

Monika Browarczyk, *Narrating Lives, Narrating Selves: Women's Autobiographies in Hindi*, Poznan–Krakow: UAM & Księgarnia Akademicka, 2019, pp. 298.— Reviewed by Sanjukta Das Gupta (Sapienza University of Rome)

Monika Browarczyk's book directly confronts the long-standing assumption in Western scholarship which regarded autobiographical writings to be the product of the historical legacy and cultural specificity of the West and considered individualism and notions of the Self as an exclusively Western attribute. By focusing on women's writings, it further demolishes the myth of autobiographies as principally male-oriented narratives of bourgeois culture. In doing so, it adds fresh perspectives to the recent research which highlights the diverse ways in which South Asian societies in general, and women in particular, articulated selfhood and subjectivities across historical periods. It further emphasizes the fact that individual agency and sense of selfhood need not be marginalized by the paradigm of collectivity valorizing caste and religious identities.

The book discusses the autobiographical accounts of four women authors writing in Hindi in India after Independence. The chapters are preceded by a long introduction which clearly sets out Browarczyk's theoretical framework of analyzing life stories as performative narratives and emphasizes the autobiographer's multiple positionalities and identity construction. The introduction also has a useful

and richly researched section on the long history of women's autobiographical works in South Asia, drawing upon both textual traditions and oral narratives across the subcontinent. Life writings by women in modern Hindi made their appearance in the literary journals of the late 19th century within an overwhelmingly male literary milieu and reflected the intellectual discourses of the time and the lived ambiguities in the conflict between tradition and modernity. Writing an autobiography imparted agency to women writers, yet as Browarczyk demonstrates, their agency as well as the reception of their represented selves were shaped by the cultural norms and historical locations.

The introduction is followed by four chapters, each of which addresses selected writings of a specific author. The texts which Browarczyk selects for analysis fittingly reveal the multiple Self positionings of each narrative as well as the broader identities which they represent. Her choice is grounded in the commonality which she traces in the well-defined 'narrative selves', despite differences in their narrative strategies. The writers—Kaushalya Baisantri, Maitreyi Pushpa, Prabha Khaitan and Chandrakiran Sonrexa—do not represent a homogenous group, but are drawn from very different classes, castes and literary backgrounds, representing the multiple identities within Indian society

The first of the writers, Kaushalya Baisantri (1926–2009), a Dalit woman activist and a follower of Ambedkar, belonged to the formerly 'untouchable' Mahar community. A native Marathi speaker, Baisantri consciously chose to write in Hindi to address a larger audience. Published in 1999, her autobiography *Dohrā abhiśāp* ('Double curse') was the first to have been written by a Dalit woman in Hindi. Doubly marginalized by gender and caste location, her autobiography emphasizes the burdens of a Dalit legacy, and her multi-faceted 'narrative self' voices both her personal life story as well her experiences as an activist, highlighting the social injustices encountered by an entire community. As Browarczyk argues, Baisantri's articulation of the community experience of stigmatization and discrimination was not only intended for

public consumption but was an expression of the writer's deeply personalized reflections.

The writings of the other authors, hailing from the upper-caste middle classes, are informed by class rather than caste issues. The two serialized autobiographies of Maitreyi Pushpa (b. 1944) bring out another of Browarczyk's central concerns, i.e. how the same author portrays differing 'narrative selves' in different stages of her life. The first book, *Kasturī kuṇḍal basai* ('How Kasturi settled her jewel of a daughter'), published in 2002, was a novelized autobiography in which the protagonist is a Hindi writer, a Brahmin by caste. This was followed by *Gurīyā bhītar gurīyā* (Doll within a doll) in 2008, which represented a more conventional autobiographical genre. In her writings, Pushpa transgresses the social mores of her class and generation and critiques the patriarchal Hindi literary establishment.

The following two chapters bring out the complexities of diverse feminine/feminist subjectivities shaped by different cultural models through the analyses of the works of Prabha Khaitan (1942–2008) and Chandrakiran Sonrexa (1920–2009). While the former, coming from the upper middle class, poses a challenge to social norms of propriety drawing upon Indian mythology valorizing feminine submission, Sonrexa willingly enacts her role as the 'traditional' Indian woman based on service and propriety, and chooses to express her agency within the limitations of this particular model. Despite the seeming differences, both Khaitan's *Anyā se anyā* ('Once the other, now the only one', 2007) and Sonrexa's *Pinjre ki mainā* ('Mynah in a cage', 2008) are indeed political statements, representing women's identities within hierarchies of power and experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Browarczyk points out that each of these life stories, straddling as they do the divide between personal narrative and the objective truth, offers alternate ways of knowing and understanding human action and reflects culture-specific notions of the person or the Self.

Browarczyk's book easily traverses several interdisciplinary fields ranging from history, ethnology, women's studies and literary and cultural studies and holds the promise of breaking new grounds

in intersectional scholarship. The book is a significant contribution to emerging academic studies of life stories as a genre and it pushes us to reconsider the long-standing concerns with history, memory, subjectivity and self-representation. A seminal research, I consider that it needs to be read by anyone interested in understanding the multiple voices of Indian society.