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Aur, aur... aurat or Contemporary Autobiographies by Women in Hindi

SUMMARY: The article in the opening section foregrounds theoretical debate on autobiography with particular reference to women's writing in South Asia. Subsequently, it presents motivations for recent interest in the genre amongst women writing in Hindi and, eventually, it looks into the narrative strategies employed by Krishna Agnihotri (*Lagtā nahī hai dil merā* ('My heart is not in it'), 1996; *Aur, aur... aurat* ('And, and... woman'), 2010) and Maitreyi Pushpa (*Kasturī kuṇḍal basai* ('Kasturi and Her Jewel of a Daughter'), 2002; *Gurīyā bhītar gurīyā* ('A Doll within a Doll'), 2008). Agnihotri and Pushpa authored two volumes of autobiographies and the article further analyses their various strategies of constructing their 'narrative selves' and of particular arrangement of their life stories in two separate volumes.

KEYWORDS: autobiography, Maitreyi Pushpa, Krishna Agnihotri, women's writings, Hindi

The year 1996 saw an interesting development in Hindi autobiographical writings. A relatively large number of women authors—rewriting a genre defined as “male-oriented ‘master narrative’ of Western bourgeois culture” (Smith, Watson 1998: 4)—started to publish their own, often very revealing, life stories.¹ Their autobiographies exemplify

¹ In the chronological order of the first published autobiographies: Krishna Agnihotri, *Lagtā nahī hai dil merā*, 1996, *Aur, aur... aurat*, 2014; Kusum Ansal, *Jo kahā nahī gayā*, 1996; Kausalya Baisantri, *Dohrā abhiśāp*, 1999; Maitreyi Pushpa, *Kasturī kuṇḍal basai*, 2002, *Gurīyā bhītar gurīyā*, 2008; Ramanika Gupta, *Hāḍse*, 2005, *Aphudrī—ek ziddī larķī kī ātmakathā*, 2015; Sushila Takbhaure, *Śikanje kā dard*, 2011; Prabha Khaitan, *Anyā se ananyā*, 2007; Mannu Bhandari, *Ek kahānī yah bhī*, 2008; Chandrakiran Soneraxa, *Piñjre ki mainā*, 2008; Susham Bedi, *Aroh avāroh*, 2015; Nirmala

the heterogeneity of women's self-expression in Hindi and showcase various novel strategies and stylistic devices employed to create the 'narrative selves'.

In the opening section of the article I touch briefly on the theoretical debate on the autobiography with special reference to women's writing in South Asia, without however, delving into the history of Hindi autobiography by women, as the subject has already been treated elsewhere; subsequently, I examine briefly the possible motives for sudden spur of interest in the genre amongst women writing in Hindi; and finally I look into the narrative strategies employed by two well-known writers, Krishna Agnihotri and Maitreyi Pushpa, who have authored two volumes of autobiography each. While focusing on their constructions of the 'narrative self' I try to identify reasons behind arranging their life stories in two volumes.

Following Smith and Watson, who take on "autobiographical occasions as dynamic sites for the performance of identities constitutive of subjectivity" (Smith and Watson 1995: 214), I analyse the above mentioned autobiographies within the framework of the 'narrative self' theory which derives from the concepts of performativity.¹ This

Jain, *Zamāne mẽ ham*, 2015. As to three earlier publications, namely *Ek agyāt hindū aurat* ('An unknown Hindu woman') written by an anonymous author in 1882; Dukhinī Bālā's *Ek vidhvā kī ātmakathā* ('An Autobiography of a Widow') of 1915 and Sphurna Devi's *Ablāō kā insāf* ('Justice for innocent women') of 1927, it has not been proven that they were authored by women, and moreover, these texts seem to blend different genres: short story, drama, and novel. On the development of autobiographical writings in India and in Hindi literature cf.: Browarczyk 2013: 80–85. A collection of excerpts from women writers' autobiographical writings edited by, amongst others, Rajendra Yadav, an established Hindi writer and editor of a literary periodical, *Hams*, (Yadav, Varma, Kaur 2013) opens with verses by Mirabai (ca. 16th), a Bhakti poet, and includes an excerpt of an autobiographical novel by Dimeshmandini Dalmia, *Mujhe māf karnā*, 1987.

¹ Cf. Eakin 1992: 45–6: "Every autobiography is of course repetition of the past, but a repetition with a difference (...) the difference at issue involves

approach, on the one hand, acknowledges the multiple and/or changing identities of the author as reflected in the autobiographical narrative, and, on the other, addresses the autobiography as a mode of writing located between fiction and non-fiction.

Post-1980s, largely in response to the feminist and post-colonial criticism, the autobiography genre, along with its canon, was redefined as a self-narrative expressed through various texts of culture, including thus not only literature, but also oral testimonies, art, performing arts, cinema, etc., and opening-up, for those earlier marginalised, a space to voice resistance vis-à-vis the dominant discourse. In South Asia, women's autobiographical narratives claimed that space in a twofold manner: through research and re-reading of earlier autobiographical narratives, especially those authored by women, and by producing new, contemporary autobiographies, often written in a dissenting mode.

The initial research on life writings by women in India was done by scholars such as Malavika Karlekar (1991), Ranjana Harish (1996), Uma Chakravarti (1998), Tanika Sarkar (1999), Kumkum Roy (2003), and others, and revealed the complexities of representing the self by women in South Asia. With time, the number of studies investigating the autobiographical accounts authored by women (and men) from the region has grown into a sizeable body.² In the introduction to a recent collection of essays on autobiographical narratives by women (and two male actors who impersonated female characters) the editors of the volume, Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley (Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 2015: 11), stress that “challenges involved in recovering women's voice should not indicate a lack of voice.” Such a perspective emphasises the need for sensitivity in approaching the diversity of the autobiographical narratives,

something more than merely a gap between the experience of subjectivity and an account of it in words. (...) the truth I want to get at is the element of resistance to the past that lurks in any desire to repeat it.”

² Cf. Arnold and Blackburn 2004; Hansen 2011; Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 2015; Malhotra 2017.

including those outside the ‘classical’ autobiography genre and expressed through different forms of human creativity.³

My research interests, however, lie in the relatively recent appropriation by Hindi women authors of the regular, ‘classical’ form of autobiography to claim agency and voice their views on a variety of subjects while narrating their lives. Though seemingly a fairly new development from the point of view of Hindi literature, where earliest modern autobiographies appear only in the first half of the twentieth century but rapidly grow in numbers by its end, I see the phenomenon as a part of a wider, pan-Indian movement for self-emancipation of various excluded categories: Dalits, Adivasis, and most recently, LGBT groups. I argue further that there appear to be two main factors influencing the development, or rather, numerical build-up, of women’s autobiographies in Hindi in the mid 1990s and thereafter: the increasing visibility of women oriented/feminist discourse in the Hindi public sphere and the growing recognition shown by the reading audience, including literary critics and scholars, to the autobiographical narratives in Hindi written by authors from excluded groups, particularly Dalits.⁴

³ Shveta Sachdeva Jha (Jha 2015: 141–164) and Afshan Bokhari (Bokhari 2015: 165–202), for instance, bring to notice various mediums of self-expression employed by South Asian women outside the classical autobiography genre. Jha focuses on ghazals or classical form of Urdu poetry along with acts of performance and patronage (construction of water tanks and mosques) as practices of self-expression by a court courtesan from the princely state of Hyderabad (18th–19th c.). Bokhari analyses the autobiographical voice of the Moghul princess, Jahanara Begum, (17th c.), not only in her writings (an anthology of essays on Sufi saints and a Sufi treatise), but also in the sacred architecture funded by her.

⁴ Hunt (Hunt 2014: 146) underlines that Rajendra Yadav—a writer and chief editor of a leading literary magazine in Hindi, *Hamis*, and Ramnika Gupta—a social activist, politician and editor of the *Ām ādmi* magazine, in the 1990s invited Dalit authors to publish in their periodicals, and issued special editions of their magazines dedicated exclusively to Dalit literature, which in turn prompted the interest of other journal editors and publishers.

The contemporary women authors writing in Hindi embrace and negotiate the notion of a self endowed with multiple identities by adapting the genre of the autobiography to their particular needs. Though bound by many intertwined factors (e.g. religion, caste, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, age and education among others) that shape and influence their multi-layered and even contradictory identities, women as a whole form a heterogeneous group which is conditioned not only by gender.⁵ With this in mind Mrinal Pande (Pande 1991: 26) criticises the one-sided and narrow-minded approach to women's issues exhibited by the English and Hindi print (and most probably other) media in India at the end of the 1980s in these words:

(...) of late large number of stories and columns, have been appearing about 'women question' and 'minority' question, but to describe women's or the minorities' oppression and inequality in isolation, as most of them do, is to ignore the cumulative forces of oppression (such as sexism, religion, caste, and class-biased discrimination) and also underestimate the nature and intensity of their revolt, when it arises and the socio-political backlash that, in turn, shall generate.

The growing visibility of women in the public space⁶ had its hand in nurturing women's interest in sharing their life stories in the form of published autobiographies in Hindi and thus participating inadvertently in the women's movement. On the whole, the women's movement in India remains an elusive phenomenon, often difficult to define and describe, mainly due to its fragmented nature and the multiplicity of its forms.⁷ But the concerns animating its different phases, and,

⁵ Cf.: Smith and Watson 1992: 15.

⁶ Facilitated by major changes in the Indian economy and mediascape prompted by the reforms of the 1990's, foremost, economic liberalization and opening India to the West and consequent spread of commercial and regional language TV channels and recently social media.

⁷ Ilina Sen (2006: 82) contextualises the equivocal status of the women's movement in India in the following series of questions, "These debates and issues have confused the entire question of whether a women's movement exists or even whether it is legitimate in India. Given the diversity

from the 1970s onwards, the appearance of elements of the feminist discourse, were heatedly debated in the Hindi media and Hindi literature—initially mostly by male, and subsequently, also by female writers belonging to different literary generations.⁸ For Mridula Garg (Garg 1993: 34), a well-known Hindi woman writer, the rise of the ‘self-awareness’/‘self-consciousness’ among Dalits and women’ (*dalit aur nārī cetnā*) in the second half of the 20th century had a direct bearing on the development of literature imbued with new sensitivity and touching on subjects which in Hindi had been widely ignored by the predominantly male literary circles.⁹

The body of women’s writing in Hindi, defined vaguely as authored by women and dedicated to issues concerning women, has grown steadily in years following the independence, somewhat in parallel with the increasing visibility of the women’s movement; it seems, though, that in the matter of women’s autobiographies Hindi lagged behind other languages of India (e.g. English, Bengali, and Marathi). Women’s autobiographies in Hindi, earlier few and far between but published in increasing numbers from the mid 1990s onwards, represent in a way one of the later phases of the development of women’s life writing in India as a whole.

of cultures and the complexities of caste, and class among women in India, can we actually speak of an overarching women’s movement in the country? Or is it that there are a number of fragmented campaigns which do not add up to a movement? How many of these campaigns are urban, middle class, and how many rural? Equally, how do we define a ‘women’s movement’: is it one in which only women participate? Or one which raises only women specific issues?”

⁸ Though the women’s movement covers a large spectrum of activities in urban and rural areas, feminism is perceived as “an urban phenomenon of a particular [i.e. middle] class” (Pande 1991: 59).

⁹ In this article, Garg controversially claims that women’s writings relate to women specific issues, but are not restricted solely to literary production of women. This argument echoes in a debate on whether non-Dalit authors can contribute to Dalit literature.

Krishna Agnihotri is one of the two pioneers (the other being Kusum Ansal) of the movement involving women's autobiographies in Hindi, with her *Lagtā nahī hai dil merā* ('My Heart is Not in It') appearing in 1996, to be followed by *Aur, aur... aurat* ('And, and... Woman') in 2010.¹⁰ Recently, Agnihotri published excerpts from her diary under the title: *Afsāne apne kahānī apnī (dāyri)* ('My Own Stories, my Own Tale (A Diary)') (Agnihotri 2017), proving her interest in other genres of life writing as well.

Agnihotri, born in 1934 in Nasirabad (Rajasthan), a holder of two MA degrees (in Hindi and English) as well as a PhD degree in Hindi literature, a college and university lecturer of English and Hindi literature, is a prolific writer.¹¹ However, the fact that it is her urge to write an account of her life, and then re-visit that account (and her own life) yet again, is of interest here. Like Pushpa, whose autobiographical writings are also set in more than one volume, Agnihotri allows us to see how her earlier construction of the self, presented in *Lagtā nahī hai dil merā* ('My Heart is Not in It'), is revisited, found somewhat wanting, and rewritten in the sequels—*Aur, aur... aurat* ('And, and... Woman') and *Afsāne apne kahānī apnī (dāyri)* ('My Own Stories, my Own Tale (A Diary)'). The very titles of the books seem to point to a changing perspective—with the first, judging by the title, seemingly a tale of woes, the other two—resolute pointers to regaining one's womanly subjectivity and agency.

Some of the autobiographers tend to name a person (or persons) termed by Smith and Watson "the coaxer or interlocutor" (Smith and Watson 2012: 598)—an individual or individuals who inspired them

¹⁰ Harivansh Rai Bacchan authored the most popular Hindi autobiography in a series of four volumes, each part dedicated to a different period of his life (*Kyā bhūlū kyā yād karū*, 1969; *Nīr kā nirmāṇ phir*, 1970; *Basere se dūr*, 1977; *Daśadvār se sopān tak*, 1985). Two other women authors, Maitreyi Pushpa and Ramnika Gupta, penned autobiographies in two volumes, and Gupta plans to publish further two.

¹¹ Apart from the three volumes of life writings she published 12 novels, 15 collections of short stories, 5 books of stories for children, collections of journalistic pieces and essays.

to publish their life stories—a device plausibly employed to disown and distance oneself from the ‘immodest’ impulse of self-promotion; for instance, Kausalya Baisantri (Baisantri 1999) and Maitreyi Pushpa (Pushpa 2002) both talk about such persons.¹² In the second part of her autobiography, Agnihotri, too, declares that she yielded to the demand of a friend, one Virendra Saxena, demurely adding that she wrote her autobiography before it became fashionable among women writers to do so, in this manner expressing her pioneering claim to literary fame. The life-story of Agnihotri published in two volumes, with a gap of fourteen years between them, maintains a continuum: the second part proceeds with the overall chronological description of Agnihotri’s life from the moment the previous part suspended the storyline and ends roughly at the time of publishing the second book. The distribution of this on-going narrative of life is different in both volumes (the first book consists of 352 pages, the second of only 160).

The second part, however, has a distinctly individual leitmotiv—the preoccupation of the ‘narrative self’ with the inevitability of passing away of life surfaces frequently and, in comparison with the first part, it contains repetitive content for the author revisits certain subjects mentioned in the first autobiographical volume. Mahesh Bharadwaj, Agnihotri’s publisher, informed me in a personal conversation¹³ that it was he that persuaded the author to write the second part of the autobiography. Agnihotri herself hints in the second volume of the popularity of the first volume, which then prompted her to write a sequel. Apparently, the intention of narrating life in two parts was not present from the onset of the autobiographical project.

In the first part of her autobiography Agnihotri acknowledges her admiration for Urdu poetry and Hindi cinema and true to her passion names the first volume, *Lagtā nahī hai dil merā*, after the opening

¹² In the case of Pushpa (Pushpa 2002: 233) it was Archana Varma who asked for an autobiographical essay for a special women’s issue of *Hamis*.

¹³ On April 29th 2017.

verse—“a line of inherent nostalgia”¹⁴—of a ghazal attributed to Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775–1862), the last Mughal emperor, who died in exile in Rangoon.¹⁵ The ghazal gained popularity after its rendition by Mohammad Rafi in a movie entitled *Lāl Qilā* (1960). Filled with pathos, the melancholic tone of the ghazal is further accentuated by the historical context and the association with the tragic events in the life of its alleged author, a deserted, powerless man on the verge of death, with both his past and his future in a shambles. The title phrase resurfaces several times in the latter part of the first autobiographical volume, but passages exuding a sense of being lonely, deprived and in difficulty are interwoven into the narrative. Constant emotional yearning for a relationship with close family members who disowned her (due to a dispute over inheritance), for the love and support of a loyal life partner, for the care and encouragement of friends, for the appreciation due to her as a writer, haunt the ‘narrative self’ and reverberate throughout both the texts in forms of avowals. The title of the second volume, *Aur, aur... aurat*, brings in, through an alliteration, a wordplay, indicating an invented, *ad hoc* etymology of the Hindi word *aurat*, ‘woman’, and combining it with *aur*, which functions as a conjunction ‘and’, ‘or’ and an adjective ‘additional’, ‘extra’, ‘different’, creating some polyvalent meanings.

In spite of the poetic reference in the title of the first volume and a rhetorical figure in the title of the second, it seems that refinement of form or word craftsmanship are not the forte of the two autobiographies. Agnihotri writes the story of her life in a manner that bears out the truth of Annie Zaidi’s (Zaidi 2015: xii) remark: “There have been periods in our literary history when it seemed women cared less about

¹⁴ I owe the elegant and befitting phrase to Maria Skakuj-Puri (personal communication).

¹⁵ Cf. the original text and its English translation: <https://atulsongaday.me/2012/12/27/lagta-nahin-hai-dil-mera-ujde-dayaar-mein/>; <https://rekhta.org/ghazals/lagtaa-nahiin-hai-dil-miraa-ujde-dayaar-men-bahadur-shah-zafar-ghazals>. [Last accessed: 12.07.2017].

craft or form; all they wanted was to be heard.” Agnihotri’s foremost wish is to be heard through her autobiography; the text of the first volume (but not of the second) yields to Agnihotri’s eagerness to share the story of her life’s turmoil, with some impairment to the narrative plotting and the style.

Up to a point the story line unfolds chronologically, following the convention of a classical autobiography, which in turn reflects the natural course of life, but impatient to share her emotional dejection and life upheavals, Agnihotri often in flash-forwards jumps ahead and in the initial part—dedicated to her childhood and youth—provides long passages hinting at later dramatic developments in her life. This narrative strategy leaves one as a reader with too many unanswered questions, turning such passages, from some sort of narrative teasers with a potential to engage one further in the story, into something quite the opposite.

Agnihotri meticulously lists the names of people she met in various capacities in different phases of her life: extended family members, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, neighbours, family servants, editors, writers, and students. She calls some people by their real names, some others by the initials, and, presumably, employs several nicknames as well. Many a time she mentions a name only to provide a one-sentence introduction of the person as a good and helpful acquaintance or someone unfriendly and malevolent, which gave rise to controversies.

Naming famous personalities of the Hindi literary establishment, whom Agnihotri accuses of downplaying her writing or harassing her in some way, brought on criticism of the literary circles. Consequently, she expressed surprise that in response to her autobiographical revelations fellow women writers were not concerned with learning the names of the alleged ‘oppressors’, but rather articulated their reservations as to the veracity of the incidents described. She presumes they were afraid of the consequences of those influential men’s contempt, or even a backlash.¹⁶

¹⁶ Cf. In an interview with Krishna Agnihotri by Ritu Bhanota, *Pakṣpāt kā śikār to huī parantu sammān pure deś mẽ milā* [“I fell a victim of partiality

In spite of what one might think of as flaws in Agnihotri's autobiographical narratives, the narratives are noteworthy for many reasons. The author is gender conscious, and verbalises her disagreement with women's position in Indian society by entering into a dialogue with the dominant discourse. Her opposition is phrased in a series of direct, ironic or sarcastic sentences, or rhetorical questions that return throughout both texts. For instance, describing the manner in which she was taught proper feminine behaviour, she ironically recalls (Agnihotri 2010: 23), "Mother told me, girls should walk on the street with their eyes downcast. That's fine, let me then walk like that, looking down. When I got back home, I had a scraped forehead. Well, with all this walking and looking down, I knocked into an electricity pole."¹⁷

There is, within the autobiography, a sub-narrative which reveals the author's constant sense of being off the centre, on the 'margin' of things: she perceives herself as pushed outside the circle of her family and friends, and being on the periphery of the main Hindi literary scene—not appreciated by critics and co-writers, especially those from the capital, or other Hindi literary hubs. This sense of occupying a liminal, off-centre space pervades the narrative. After all, Agnihotri fulfils "multiple conditions of liminality" (to apply Lambert's phrase; Lambert 2015: 226): born into a prosperous Brahmin family; married in her late teens, she divorces an abusive and drinking husband; later on she remarries and then separates from her second husband to become a single working mother; finally, in the aftermath of a dispute over inheritance, she is evicted from her natal home by her brother. Abandonment, first by her in-laws and later by her own natal family, leaves her in a liminal space; no longer can she claim—as other 'good' Hindu upper-caste women—her right to belong either to her natal home

but received due recognition in the whole country."], in: <http://www.shabdankan.com/2016/02/krishna-agnihotri-hindi-writer-interview.html>. 15.01.2018.

¹⁷ *mā ne kahā—larḱiyō ko sarak par nīcī nazar kar calnā cāhiye. thīk hai, nīce dekhkar calūgī. śām ghar par lauṭī to mātā phūṭā huā. patā lagā nīce dekhne ke cakkar mē māḱ bijlī ke khambe se ṭakrā gaī.*

or to her in-laws. Aspiring to the main Hindi literary stage brings her a similar experience of being treated as an outcast; she sees herself as a downplayed provincial writer, as someone not accepted by the establishment, someone not on a par with its prominent members.

Agnihotri's memories of growing up as a girl are presented as a series of exercises in inequality and subjugation. Even though some of these may seem small-scale 'trainings', they are still disturbing for their daily regularity. For instance, she describes her mother as doting on her brother, and being strict with her, which makes her childhood happy but deprived of her mother's affection. The memory of sad faces of her parents when her younger sister is born haunts her (Agnihotri 2010: 3). As the oldest daughter she is expected to take care of her younger siblings and help with domestic chores (including cooking from the time she is about nine), and her mother often disciplines her by hitting her (a hand slap, a smack with a rolling pin or a pair of iron kitchen tongs).

In different phases of her life—in her childhood and her teenage years, after her marriage and after divorce—Agnihotri is exposed to numerous forms of sexual transgressions of her bodily integrity. She describes finding herself being vulnerable to sexual misbehaviour of various degrees in her childhood: her aunt's servant undresses her and puts her to sleep with him; a neighbour touches her 'secret body part'; and another neighbour bares himself in front of her. In her teens an older relative harasses her, and her father's friend, who is her appointed guardian when she studies at the Women's College in Nagpur, sexually assaults her.

The narrative bears witness to various forms of molestation and sexual aggression against women and thus translates incidences of such offences—otherwise partly revealed only in the available statistical data—into a personal testimony. Sexual violence affects girls and women not only in the public space, but in the seemingly safe environment of their homes, it is inflicted by strangers but mostly by acquaintances and relatives.¹⁸ Other women autobiographers, for

¹⁸ Cf. Ashis Gupta: <http://riceinstitute.org/research/reporting-and-incidence-of-violence-against-women-in-india>. [Last accessed: 17.09.2017].

example Prabha Khaitan, Maitreyi Pushpa, and Ramnika Gupta, also give testimonies of sexual assaults against girls and women as extending from private to public spaces, which attests to the disturbing reality of women's vulnerability to various forms of sexual transgressions (from eve-teasing to rape).

As a young person Agnihotri becomes a victim of domestic violence. The sixteen-year-old Krishna is married to a man who is a stranger, and who on their first night consummates their marriage with just one introductory remark, "You are a little fat!" ("*Kuch moṭī ho*", Agnihotri 2010: 94). Her husband, an officer of the Indian Police Service, often abuses her both verbally and physically. Dealing with aggression experienced every-day, Agnihotri does not depict such scenes with any graphic details or at length; in a sentence or two she mentions repeated occurrences of beating as daily routine.¹⁹ At times the description turns ironic; possibly it is her strategy of distancing herself from disturbing memories of violence which includes marital rape (Agnihotri 2010: 112), "At night, when my lord and master got back home drunk, he would need a woman, but I was angry and would pretend to be sleepy. This was not something Mr Captain could accept, so he would take out the police baton and strike me again and again. I would be still crying when he would get hold of me, satisfy his lust, and start snoring."²⁰ The extent of her husband's brutality can be guessed by the three instances of eyewitnesses attempting to stop his assaults; it is

¹⁹ I owe an acknowledgment here to Urvashi Butalia. In her keynote lecture "Women's Autobiographies. The Publishing of Experience and the Experience of Publishing" in May 2017 at Torino University Workshop ("The space between the lines. Exploring gender, performance, history and archive in auto/bio/graphical writing from South Asia"), while discussing autobiography of Baby Halder (Halder 2006), she drew attention to her casual manner of narrating domestic violence.

²⁰ *rāt patidev pīkar āye to unke aurat kī āvaśyaktā thī, par māī to narāz thī, islie sone kā bahānā banane lagī. bhalā kapṭān sahib ko yah kaise sahan hotā, uthāyā pulisiyā ḍaṇḍā, bahut mārā. rotī huī mujhko āgoś mẽ le, apnī āg thaṇḍī kī aur kharrate bharne lage.*

telling that the men who try to help are subordinates of her husband's or of a much lower social status (a policeman, a family servant, and a rickshaw driver).

In spite of such mistreatments Agnihotri's 'narrative self' underlines her constant willingness and steady effort of adhering to the Hindu upper-caste ideal of a submissive wife: she slaves in the kitchen to cook whatever her husband likes and in the morning wakes up before him because that is what is expected of a good spouse. Commenting on her own compliance in an ironical mode, Agnihotri gives a bitter judgment of her own behaviour and the models of ideal feminine conduct imprinted by society and culture on women of her caste and class. In this context, the autobiography significantly emphasises that it was her father-in-law who, tired of his daughter-in-law being beaten and abused every day, encouraged her to separate from her violent husband (Agnihotri 2010: 174). She brings in the testimony from her husband's father showing that even he was disgusted with his son's behaviour to condone her decision of leaving her home.

Being aware of the mechanisms of control employed by the society and the family to discipline her, Agnihotri reveals that as a girl, and then a young woman, initially a wife, and later a divorced, working, single mother, she is continuously censored and accused of immoral conduct by her mother, both her husbands, colleagues at work, editors, writers, friends and 'enemies'. Throughout the narratives, somehow defending herself and complying with her upper-caste Hindu ideals of the feminine, she actively dismisses these allegations with direct denial of any wrongdoing. Agnihotri describes with much detail how she, a single woman, negotiated the mechanisms of the power structure at the workplace (she worked in two colleges and at a university, in Jabalpur and Khandwa) and how she, a provincial writer from Madhya Pradesh struggling for recognition, managed to manoeuvre members of the publishing industry and the media to her advantage.

The mocking, the teasing, the passes made by her male colleagues were an everyday reality; Agnihotri understands all such unwanted advances to be the consequence of her being single, i.e. unprotected by

the presence of a male guardian, which makes every man at work think he has a right to her (Agnihotri 2010: 197). She thus narrates her workplace as a hostile space where she has to manoeuvre between unwelcome sexual approaches of men with their mocking, and the antagonistic grumbling of a female boss unhappy with her subordinate's good relations with the students and her alleged literary fame.

By 1966, in Agnihotri's own words, she becomes a recognised Hindi writer with stories published in mainstream Hindi magazines and readers sending her letters of appreciation (Agnihotri 2010: 228). Thereafter she continues to publish stories, essays and reports in magazines, but publishes also collections of short stories and novels in book form. Throughout her autobiographical narratives Agnihotri connects dramatic events of her life with her short stories and novels, revealing to readers the sources of her inspiration for some of her writings in a manner expected of writers' autobiographies.²¹

The world of the Hindi literature that Agnihotri aspires to and which she cultivates through painstaking attempts of creating her own network of editors, publishers, and reviewers is another predominantly hostile space, where she encounters prejudice, unwanted sexual advances and social censorship. Her creative experience is presented as a constant effort of someone from the margin, to be noticed and get access to mainstream publishers and editors. She views the politics of the Hindi literary establishment as critics' favouritism towards writers whom they know personally, and sees herself ignored as a provincial writer from Madhya Pradesh. Ironically, the 'narrative self' repeatedly addresses the established writers as the great people of Delhi while describing itself/herself as an average writer from provincial Khandva or Indore; however, the sarcasm hidden in this attempt at a humble self-depreciation does not go unnoticed by the readers.

Men from the literary circles, just like her colleagues at work, make repeated passes at Agnihotri; some of them even seek to become sexually intimate with her. Describing a scene when a young editor attempts

²¹ E.g. Agnihotri 1996: 258, 268, 271, 273–274, 280.

to touch her throughout their first meeting, she concludes, somehow revealing her own culture-imposed prejudices, “Is a woman writer like an actress? Without touching her body or without using her, you cannot establish any other relationship with her?” (Agnihotri 2010: 322).²² On the other hand, gender biased accusations of her employing feminine charms and providing sexual favours to secure publications are being circulated as well. However, and Agnihotri brings these double moral standards to notice, nobody criticises famous male writers (like Mohan Rakesh, Kamleshvar, Rajendra Yadav, or Nirmal Varma) for their sexual escapades and live-in relationships (Agnihotri 2010: 244).

Maitreyi Pushpa has authored two volumes of autobiography: *Kasturī kuṇḍal basai* (‘Kasturi and Her Jewel of a Daughter’), published in 2002, and *Gurīyā bhītar gurīyā* (‘A Doll within a Doll’), published in 2008. She was born in 1944 in Sikurra village, in a Brahmin family, and grew up in villages near Jhansi and Aligarh; later on she studied in Jhansi. Therefore, folk and literary heritage of this historical region, Bundelkhand, as well as the rural and then the small town background are vital reference points in her writings. Married to a doctor, she moved first to her in-laws’ house in Aligarh and later on to Delhi after her husband is appointed lecturer at a prestigious medical university there. Mother of three daughters, Pushpa debuted in her 40s, and, as of now, has twenty-seven books to her credit.²³

Contrary to Agnihotri’s strategy of constructing similarly structured narratives in both her autobiographical volumes, Pushpa presents readers with two formally different autobiographies. The first book, subtitled ‘novelised autobiography’ (*aupanyāsik ātmakathā*) is an attempt at an experiment with the autobiographical mode of writing. True

²² *kyā mahilā lekhikā koī abhinetrī hai, jiske śarir ko koī chue yā upayog kiye binā koī rīstā nahī ban saktā.*

²³ The list of her books (cf. <http://maitreyipushpa.com/career.html>), apart from two volumes of the autobiography, includes ten novels, seven collections of short stories, five volumes of essays on women, one play, and one book of reminiscences.

to the subtitle, Pushpa novelises the tale of her life to the extent of introducing the third-person narration; of focusing on steady, almost entirely chronological development of the plotline; and of including long passages with dialogues and monologues by various characters. By contrast, the second volume combines a partly novelised narrative with a more classical form of an autobiographical tale, i.e. it is narrated in the first person; it includes auto referential interventions (for instance, passages that intertwine description of bygone events with reflections on the past from the perspective of the time of writing the autobiography); and it meanders between the past and the present.

The third-person narrative mode of *Kasturī kuṇḍal basai*, on the one hand, might be a strategy designed to detach oneself from the experiences of the past,²⁴ and on the other, a device to introduce her mother's and her own stories on equal footing. It can even be comprehended as an indication of the author's understanding of an autobiography essentially as a narrative in which the relationship between the 'author'-cum-'narrator'-cum-'protagonist' is more convoluted than the reader's presumption that all three personas seamlessly merge into an 'autobiographical self'. In *Gurīyā bhītar gurīyā*, however, written after Pushpa has gained considerable literary recognition and (in her own words) to satisfy readers' curiosity as to how from a housewife-cum-mother she turned into a writer, the 'narrative self' keeps a tight rein on the first person narration.

Pushpa's idiom of prose writing, which is also true of her autobiographies, incorporates multiple dialectical, caste and gender variations of the language, in which she was immersed both in the early stages of her life and after she moved to Delhi. Her provincial background, her education in the Hindi medium (from the level of primary school till the university), her passion for Hindi poetry and prose,

²⁴ Cf. Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* (Halder 2006), which intertwines the first and the third person narration, where the latter is applied in auto-reflexive, and Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (Rushdie 2012) narrated in the third person throughout.

her dedication to Hindi as opposed to English ‘culture’ of the elite in the capital link her deeply with the Hindi heritage and are evidenced in her writing style which is intertextually rich in colloquial proverbs and phrases, and literary and folk quotations.

Pushpa’s craftsmanship, with its drawing from colloquial and literary references, is evident in the title of the first volume, *Kasturī kuṇḍal basai*, which comes from a verse by Kabir, a saint-poet of the Bhakti movement.²⁵ The meaning of the original stanza is open to a number of interpretations—it may reflect on the fruitlessness of a spiritual quest in the outside world as self-realisation lies within, or/and on search for one’s true self within. But Pushpa adds another layer of meaning by introducing a wordplay. This other reading, taking into account her mother’s name—Kasturi—produces an additional interpretation of the title: ‘Kasturi and Her Jewel of a Daughter’ or ‘How Kasturi settled her Jewel of a Daughter’. The Hindi reader at one glance accesses all the multi-layered readings which encompass the elusive connotations of the original verse and the wordplay hinting at the combined tale of a mother and a daughter.

For *Kasturī kuṇḍal basai* is not only the tale of Pushpa; it includes also the story of her mother’s life, and their mutually complicated and tense relations. The narrative covers the time span starting from before Pushpa was born, i.e. the tale of her mother’s early life, to the period shortly after Maitreyi’s marriage. The manner of narrating Kasturi’s life bears witness to her independence and strongwill: early widowed, she struggles as a single mother to achieve economic security, and these harsh circumstances shape her strict attitude towards her daughter’s

²⁵ The said verse comes from a couplet (*Kastūrī kuṇḍal base/mṛg dhūṇḍhe ban māhī*; <http://santkabirdas.blogspot.com/2012/02/kasturi-kundal-base-mrag-dhundhat-ban.html>) and refers to a musk deer that searches for the musk throughout the forest ignorant of holding the musk within his body. In her narrative, Pushpa extensively refers to the passages of Hindi literature. Chapter headings of both autobiographies quote verses from significant literary works in Hindi. Last accessed: 12.10.2017.

upbringing. Rewriting her mother's life sheds light on their troubled relationship and becomes an exercise in reconciliation.

The introduction to the first volume of her autobiography—provokingly titled *Shall I call it a novel or an autobiography?*—showcases Pushpa's viewpoint of the genre (Pushpa 2002: 5), "It is possible that what happened is not in the story, and what is in the story, did not happen in the real life, but the foundation of this story are those perfect pictures vivid in my memories, even though I might have just heard about them from someone else or even though they might have originated in rumours about my own family." Pushpa seems to subscribe to the idea that for an author composing a self-narrative, because of the interplay of memory and the externally and internally imposed censorship, writing is an exercise in narration that combines fictional and non-fictional elements. She rhetorically engages the audience in this reflection, simultaneously appealing to the reader's more empathic response to life stories. In the second volume she reconsiders these reflections, claiming the text to be a truthful account of her life with just a few aesthetic embellishments, but of importance only if liked by the readers (Pushpa 2008: 332). Thus there are contradictions comparable to those present within Agnihotri's narratives, for Pushpa too introduces incongruous 'narrative selves' in each of the two volumes.

'A Doll within a Doll', the title of the second volume, by association with the so-called Russian doll (a set of hollowed wooden dolls of decreasing sizes that neatly fit one into the other), brings in a polyvalent image of a woman with multiple roles or identities that somehow remain hidden or immersed in one another. The image introduced in the title is reflected in the narrative and its division into two parts. The former explores relation of Pushpa and her husband, who attempts to groom her into a perfect spouse; her experience of moving from provincial India and settling in Delhi among educated, but close-minded, middle-class professionals; and her insights into motherhood. The latter part is dedicated to Pushpa's entry into the world of Hindi literature, and her growing literary fame; it brings into sharp relief her husband's reluctance to accept her emerging, separate identity of a writer.

Another feature of both autobiographies reveals complex relations between the constructed ‘narrative self’ and the other protagonists, for Pushpa employs a strategy of introducing polyphonic voices. Whole passages of both volumes of the autobiography turn into dialogues and monologues of multiple characters—in the first volume, her mother is the most vocal of them all, and in the second, her husband—and challenges their statements and opinions with hers, revealed, respectively for each volume, in the third-person and in the first-person narration. Many of the protagonists populating her autobiographies voice the views of the traditionalists in the Indian society (in *Kasturi*... it is her grandmother, village men and women, and in *Gurīyā*... her husband plays that role), whereas Pushpa and her mother Kasturi (in both volumes), and her close friend Inama and her daughters (in the second one) invalidate the conventions with irony or sarcasm.

For instance, in the first volume Kasturi contradicts teachings of Pushpa’s grandmother on how a woman should be docile, submissive and obedient like a cow by comparing passivity of the brides-to-be to the cattle waiting in the market to be purchased by a prospective buyer (Pushpa 2002: 11, 71). It is a defiant reinterpretation of a culturally prevalent image (the ‘cow’ in Hindi phraseology indicates such positive qualities of the feminine character as meekness and subservience) and hence it creates a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse.

In a manner similar to Agnihotri’s autobiographies, Pushpa too in her texts depicts the men-controlled world as a space unfriendly and unsafe for women, filled with men’s condescension and lurking sexual advances. And likewise, as in Agnihotri’s narrative, in Pushpa’s as well, the unsafe zone covers both home-like and public spaces, e.g. rented accommodations, where the family members and the acquaintances of the chaperones appointed by her mother eve-tease her and attempt to molest her (Pushpa 2002: 51, 53, 116); as well as buses, schools, markets, and college (Pushpa 2002: 125, 40, 92).

Pushpa’s husband, in accordance with culturally ingrained attitudes of his high caste, middle class, profession, and gender, patronises her; so does the editor-cum-established writer whom she asks

for guidance on how to write. Her commentary to his ‘mansplaining’ reads, “I am like an empty pot...I read nothing, I saw nothing (...) his greatness is sky high and my smallness has no end” (Pushpa 2008: 179).²⁶ In the second volume, as she discusses men’s sexual interest in her, she somehow swings away from describing revulsion towards such behaviour and wonders if, after all, the attention is not a figment of her imagination; at times she alludes to being pleased with the men’s attentiveness; such treatment of the subject gives vent to her mixed response.

Unlike Agnihotri, who depicts her active participation in literature as a constant struggle, Pushpa presents it as a steadily mounting success. Her growing confidence as a writer is evident from her depictions of the early uncertainty and willingness to be guided by experienced literati to the point of being unconcerned about criticism and comparing the idiom of her writing to that of Krishna Sobti’s, the doyen of Hindi literature (Pushpa 2008: 231). However, the ‘narrative self’ initially insists on pointing to her daughters as those who have insisted on her venture into literature in the first place (Pushpa 2008: 129), as if to diminish her own ambitions and persistence (attested to by already narrated, numerous earlier attempts at publishing her stories).

‘The Associate Editor’ (an editor of a popular Hindi magazine and writer) and ‘the Godmother’ (a senior woman writer), two among those that facilitate Pushpa’s entry onto the Hindi literary scene are introduced only by sobriquets, probably because of the misunderstandings that arose between them and Pushpa, and which are narrated in the latter part of the book. For those who are familiar with the important personalities of the Hindi literary establishment, deciphering their slightly veiled identities is not difficult. There are also some other controversies that the text gets into polemics with, foremost those connected to Rajendra Yadav and his role as Pushpa’s literary mentor.²⁷

²⁶ *māī xālī sī bartan sī... na kuch parhā, na dekhā (...)* āpkā barāppan ākās kī ūcāī par aur merī nīctā ki had nahī.

²⁷ I am not describing it in detail here. Pushpa (2017) has recently published a book of reminiscences dedicated to her relationship with Yadav.

Both Pushpa and Agnihotri had their share of controversies after publishing their autobiographies.²⁸ Autobiographical narratives, in particular, are often perceived as mediums of asserting subjectivity and agency, that is why they constitute texts significant in the development of women's writings, and for the women's movement, but for the very same reason they may evoke censorious responses from the readers. There are many conflicts between dominant discourses—even if internalised by authors through socially and culturally specific constructs of gender, social position, language identity, religion, caste, etc.—and personal choices and opinions of women authors that these narratives tackle, and which often put these texts at the crossroads of inconsistency. And also for that reason the two volumes of autobiographies written by each author, Agnihotri and Pushpa, are an interesting case study of various strategies of constructing incongruous 'narrative selves' in accounts of one's life published in two parts.

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²⁸ For instance, at the International Hindi Conference in Paris in September 2016, Narendra Kohli named Agnihotri and hinted at other Hindi women writers of autobiographies, as promoters of immorality.

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