

## READING MULTIPLE SELVES IN CONTEMPORARY AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Smita M. Patil

Teaches at School of Gender & Development Studies,  
IGNOU, New Delhi, India.

### ABSTRACT:

**Self and social location are being re-configured in contemporary autobiographical writings. This article reflects on autobiographies such as Devaki Jain's 'The Brass Notebook: A Memoir' and Wandana Sonalkar's, 'Why I am not a Hindu woman: A personal Story. Questions of social and political are probed differently in both autobiographies. What are the tropes and ways through which it addresses the complex spaces of subjectivity, identity and politics? Is there any distinct way of engaging with the past and the present? Thus, the paper looks at aforementioned autobiographies through diverse, interdisciplinary approaches.**

**Key words: Caste, Class, Identity, Subjectivity, Politics.**

### INTRODUCTION:

Autobiographical turn has created epistemic and ontic shift in the interdisciplinary worlds related to social sciences and humanities. Modern and postmodern understandings on autobiographies have problematised the typical, theoretical play using the binary oppositions such as subjectivity and objectivity. It also has created the debates that questioning the credentials of the academic writings and consequential marginalization of non-academic writings. Thus, autobiographies unravel the boundaries of self, social location and social/political realms. This article tries to engage with autobiographies of Devaki Jain's book, *The Brass Notebook: A Memoir* and Wandana Sonalkar's book, *Why I am not a Hindu Woman: A personal Story*. Thus, it maps political and social spaces that determine the interests of the narrator, the text

and the larger worlds of articulation and interpretation inherent in those texts.

Autobiographies have heralded a new era of utterances and reevaluations. History of the genre of the autobiography of course are embedded in distant political and social milieu. It has its own sensorium and bodily shifts. Western autobiographies, for Raj Kumar, traces the genealogy of the genre, autobiography to that of Saint Augustin's confessions and its interplay with material and internal worlds. Rousseau departs via embracing the life in its totality. Vicissitudes of mental is very much part of the autobiographical writing of Benjamin Franklin. Raj Kumar, further argued that J.S.Mill engaged with self-recognition and grappling of time (Kumar : 2010,pp 257-58). Geopolitics of autobiographies are fractured through the aesthetic, political and social barriers that differentiate countries.

Developed and developing societies too witnessed the autobiographies from the core and peripheries of respective countries. Hegemonic and oppressed communities have different things to articulate through the writings that touch their selves. Social stratification and linguistic differences too diversified the scope and readership of the autobiographies. Autobiographies across the globe produced distinct epistemic textualizations. India too is witnessing upsurge of autobiographies in different, regional languages. In addition to those linguistic bifurcations, caste, ethnicity, gender too polarized the autobiographies and the theoretical critiques to the autobiographical realms and comparative approaches/translation culture. History of the autobiographies in India demonstrate the plural and unequal voices that decide

the broader realm of autobiographies. Ardhakanaka, the autobiography by Benaridas is considered as primary text in the history of Indian autobiographies. However, history of the knowledge production and the hegemonic role of the dominant communities/castes also is central to the intellectual production. Therefore, the some of the autobiographies by Gandhi, Nehru and Nirad Chaudhari have portrayed self, nation and political complexities. Nevertheless, majority of the writers from the dominant communities have not admitted their dominant social location and access to knowledge and writing. Autobiographical accounts, for Uday Kumar, explore the voices of the left out from the knowledge establishment. Kerala, to Uday Kumar, had the emergence of writings on self in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is haunted by the subjectivities' complex renderings.

Histories of autobiographies unearth the nuanced evolution of new form of writing. Agency and its articulations are very much part of the trajectory of self-narration (Kumar,2016:1-42). Gender impacts the genres of that tradition. Masculine domination is central theme in the south Asian autobiographical renderings (Browarczyk and Lidia,2018:vi). Caste and gender questions too have problematised the Brahmanical-hegemonic autobiographical writings. Dalit women explains the relations of the private and the public through their distinct autobiographical articulations (Brueck,2016:25-37). Subjectivity, caste and nationhood, for Raj Kumar, are scrutinized in dalit writings. Thus, it explored the agony of the subjugated in caste-based India. Dalit modernity thus is acquired in the context of the postcolonial nation. It is a sort of challenge and foregrounding existential contours of dalits. Dalit autobiographies also herald new kind of readership among the dalits in general and readers from other social background in particular. Emergence of dalit literati in the age of compar-

ative literature and translations studies are integral to the advent of dalit personal articulations. They are deploying it as a potential energy to undermine the symbolic domination of the Brahminic aesthetics and literature. However, writers like Mulk Raj Anand confessed that his writings hardly represented the pangs of the marginalised castes due to his dominant caste status.

Patriarchy and its rooted nature in caste is being focused on the dalit women's autobiographical accounts. It is criticized that male writers from dalit community are not sensitive to the issues related to caste, gender and patriarchy. Dalit writers irrespective of gender are searching for the justice from practitioners of the oppressive caste culture. Their narratives are in constant search to find meaning for their oppressed lives rather than falling to the trap of aesthetics and form. Dominant castes engage in superficial individual complexities due to their caste privilege. Caste and patriarchy differentiate the depth of the autobiographies of dalit women (Kumar,2010:258-261). Fragmented subjectivities of women in the context of Indian modernity are evident in the autobiographies of women. (Ghosh,2010:105-123). Moreover, gendered spaces in caste driven society also mark the social body of the autobiographical writings. Those writings by women attempt to transcend the imposed ideologies and boundaries on women. Lakshmibai Tilak, Rassundari Devi and Binodini Dasi tried to expose the complex ideological-societal web through their potential writings. Public and personal questions get articulated in Ramadevi Choudhari's writings (Kumar,2010:259). Conflicts based on modernist and postmodernist writings have complicated the stylistic and ideological planes of the autobiographies.

---

### **Foregrounding Social/Cultural, Gendered bodily determinations:**

Devaki Jain in her book, *The Brass Notebook: A Memoir* is unique from conventional autobiographical writings by women. It revisits the conundrums of gender. It also reflects on the caste and the socialization. She also articulates the space of women within the matrix of larger society and economic cycles. One of the striking features of Jain's writing is that it vividly portrays her intellectual formation. Differencing herself as an intellectual in a male dominated world of knowledge is particular feature of her writing. Narrative also opens space to social scientific readings of different issues of her journey in an open-ended fashion. It shows the manner in which social and cultural networks shape the dominant intellectuals. Hegemony is exposed in subtle ways. Gendered realms of herself constantly plays throughout the narrative. It also expresses certain stylistic anarchy by demonstrating the problems in her writing about oneself in the context of the category of writer's block. She links to her experiential dilemmas related to writing to that of Doriss Lessing's much celebrated novel, "The Golden Notebook".

Socialization and gender are vividly critiqued in Jain's writing. Ingrained habituation of an individual is thoroughly described by Jain to demonstrate its impact on gendered identities and intellectual quest. Unlike other traditional autobiographical writings, it does not conceal the privilege based on ascribed identities. It also does not hide the economic privilege of her family. Her autobiography dwells on the nature of the pre-colonial era. It also reflects on the nature of the Indian society in the colonial era. It also imbibes the scattered style. Diary of the narrator plays an important function in the autobiography. Letters also are used in the mist of the larger autobiographical narrative. Time is thus fractured in peculiar fashion. Orthodox

family as a unit is analyzed in the context of rituals and imposed regulations on the sexuality and body of the women. Modern outlook in the midst of the deepened conservatism and its contradiction is examined in interesting fashion. Marriage as in institution is subjected to rigorous analysis and audacious description of desire of the women categorize in this autobiography from the usual autobiographies that succumb to the language of the statusquo. Caste and social mobility in the framework of upper caste social-political space. Mobility of the dominant caste and choice of the women are analyzed across the text. Is there any peculiar social space that structures such narrative?

Dominant caste identity provides the authenticity to reveal oneself in highly caste stratified society. Articulation is linked to the ideological orbit of the social location. Ideology of community on culture related to performance in the form of stigma is also delineated in the backdrop of her family's approach towards dance. Elite background and activist phase of the author in the context of anti-nuclear disarmament is portrayed as a strange mixture of dominant class and political articulations. Jain as an economist, researcher and activist also operates as part of the narrative. Broadly, the autobiography provides frank description of the different phases of her life.

### **Language of Resistance and Complex worlds of Culture:**

Politics is usually sidelined as metanarrative or the individualist in some of the writings on self and formation of an individual who left an indelible mark in the grand time of history. Wandana Sonalkar's attempts to read her political consciousness or the way of reading the social cum political through her autobiographical writing. Politics in Maharashtra in particular and India in general is central to her autobiography. Thus, she attempts to engage with the 'universal' and the 'particular'. Author revisits

some of the recent events like that of women's entry to Sabarimala in order to carve larger social/political background that represses the dissent and rights of women in contemporary India. At the same time, Wandana Sonalkar also reflects on the women from Muslim community and their protest against the patriarchy within their religion. In addition to that Wandana Sonalkar comments on the lower caste students against the ideology and forms of educational inequality. Broadly, she reads these political developments as ways to expand the meanings of democracy. It is also a way to end the challenges before the Indian democracy.

Sonalkar is conscious of the challenges before the constructive and positive approaches towards religion. She also discusses about the formation of the hatred that emanates from the politicization of religion. Democracy, for Wandana Sonalkar is transforming in the context of the majoritarian appropriation of the dominant religion. Thus, Sonalkar identifies herself as a rationalist and activist who brought under the political socialization via Marxism. She discusses about the othering of minorities under the totalitarian proclivities grounded in the politicization of Hindu religion. She lambasts against such hatemongering political environs that oppress Adivasis, women and lower castes. She lampoons at the patriarchy within diverse religions. Sonalkar is equally critical of the patriarchal brahmanic culture that operate within Hindu religion. Politics played on the basis of caste and reactionary ethos are staunchly opposed in her autobiographical. She recollects the political socialization and imbibing of rationalism that she received from her father. She had memories about her mother's pacified approach towards the religious ethos (Sonalkar,2021:5).

Consequently, Wandana Sonalkar's later realizes the caste breeding ideological grounds of such religious culture. Therefore, she distances herself from the othering culture of the

hegemonic religion (Sonalkar,2021:6). At the same time, she waged struggle against the inhuman oppression of the marginalised sections. Conservative people attacked her for questioning the dictates of the dominant religion. She explains to us that how she was attacked in the field of social media for her critiques (Sonalkar,2021:8). One of the significant aspects of this autobiography is that Sonalkar reflects on certain political tensions which is at the level of state and country. She critiques her own dominant religious identity and its politics of hate. Wandana Sonalkar unfolds the patriarchy and hierarchy inherent in such religious order. (Sonalkar,2021:10). She further shows us the misogynistic dimension of Hindu religion through its oppression of women. By raising the questions related to the polarizing tendencies grounded in class, caste and gender based on hegemonic religious social/political realms. She provides real scenario of the divide within diverse social and political groups (Sonalkar,2021:16-18). She derides the political culture that thrives on dominant food culture, animal rights, premodern environmentalism and partial forms of media. It offers internal critique to those intellectual men who defend atheism and oppressive towards to the questions of choice of the women (Sonalkar,30). She is equally critical of the gender relations and the transforming nature the ideology and institution of the family. It raises criticism against the misogynist religion and the regional literary approaches that celebrate the patriarchal ideology.

Wandana Sonalkar argues that modernity and conservatism coexist in strange ways. For instance, her mother supports the idea of the purity. Her mother opposes caste as well. Similarly, caste does not vanish in the diaspora. Culture of the caste is thus permeated across the globe. (Sonalkar,36-37). It is further observed that conservative, patriarchal, religious values acquire new forms according to the changing

time and space (Sonalkar,2021:42). Thus, the autobiography moves away from the exaggeration related to family, culture and religion. Post-independent India also allowed the reactionary ideologies and political formations around the culture, caste, gender and religion (Sonalkar,2021:48). Sexuality is also subjected to the oppressive culture based on caste, gender and patriarchy. One of the crucial points in which she analyses the dalit writings' approach to caste-based marriage and parenting to revisit her own upbringings based on dominant caste values/interests. Relations of parenting and psychological levels of children are also analyzed in this context (Sonalkar,2021:51). The nature of nation-state in the postcolonial era is discussed as larger canvas to map parochialism and transforming avatars of religion driven masculinity. Therefore, one can argue that a comparative approach towards Hinduism and Hindutva differentiates this text from traditional autobiographies. One of the salient features of this autobiography is about the debates on the ideological dialogues that happened between B.R.Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi. Sonalkar also sneers at the reactionary role of the women from the upper castes in maintaining the politics of caste. She identifies herself as one who waged battle against the hate politics based on caste and religion. She reads her shift from the rural area to that of urban area as a means that helped to overcome certain form of social conditioning (Sonalkar :119). Her autobiography tries to grapple the question of the personal, the social and political spaces.

#### **Possibilities of Continuous Readings and Interpretations:**

Writings on oneself signify different temporality. It moves in different direction of societal regulation. It acquires the velocity of the uncontrolled subjectivity. At the same time, it cannot completely transcend the binary opposition

of the internal and the external. Societal and political conditioning constantly warns the textual displacement in biographies and the autobiographers. It shifts from the homogenization to the multiple realities. Diverse identities and its complex interplay are very much part of the conceptual and the empirical ingrained in autobiographies. At the same time, autobiographies are often sidelined in the name of its experiential articulations. Devakai Jain's and Wandana Sonalkar's writings compels us to have new readings of their autobiographies. It widens the scope and space for the readers to think and rethink on a number of issues. It also engaged us with some of the fundamental and cardinal debates on the societal and political formations.

#### **REFERENCES:**

- 1) Browarczyk, Monika and Lidia Sudyka (2018) "Opening Up Intimate Spaces: Women's Writing and Autobiography in South Asia", Cracow Indological Studies, Vol.XX,No.2,pp.v-xvi.
- 2) Brueck, Laura R (2019) "Narrating Dalit womanhood and the aesthetics of autobiography", The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, vol.54(1).
- 3) Ghosh, Sutanuka (2010) "Expressing the self in Bengali women's autobiographies in the twentieth century", South Asia Research, Vol.30(2).
- 4) Jain, Devaki (2020) The Brass Notebook: A Memoir, New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Books LLP.
- 5) Kumar, Raj (2010) Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity, New Delhi, Orient Blackswan.
- 6) Kumar, Uday (2016) Writing the First Person: Literature, History and Autobiography in Modern Kerala, Permanent Black & IAS Shimla & Ashoka University.
- 7) Sonalkar, Wandana (2021) Why I am not a Hindu woman: A Personal Story, New Delhi: Women Unlimited.