de Souza through to a sister of the daughter-in-law of the author she was trying to track, who in turn guided the editor to a daughter of the author in Pune, who possessed copies of "unknown" books.

The editorial strategy in both these instances, I would suggest, is a sweeping generalization about the sisterhood of women in India, from Vedic priestesses to Buddhist nuns to Sarojini Naidu to Toru Dutt to Iqbalunnisa Hussain to Zeenuth Futehally. Such a generalized statement of the oppression of women in "India" rather hastily brushes aside any socio-political or other considerations that could be relevant to the writer's lives or their subject matter. This thesis will argue that texts and authors have to read and understood against the grain, and along the grain, of the texts as well as the con-texts.

As against the above instance, let me instead examine a few discussions around a few early autobiographical narratives by women in India. My endeavor here will be to look at the history of framing autobiographical selves, by the writers and by scholars engaging in discussions of these texts.

Tanika Sarkar's *Words to Win* narrates the making of Rashsundari Debi's autobiography; she frames selections from the text in the history of Rashsundari Debi's life-world—her class, caste, religion, locality and the reform currents in

nineteenth century Bengal that enabled its publication.[26] Born around 1809 and presumed to have died around 1890 (dates are not available), Rashsundari Debi was married off at the age of twelve and took over the responsibility of heavy, daily domestic labour involved in running her entire marital household by the age of fourteen. She also had twelve children and was widowed in 1867, around the age of 59.

In a period when orthodox Hindus did not allow female literacy because of a firm belief that an educated woman would become a widow, Rashsundari Debi secretly taught herself to read and write. The desire to read, the autobiographical narrative claims, came after she dreamt that she was reading the manuscript of a spiritual biography, *Chaitanya Bhagabat*, and was possessed by an "unearthly joy" (169). She had never seen the book before, nor could she identify it. And yet in her dream, she was reading it, fulfilling her "deepest desire." A few days later, she accidentally learnt that a particular book was the book of her dream, stole a page and hid it under the hearth of the kitchen since nobody must see her even holding it her hands. Working from dawn to midnight, with children waking up one after the other, Rashsundari Debi "held on" and "occasionally" glanced at it in her left hand while cooking with her right, stealing looks from under her veil. But, says her narrative ruefully, the letters "remained inscrutable" (171). At a time when she dared not glance at a piece of paper for being accused of being able to read, Rashsundari Debi taught herself to read by matching the alphabets from her son's palm leaves that she stole secretly with the words that she heard in the course of

[26] Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of "Amar Jiban": A Modern Autobiography* (Delhi: Kali, 1999).

the day from her place by the hearth in the kitchen (171). But she managed the "almost impossible" achievement, somehow teaching herself to "limp and stammer" across her alphabets around the age of twenty-five (174).

Tanika Sarkar's "Introduction" notes that Rashsundari Debi was the first Bengali person to "write out her own life" and the act of teaching herself to read, and later write, was the only exceptional event to interrupt the rhythm of her conventional domestic life. In a deeply "transgressive" act, she chose to "recreate . . . indeed, to invent" her life in an autobiographical act and thereby "gather it closely . . . and possess it more fully" (3). The prose of the autobiography—"drab, ponderous, pious" as Sarkar terms it (11)—is perhaps a reflection of her outwardly docile existence as a good wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. Yet, it is interrupted by "evocative" reflections and "acid comments" (11). Though "indifferently written," the text is "superbly crafted" in that these flashes are not "accidental" nor "uncontrollable burst[s]" but "carefully calibrated and highly controlled strategies" so that the autobiographical narrative proceeds through a "magnificently controlled doublespeak" (12).

Sarkar also notes that a textual wallowing in a "fixed repertoire" of pain, submission, obedience, fear, humility along with a linguistic "ponderousness" and "listlessness" means that this is not a "particularly pleasurable" text to read (13). Nonetheless, the "hesitant" and yet "compulsive" moves towards "self-disclosure" and "self-creation" by a "pious, modest, and obedient housewife" sketch out a "profoundly modern sensibility" (13).

The editorial "gather[ing]" of the contexts and lineages of the autobiographical text (10) claims to critically position the making of a "modern" subject—a subject who accomplishes the composition and presentation of her life. This clear-cut task is nonetheless offset by Rashsundari's text: it constantly "defeats" the expectation that it is "the actual life and not a text"; its "textuality" is "underlined by the distance it sets up between Rashsundari's lived experiences and her narrative preoccupations" (10). In fact, Sarkar asserts that the Bakhtinian constitutive principle of autobiographical writing, a fundamental tension between a "necessary othering of the self in order to narrativise it and render it into an aesthetic product in an inter-subjective situation" does not "paralyse" Rashsundari's text (10). Instead, the editorial composition of the context of the autobiography exclaims that the narrative "seems to have founded a theological-narrative stance that handles the paradox as a constitutive principle of her text" (10-11).

What interests me here is not the generic authenticity of the narrative as an autobiography, but the editorial recognition of this work, towards the end of the twentieth century, as an "early text of modernity" (5). For instance, the text is a material product composed in the contemporary "new" Bengali prose and printed for a readership zealously interested in the "self-reflections" of an ordinary woman (4). Sarkar points out that, even if granted that one of her sons had edited the text for language or structure, it is nonetheless remarkable that the narrative does not deploy gendered markers of a female experience. Sarkar notes that Rashsundari does not draw on any speech acts—proverbs, riddles, tales, pungent or earthy idioms—or grammatical constructions that would generally mark the prose as "woman's writing." The editorial framework also looks at the

"compulsive yet hesitant" moves in the text—"carefully calibrated" reactions that subtly frame the overt and the explicit—as a self-disclosure and a self-creation that are the engagements of a "profoundly modern possibility" (13). It is this fact of a search for "a space of her own" as well as a "space in public view" that disturbs—"trouble(s) and touch(es)"—Sarkar (13).

Given that working from her disciplinary location in history, Sarkar's concerns are not primarily about whether Rashsundari Debi's autobiography conforms to conventions of the literary genre or not, nonetheless, it is significant that the editorial paradigm reads in the narrative a search for a space of her room, evocative of course of Virginia Woolf's call for a room of her own, and a modern sensibility.

Binodini Dasi (1863-1941), a professional actress widely acknowledged as occupying an indisputable place in the cultural history of Bengali theater, has written in Bengali about her life. A recent publication of her selected autobiographical writings edited and translated by Rimli Bhattacharya reads the texts as social texts that "evaluate the place of public theatre in the cultural history of the nation" (ix).[27] Bhattacharya's primary interest is in foregrounding Binodini's identity as a stage actress, the "blood relationship" between the actress on the one hand and the stage and her colleagues on the other. The translation is propelled by a wish to "understand" Binodini's "work" as "the history of theatre and its practitioners"; yet, above all, there is also the "desire" to chart the "life

[27] Rimli Bhattacharya, ed. and trans., *Binodini Dasi: "My Story" and "My Life As An Actress"* (Delhi: Kali, 1998).

story of a pioneer, a modern working woman and an artist" and make it available to those without access to the Bengali language or its cultural history (xii).

Extensively referenced to various plays, scripts, writings, the history and cultural politics of Bengali theatre and its leading protagonists, the material conditions of performance as well as details of production, the book meticulously attempts to "embed" the actress's writing in her "performance context" and offer "more than one perspective" for sustained engagements (x). The editorial attempt here is to situate the autobiographical narratives of Binodini Dasi not just "exclusively" within the "theoretical terrain of women's autobiographies as a branch of feminist studies." Painstakingly, Bhattacharya prises apart the rich possibilities that the text offers. The editorial search here, we are informed, is to read an "extraordinary" woman's life not just for the extraordinariness of that life, but to probe the margins of that "life" in order to read for a critique of its "world."

Bhattacharya's editorial framing suggests the ways in which an autobiography can be read not for a "limitation" or a "prescription" of the genre in contemporary women's studies in India but to investigate the broad contours in which such studies have worked. Nonetheless, there is underlying the editorial framework an understanding about the subject of an autobiography—she is an "extraordinary" person, a "pioneer," whose life has to be read as a life story of a achievement and progress. Yet, this woman-as-achiever is curiously unmarked, apart of course from class. Similarly, the "modern working woman" suggests rather too facile a deployment of a category: the trials and tribulations of a "working woman," her marginality and vulnerability, remain un-textured by geography or history, leave

alone caste or profession. Even more dangerous is the term "artist," for even as the editor picks on the actress's "passion for the stage and her absolute commitment to her profession," the term suggests an absolute erasure of the politics of this terrain, in terms of both its ideology of aesthetics and its material conditions. Though Bhattacharya's translation has been critically lauded, I would suggest that the editorial introduction to the work indicates the rigourous attention to each life and story that is required in order to make sense of it for our lives, in all their multiplicities, today.

Uma Chakravarti explores the reconstitution of patriarchies in the nineteenth century through the life, work and times of Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922).[28] In order to understand Ramabai's critiques, Chakravarti suggests that we simultaneously need to understand the "structure" of Brahminical patriarchy, its "material and ideological" composition of a "specific set of cultural practices" that Ramabai "attempted to analyse, break with and contest through her work" (1). Chakravarti's text attends to factors of caste, religion, gender, colonial rule and the emergence of nationalism, particularly in Maharashtra where Ramabai came from, lived and worked in for most of her life. She does through methodical discussions on law, the state, the family and religious and cultural institutions.

Chakravarti contends that the relationship between a structure and agency with reference to gender, at a given historical moment, can be understood only in the context of multiple pressures—in terms of caste as well as class location—as also shaped by particular material and ideological constructs. While she allows that

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[28] Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (Delhi: Kali, 1998).

women's agency cannot be understood as completely determined, she argues that agency "tended to be articulated in certain ways" and that "*effectively* women had fewer choices than men" (301). Chakravarti's text is useful in the technique it is suggesting will be productive for grasping the "conflictual and uneven resolution" of "gender problems" for a certain class at a given moment of time. It may also enable, she offers, a way to recover a "sense of struggle, potential and actual" that women may face.

Chakravarti's reading of Pandita Ramabai's life and times offers, I will propose, rich possibilities for studies that investigate the contours of a "self" in autobiographical narratives. By way of further illustrating the disciplining of difference I raise and wish to nuance, let me briefly look at an "autobiography" of a more recent life by a contemporary scholar, a third world woman located in a first world academic space. Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* is marketed as a "memoir" of her childhood, set in Pakistan after 1947, in the world of her paternal grandmother, her Welsh mother and her sisters.[29] Suleri weaves the history of Pakistan into that of her self and her family, constantly reminding the reader that she is writing a public history. Suleri's title sets up food as an important metaphor throughout her text.[30] And the food feeding her text (her history of Pakistan, her siblings, her parents, relatives and friends, the West and her professorship of English at Yale) is intertwined with Suleri's own personal history that holds and links the contents together. It is an attempt to deal with private history in a public

[29] Sara Suleri, *Meatless Days* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
[30] The government of Pakistan declared all butcher shops must remain closed every Tuesday and Wednesday, in an effort to preserve the national supply of goats and cattle. But, as Suleri explains, this initiative proved limited in its effectiveness, since ". . . the people who could afford to buy meat, after all, were those who could afford refrigeration, so the only thing the government accomplished was to make some people's Mondays very busy indeed" (31).

sphere, setting the two "in dialogue." She uses names of people and places in an attempt, she says, to write an "alternative history" that is not "explanatory," merely presenting them. Suleri's crafting of a life story is acutely aware of the public aspect of her "personal" life story, for as she shifts perspective onto the theme of language, she deliberately names her reader/audience as "a stranger or an acquaintance."

Talking of language on the first page of her text, Suleri notes that in the USA, she understands leaving Pakistan meant leaving the company of women. Suleri maps her discourse by telling her reader, "a stranger or an acquaintance," the peculiar situation of women in Pakistan. It is "a place where the concept of woman was not really part of an available vocabulary: we were too busy for that, just living, and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant." Language as a tool to conceptualize the category "woman" carries with it certain obstacles: in Pakistan, there was no "concept of woman" as part of an "available vocabulary." Each woman was relegated more specifically to one of many other roles, which required intricate "negotiations" to make the reality of lives correspond with the linguistic definition of each of those words. But the language used in Suleri's current location, English, cannot fulfill this purpose. It does not, it cannot, successfully translate their reality into words.

Language and discourse are allied to her father, one of the book's central male figures and a journalist, and consequently history, and its production. Ironically, her Welsh mother living in Pakistan epitomizes the theme of woman's lack of place and history. Suleri writes that "[s]he let commitment and belonging become

my father's domain, learning instead the way of walking with tact on other people's land. . . I'm curious to locate what she knew of the niceties that living in someone else's history must entail, of how she managed to dismantle that other history she was supposed to represent" (164).

Quite clearly, her mother's history of living in Pakistan and teaching English at a University has a close parallel to Sara's own life and profession in USA. And writing of this strange situation of language and paradox, Suleri closes the first chapter of her text with an anecdote from her classroom at Yale University where she teaches English:

> When I teach topics in third world literature, much time is lost in trying to explain that the third world is locatable only as a discourse of convenience. . . . And then it happens. A face, puzzled and attentive and belonging to my gender, raises its intelligence to question why, since I am teaching third world writing, I haven't given equal space to women writers on my syllabus. I look up, the horse's mouth, a foolish thing to be. Unequal images battle in my mind for precedence—there's imperial Ifat, there's Mamma in the garden, and Halima the cleaning woman is there too, there's uncanny Dadi with her goat. And against all my own odds I know what I must say. Because, I'll answer slowly, *there are no women in the third world.* (20; emphasis in the original)

Suleri is gesturing, I would suggest, given that Suleri is a woman from a Third World country, that binaries which continually haunt attempts to define race, gender, or nation offer false comforts. Even as she problematizes Western notions of women within a Pakistani context, she muddies the trope in both postcolonial

and feminist theory that posits a racial or national authenticity as prerequisite to any informed analysis.

Elsewhere, Suleri has queried the politics of authenticity to argue that a progressive feminist politics calls for a rejection of easy boundaries of any either/or paradigm that defines or limits the experience or identity of women.[31] The assumption that a monolithic category of women exists as a result of sexual difference or shared subordination denies the multiple yet specific overlapping entities—political, cultural, historical, economical—that position women in particular locales at a given time and that feminism indeed seeks to challenge. Therefore, by emptying the dubious categories of women and third world of their superficial authority, Suleri then moves on to a detailed narrative hosting audacious and marvelous women.

Suleri's prose has been called "lyrical" by her reviewers as well as accused of being cold and distant. Suleri herself has claimed that her first draft is usually her last, that she does not need to make many revisions to her work and that her writing is a mirror of her speech, not a created artifice as it is termed. Curiously, Suleri sees the book as creating itself, in a spontaneous overflow so to speak, so that the things she writes down become, in a way, obvious. More curiously, the fact that her memory somehow chooses to recall selectively only certain events is, for her, not altogether that mysterious because she believes the narrative "shapes itself." Of course she remembered—her memory allowed her to recall—this

[31] Sara Suleri, "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition" in *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 756-69.

particular thing and not that particular thing, for the process of memory is beyond, she says irritably, her control.

But Suleri is also conscious that the genre of autobiography, irrespective of its claims, engenders a form of self-censorship because the author inevitably chooses what to include and what to leave out of the text. She also claims that "[f]orgetting is just about as important as what you remember." Suleri's complication of the intractability of language and the claims to an unmediated presentation of her impromptu memories hints at the problem of translation. In her *Boys Will Be Boys*, Suleri returns to her childhood and early life and dwells particularly on her father ("Pip" for "patriotic and preposterous," we are told).[32] The text is peppered with Ghalib's Arabic poetry that Suleri attempts to translate, apart from a lot of other poems and linguistic events. Confronted with a particularly difficult line, she turns to her father Pip for help, who declares "Translation is not in the word; it is in the essence!" That is to say, translation requires not a fluency in two or more languages, but, rather, the ability and the desire to understand the underlying essence of things. Her and her mother's crossing of boundaries, or translation, invites us to question all boundaries.

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This chapter has tracked the shifts in the writing and theorization of the genre of autobiography from the canonical texts of English literature to the framing of a feminist perspective, primarily emerging from and dealing with the West. In the last section, I surveyed the complexity brought to the fore by feminist readings of

[32] Sara Suleri Goodyear, *Boys Will Be Boys: A Daughter's Elegy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003; Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004).

early women's autobiographical writings in India, and concluded by looking at a recent autobiographical and critical interventions of a third world Muslim woman in the first world academic milieu.

My intention was to lay the ground for the ways in which autobiographical initiatives can be understood as drawing on the personal to "mess up" the social, the layering of concepts of "self" and "identity," of "language" and "writing," of "personal" and "public," and the question of a "translation" of ideas and concepts about the structure and organization of our lives and our worlds. Such a messing up offers, I propose, possibilities of pushing notions on how a text derives from a generical tradition at the same time as it interrogates and transgresses the boundaries of the genre to raise larger questions on identities—imposed from within and without, and deployed back to raise imposing claims from its own location and politics.