



EXPLORING AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A SOURCE FOR WOMEN'S HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Throughout most of human history, women were relegated to the side-lines. Women's history emerged in the West as a result of a feminist involvement in historical studies during the second wave of feminism, which began in the 1970s. Women's history did not truly get underway until sometime later in India. Although women's history is becoming a popular and, in some ways, "soft," research choice, it is still underrepresented in university history curricula. This article follows in the footsteps of a large body of feminist literature that investigates the representational agency of women's personal narratives by exploring the intersection of politics and genre in the autobiographical writings of politically active British women in the late nineteenth century.

Keywords: History, Women, Gender, Autobiography, Political

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I. INTRODUCTION

To put it simply, history is not the past. What we have here is the historian's attempt to piece together the past. Historians bring their own biases and assumptions to the table when they reconstruct the past. One of the misconceptions that had long impacted their knowledge of the past was the belief that males are superior to women and achieve more significant things in life. History, from its very beginning, has been mostly the tale of individuals and their deeds in the spheres of politics, diplomacy, statecraft, and economics. Women, with a few notable exceptions such as kings, princes, and rebels, were not included in these fields, hence they were mostly forgotten by historians. Women were 'hidden from history' throughout Sheila Rowbotham's time period. As a response to patriarchal efforts to downplay or erase women's contributions to history, the field of women's history began in the 1970s. Women's historians work to bring women's traditionally subordinate status to the forefront of public discourse. Feminist historians have begun to examine women's everyday lives, including their health, education, leisure, culinary styles, and sartorial habits; their domestic roles as nurturers and caregivers; their sexuality; the love and violence that permeate their intimate relationships, friendships, and sub-cultures; and their sexuality.

To help the majority locate its past,' women's history has been compiled. Women's history seeks to include women in the historical record, but it also contests the analytic paradigms



upon which traditional historiography is based. The study of women's past has caused a paradigm shift in how we understand the past. The traditional chronology and periodization of history, which is based on changes in men's lives, is contested by women's history, as are the ideas of what is relevant to the historian and what is not. Diaries, letters, journals, memoirs, pictures, women's creative works, oral testimonies, folklore, and other sources are all examples of how the growth of women's history has prompted a search for materials that are often located in places other than the official archive. Additionally, more strategic readings are made to recover women's voices that have been silenced, and archival documents and other traditional sources are reviewed to discover exclusions and silences.

Autobiographies were written by Indian women in English. Women have been exploited from the beginning of time, and these memoirs reveal how difficult it has been for them to overcome their past and become their own person. For generations, Indian women were treated as chattel by both males and society at large. At some point in social history, they also began to believe in the conditions adhered to them by the male-dominated society as a result of this practise and their societal indoctrination to self-effacement stories. The memoirs of Indian women reveal a heartbreakingly difficult path from object of exploitation to authentic self.

Naturally, female autobiographers tend to emphasise the concrete rather than the abstract. When it comes to female autobiographers, the author's public persona and life in the spotlight play a crucial influence. The fact that the autobiographer is a woman might be used to the author's advantage when trying to connect with her audience. However, this same factor limits her ability to break beyond conventional modes of communication in her writing. In *The Revenue Stamp*, Amrita Pritam shares her intellectual perspective on life, whereas Kamala Das's *MY Story* receives harsh criticism for its sensational and even twisted portrayal of Das's own experiences. Two such ladies who are dedicated to the reality of who they are are Amrita Pritam and Kamala Das. To better understand themselves and the world around them, they investigate the male-dominated societal norm. By writing their autobiographies, they are able to reveal previously concealed aspects of their character. These ladies chronicle their plight in the social and family spheres, as well as the internal struggles that arise from their intimate relationships.

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II. READING HISTORY THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Feminist scholars have done a lot of work over the past two decades analysing the historical, political, and literary significance of women's personal narratives, looking at things like letters, journals, memoirs, travel writing, ethnography, biographies, fiction, poetry, and even stage performances by women to determine how they represent women. This essay looks at how a few different politically engaged British women of the late nineteenth century developed a nuanced and critical connection with their autobiographical writings. A number of prominent women's rights activists of the time are discussed in terms of their perspectives on the relationship between autobiography and history and politics, before the focus shifts to a close reading of Edith Simcox's *Autobiography of a Shirt Maker* and its manifestations of this relationship. It is argued, on the one hand, that the women's desire to 'write to history'



provided a primary motivating factor in terms of life writing, and, on the other hand, that their writings reveal a representation of selfhood that is both ontologically and epistemologically complex, all the while situating their negotiation through a maze of contemporary class-related and gender-specific constraints which aimed to 'outlaw' female behaviour.

Many politically engaged women of the 1870s through the early 1900s faced a double bind when it came to autobiographical representation: although they yearned to see their stories in paper, they also understood the gendered and ontological limitations of that medium.

Literature is an integral aspect of the author's life that they want to share with the world, making the two inseparable as a result. Autobiographies are enduring testaments to the lives of notable people like presidents, prime ministers, authors, Nobel Prize winners, and celebrities who have endured extraordinary circumstances. These autobiographies are popular because readers are curious in the people behind the famous faces. Authorial autobiography is a window into the author's psyche. The works of men and women are diverse in important ways. Men rarely provide detailed descriptions of their families in their autobiographies, opting instead to focus on their own lives and the successes they've had.

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Relationships with one's family, beginning with one's parents and continuing on through one's marriage and the raising of one's children, are often central themes in a woman's autobiography. Women are better equipped to articulate the emotional realities of life because of their natural inclination toward warmth and their greater breadth and depth of emotional experience. Women consistently and earnestly focus attention on themselves, their emotions, their thoughts, their worth, and their potential for growth and development. Both the author and the reader can benefit from autobiography's therapeutic qualities by better understanding and overcoming their own personal scars. Through sharing their experiences through writing, women have a platform from which to address taboo topics and serve as reflective mirrors for other women.

III. EXPLORING SELF IN INDIAN WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Our need to share our thoughts and feelings is fueled by the experiences we have had. Self-declaration through language like this is essential to the autobiographical genre. An autobiography's artistic need to convey one's own affairs, impersonalized in the first-person narration, seems to follow naturally from an author's love of self.

The experiences that women authors encounter tend to put them in a contemplative frame of mind. Their goal is not to bring about societal change, preserve history, or boost their own egos. Women's autobiographies seldom reflect the established history of their eras, as Estelle.C. Jelinek so astutely observes. Focusing on domestic issues, family troubles, intimate friends, and especially persons who affected them, they place considerably less emphasis on the public aspect of their life, global concerns, and even jobs.



A number of Indian women authors have penned autobiographies, both in Indian languages and English. It wasn't until the middle of the 19th century that women began writing their own biographies. Instead of mimicking males, women have created their own unique voice and method of storytelling. Autobiography was a tool for new authors and social revolutionaries. This literary form was utilised by Indian women to discuss their experiences with patriarchy and colonialism. It's a way for women to examine aspects of their identities that males often ignore or squash.

Autobiographies written by women are not just about discovering who the author is; they are also about analysing and understanding that person. Autobiographies were one way that women sought to figure out who they were. Only a small number of early female authors were autobiographers. However, throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, a growing number of autobiographies written by women appeared in print. Women's autobiographies examine the development of women's status across time. They discuss how they are adjusting to the new norms of a culture that exploits the 'new woman' in many ways. Actresses like Binodini Dasi and Hamsa Wadkar also published memoirs. In their memoirs, they discuss their time in the spotlight and how they dealt with it.

Rasundar Devi, Krupabai Sattianadhan, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, and Lakshmibai Tilak are just a few of the 19th-century women who documented their lives in books. We may thank Cornlia Sorabji, Kamala Das, Amritha Pritam, Savithi Devi Nanda, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, and Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya for the literary achievements of women in the 20th century. They each employed their own set of tactics and motifs. The purpose of this analysis is to gain familiarity with the topics, writing styles, and contexts in which autobiography has been used by women authors.

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Many nineteenth-century women's autobiographies share a common thread: the author's or protagonist's delight in the love and support of a forward-thinking spouse, as well as in the expanded opportunities afforded by her own education. Some passages also provide a glimpse of the multifaceted struggles involved, such as the ache of being constantly watched and corrected, the sense of inadequacy, the exhausting demands of the new house works, the certainty and anxiety of raising children in the new mode, outside of the reassuring circle of the traditional family, the yearning for the support of a world they had lost, and so on.

IV. PRESENT SCENARIO

Women are equally underrepresented in accounts of the First and Second World Wars. Women had fought in the war, left their homes to help their families, and now many of them were opposed to it. However, war is still portrayed as something that only men care about. The work of feminist historians has shed light on the contributions of women, but these results have not been included into canonical histories. Our institutional architecture does not allow for the inclusion of women's contributions to modern European history in its packaging or presentation.



Whether you're talking about the ancient, mediaeval, or current eras, all of India's history will always be "His Story." The historical contributions of women in India are still largely ignored in introductory courses. Persistent myths persist concerning the superior status of women in antiquity and their debasement in the Middle Ages. The few women who made their mark in mediaeval politics and diplomacy are either viewed as rebellious and defiant (like Sultan Raziya) or as conspirators and power-mongers (like Akbar's wet nurse and regent, Maham Anga, and Jahangir's wife, Nur Jahan). Women's lives, including the deprivation and denial they endured within a rigidly patriarchal value system, the agency and active political roles of royal women like Gulbadan Begum (Babur's daughter), Jahanara Begum (Shah Jahan's daughter), and Zeb-un-Nisa (Aurangzeb's daughter), their literary and other creative endeavours, and the exploitation suffered by slaves and nautch girls within the harem. Many common women disappear from mediaeval records.

Women are treated relatively superficially in the contemporary Indian history curriculum, with just one or two modules covering topics like women and social reform or women in the nationalist struggle. Contrarily, a massive body of literature has been produced because of the progress made in understanding the lives and roles of women in British India. Much of this study puts the spotlight on women's unique perspectives on social transformation, emphasises the power of women's printed words, and shows how women were far from on the sidelines as nationalists, farmers, and workers. However, such studies are not reflected in course materials or textbooks designed for college and university students.

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The institutional structure of history is still highly skewed toward men and steeped in sexism. Feminist historians' attempts to remake history have not materially altered how history is read, written, and taught at the institutional level, at least in our own milieu. And to fix this, we need to make sure that textbook authors give women their due by sensitising curriculum planners, educators, and all those involved in the pedagogical elements of this field. Such initiatives are necessary if we want to restore historical study on foundations of gender parity.

V. CONCLUSION

Historians have taken use of autobiography due to its adaptability and promise as a legitimate form of history, a natural venue for the union of subject and object. Recent historians-turned-autobiographers demonstrate the strength of the newly decentered voices that are emerging in historical writing by turning to autobiography as a method of practise, and they hint at the growing presence of other innovative and ostensibly unconventional genres, especially those that emphasise the performative dimension. The periodization of history according to political, diplomatic, and military events was also contested by women's history. These fields were driven mostly by males, while women played very minor roles. Many historians have focused on the ordinary lives of women and the ways in which they resisted oppression in subtle ways.



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