

Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Elusive Lives. Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia*. ix + 296 pp. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018.—Reviewed by Maria Skakuj-Puri (independent scholar, Delhi)

The reader's first introduction to women whose lives and writings are the subject of Siobhan Lambert-Hurley latest book, *Elusive Lives. Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia*, is the book's cover, with its pale reproduction of a page from what appears to be a handwritten manuscript in an alien and exotic script. Illegible but to those familiar with Urdu, and further blurred to provide a more opportune background for the bold fonts of the English title, it is, as we are informed in the copyright page, a sheet from the handwritten memoirs of Safia Jabir Ali. Having never appeared in print, the folio sits, together with other papers of the Badruddin Tyabji Family, in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, India, buried deep in the bowels of the archive. However, a close scrutiny of the recovered fragment yields an interesting clue: in the second line from top, somewhat to the right, there appears an English word in the Latin script, 'farm'. Written in perfect hand, it provides an unexpected if tiny peek into the world of its elusive author: the writer might be writing in Urdu, but probably is not unfamiliar with English either. So, who is she?

While most of Lambert-Hurley's earlier writings as well as those of other scholars working in the field focused mostly on readings of individual texts and case studies, the current volume attempts (and quite successfully) to work out a more encompassing template for

reading women's autobiographies in Muslim South Asia, starting with the question: "(...) what does it mean to write autobiography in a cultural context that idealizes women's anonymity?" (7).¹ The book opens with an introduction titled "The Ultimate Unveiling", which briefly reviews work done on autobiography in South Asia (3–8); outlines the methodology employed and the themes to be discussed in subsequent chapters; defines how the South Asian Muslim women are constituted as a group and a category for the purpose of this enquiry (8); situates Muslim autobiography and its study within the writing on autobiography in general (13–16); discusses the issue of historicizing autobiography but also treating autobiographical writings as "(...) acts of self-presentation" (16–19); and proposes to look beyond authors and texts to the "(...) collectivities to which women in Muslim South Asia belonged" (19–25). The introduction ends with a brief scrutiny of the autobiographical sample (25–27). All together the sample is very impressive, consisting of some 200 pieces of autobiographical writings (27) in languages such as Urdu, English, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi and Malayalam (6), and is drawn from the archives of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The main body of research is presented in five chapters, each of them attempting to answer one of the questions posed in the introduction: *what, who, where, how, why*, (21–23) and closes with a section devoted to concluding remarks. The first chapter titled "Life/History/Archive" is a slightly reworked version of an earlier article² and begins with the author narrating her own journey into the archive, right from "(...) exploration of the colonial archive par excellence, the British Library in London", (31) to forays into the archives in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, both the institutional and the private, with "the home,

¹ All page numbers refer to the current edition. The transcription of vernacular words in quotations follows the original text.

² Lambert-Hurley, S. 2013. *Life / history / archive: Identifying Autobiographical Writing by Muslim Women in South Asia*. In: *Journal of Women's History*, 25(2): 61–84.

the market, the street” (39) yielding optimal results. Having ... collected literally hundreds of books, manuscripts, articles, and words relevant to this study of autobiographical writing—whether called “autobiography” or “memoir”, *ap biti, biti kahani*, or *khud navisht, atmakatha* or *atma jibani*, or, in more specific forms, *roznamcha* or *safarnama*... (55)—the author confesses that it was “(...) a constant problem [...] how to fit these real-life historical sources into the theoretical boxes dreamt up by academics usually within the context of a Euro-American literary tradition” (55). However, she makes her choice and draws a line “at the constructed life: no novels, but more autobiographical biographies and the bibliographical autobiographies; the autobiographical fragment; the written-made-oral (including some film), but not the oral-made-written; the published “diary book,” but not diaries or letters; the spiritual, but not the ghosted; and the travelogue when relevant (...)” (55). Similarly excluded are “(...) diasporic memoirs, particularly where authors are second-generation immigrants or more” (13). As the texts constituting the sample vary in many ways, some being unpublished manuscripts while others having seen the light of day in journals, books or occasional publications, Lambert-Hurley proposes to use the term “(...) autobiographical writings” (55) to describe them best.

Her material or the *what* thus defined, Lambert-Hurley moves on to the next stage and to the second chapter, “The Sociology of Authorship”, where she introduces her authors (the *who*) and contextualises the milieu in which they lived and wrote, with special attention to the social and cultural background, and factors such as literacy (especially female literacy) and education (57–59, 67–75), class and status (59–67), occupation (75), etc. On the basis of the last, she groups her authors into discrete groups: courtly women (77), educationalist (78), writers (83), politicians (87), performers (89), concluding, that “most Muslim women who produced autobiographical writings in the modern period and even before belonged to one (or more) of five main groupings” (91). A few others were apparently ‘more difficult to categorize, but still had unusual or high-profile jobs’ (91). This last, mixed bag group thus comprises a high-level functionary of an international

institution (UNICEF) in Bangladesh; a doctor-turned-social activist in Pakistan, and two prostitutes: Piro, from the 19th-century Punjab, and Nalini Jameela, from present-day Kerala.

As the space where the autobiographical writings are/were crafted is of utmost interest, especially in the case of women's writing, the third chapter offers "The Autobiographical Map" or the *where*. Starting with Virginia Woolf's assertion that ...to write fiction, a woman needed "a room of one's own..." (98), the author concedes that ...it is difficult to know, in physical terms, to what extent this ideal was achieved by Muslim women writing autobiography, if not fiction, in South Asia... (98) and admits that "(...) only occasionally will an author offer a glimpse into the specific space in which she crafts her life story" (97). Close reading of the text (be it in a manuscript or printed form) followed by a diligent consideration of the paratexts attending it, e.g. authorial prefaces or notes in the case of published works, editorial introductions, interviews and personal communications pertaining to the writing/translating/editing/publishing the text, the material form of the text and the visuals accompanying it, and so on, are, in Lambert-Hurley's view, indispensable to understanding the staging of written lives and the persons hiding behind them. To this end she meticulously maps the authors in "(...) regional, local, and religious terms in an attempt to understand how specific locations may have stimulated autobiographical production" (98). On the basis of the sample certain conclusions are then drawn—with certain regions (e.g. Bangladesh) and certain urban locations (Delhi, Bhopal, Hyderabad, Mumbai) exhibiting greater density of Muslim women's autobiographical writings than others—which conclusions might be yet modified when more texts are brought within the purview of the study, with definitely many more being out there. An accomplished historian with many years of work in the archive behind her, Lambert-Hurley concedes: "(...) I am under no illusion that my source base is complete, or even as comprehensive as it ought to be" (25) for 'to recover historical material from private collection—to make the home, the street, the market into an archive—is not a straightforward or systematic process' (25) and "(...) [A]s

a result, it is possible that the socioeconomic and geographical clustering that I discuss in chapters 2 and 3 may reflect research context as much as historical production” (25). At the moment Lambert-Hurley’s impressive study provides a perfect grid onto which more data can be added with time, if and when located.

The question of the *how* is approached in the fourth chapter, “Staging the Self”, which treats of “(...) the lives and afterlives of texts”. In the first section, Lambert-Hurley analyses the process of production of a piece of autobiographical writing, starting with the manuscript (assumedly “(...) the most unmediated form of autobiographical production”, 127), then moving on to texts published in journals or magazines (right from the time of the proliferation of printing in the 19th century and the appearance of first magazines for women in the vernaculars and in English), else published in book form. As “(...) few memoirs are untarnished by outside interference” (47), she carefully considers the role of the mediators—editors, co-writers, translators, publishers, and other facilitators—on the final outcome.

Of great interest to any scholar is the second section of the chapter, a case study which scrutinizes the four iterations of Begum Khurshid Mirza’s autobiography. Reading like a piece of detective work, the analysis is worth recounting briefly. The manuscript of the autobiography in question first saw the light of day as “(...) a nine-part serial in the *Herald*, a monthly English-language publication from Karachi, in 1982–1983” (139) during the lifetime of the author. Later, in 2003, “(...) the entries were brought together in a poorly circulated Pakistani book edition attributed to Lubna Kazmi” (139), Begum Khurshid Mirza’s daughter. A year later, this very book provided the basis for the 2004 edition published by Zubaan and edited (anew) by Lubna Kazmi. The comparison of the three published versions with the “(...) typed original complete with later editorial markings” (139), given to Lambert-Hurley by the author’s daughter, provided a unique opportunity to follow manuscript’s metamorphoses into a printed text, or texts. While “(...) the material forms of the four versions” (142) are apparently very different, the written content varies less though there is a distinct,

underlying editorial consideration in preparing each version for its intended audience. For example, the choice of photographs accompanying the text in Pakistan (both in the magazine and the book) is different than in the text published in India, where the author's Aligarh connection is foregrounded at the expense of her later life as an actress in Pakistan. We further learn that the titles of all the three publications are different as well: the serialized version was published as "The Uprooted Sapling", while the books appeared as *The Making of a Modern Woman: Begum Khurshid Mirza, 1918–1989* (in Pakistan) and *A Woman of Substance: The Memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza* (in India), the Pakistani book selling its author as a modern woman in an Islamic society, and the Indian book, downplaying her Muslim identity as merely incidental and focusing on her family roots (pre-Partition Indian) and her personal achievements. Of utmost interest to the scholar of women's autobiography is Lambert-Hurley's investigation of the "(...) penciled marginalia on the original manuscript" (145) which apparently resulted in additional material being inserted into the book—among others, a chapter on Rashid Jahan (1905–1952), the author's eldest sister and a well-known Urdu writer. The jottings were traced back, as narrated by Lambert-Hurley, to Gail Minault, a feminist historian, "(...) who confirmed her role as an early reader of the book manuscript" (145). With Lubna Kazmi further owning up, in the preface to the 2004 edition, to having added a number of chapters to her mother's autobiography to fill in the gaps, all written in the first person (thus taking over her mother's voice), Lambert-Hurley suggests that the case of Begum Khurshid Mirza's autobiography is "(...) especially useful (...) in showing how the author's identity and assumptions as a Pakistani actress, wife, and mother could be overwritten by a protective family, a feminist editor, and an Indian press keen to tailor her interests, perspectives, emotions, and sexuality to their own expectations" (23). So much for the veracity of autobiographical writing in print and academic impartiality and detachment.

The last, fifth chapter, "Autobiographical Genealogies", addresses the matter of possible motives for putting one's story in writing

or the *why*. “Particularly striking when considering autobiographical writings in Muslim South Asia as a body of literature are the kinship links between writers” (155) notes Lambert-Hurley right at the start of this chapter and recalls the case of Bhopal, where “(...) five generations of royal women (...) produced autobiographical writings (...) over nearly a century and a half” (155). Referring to these and other, similar ‘autobiographical genealogies’, involving both women and men in large extended families, Lambert-Hurley submits that “(...) family models could inspire but also structure autobiographical outputs” (156–157). To test the proposition she uses “(...) a closed case study—of one family in which the cultural milieu was largely shared—to examine how autobiography’s form, style, and content may have been contingent on gender and time” (157). What follows is a brilliant analysis of the Tyabji family autobiographical tradition, right from the writings of its founder, Tyabjee Bhomeeah, in the second half of the 19th century, to those of Laila Tyabji and Sohaila Abdulali today. In Lambert-Hurley’s view, ‘the Tyabji clan case study offers a unique opportunity to interrogate theoretical frames applied by gender theorists to autobiographical writings’ (185) with Jelinek’s³ “‘difference’ model” (185) singularly apt as the starting point for contrasting female and male narratives works here, namely, men purportedly narrating “success stories” and women emphasizing the personal and the domestic (185); women partial to the “disconnected” and the “fragmentary”, and men to ‘linearity and cohesion in their construction of the self’ (185). But what, to Lambert-Hurley’s mind, undoubtedly defines “(...) the available autobiographical canon of this extended family throughout” is “(...) a strong sense of identification with the Tyabji clan itself: a collectivity that certainly did not erase or even subsume the self, but actually provided a framework within which to articulate individual expression” (185).

The short, closing Coda, “Unveiling and its Attributes”, starts with the sentence: “[T]o unveil suggests a dramatic and daring act” (189)

³ Jelinek, E. (ed.). 1980. *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

alluding thus to “(...) established historical narrative of Muslim women’s feminism” (189). However, discarding the veil, observes Lambert-Hurley, does not necessarily “unveil one’s voice” (7) and “(...) words may be veiled even when bodies are not” (192). Trying “(...) to recover, decipher, and unravel the specific codes and contexts that have enabled and structured articulation of a gendered self in Muslim South Asia” (193) one must learn to be attentive to silences, read between the lines and recognize the strategies employed by Muslim women to voice the self—see the travel diary (or a hajj narrative) as a useful cover for recounting personal experience (38); or a lecture and its text subsequently published in a magazine or a pamphlet as a way of putting woman’s practical knowledge and/or expertise on equal footing with man’s, and so on—and further embed (and legitimize) their discourse.

Without doubt *Elusive Lives. Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia* is an extremely readable, brilliantly structured and well researched scholarly contribution written with great commitment, and of great importance to all who study autobiography, especially women’s autobiography, in South Asia. Narrowing the case, as it may be here, by its Muslim focus, it provides in fact a clear and very functional template for reading large samples of texts in a certain way and can be used successfully in other linguistic and cultural contexts as well.

It would be interesting to see the present sample enlarged further by a body of recent or less well known, earlier autobiographical writings from Pakistan (which could provide a large number of texts written in a Muslim-majority environment and thus maybe not so focused on falling back on community-oriented and/or religious identity to legitimize itself), maybe even from Sri Lanka with its tiny Muslim minority (to see how that context shapes the gendered self), or for that matter, India, but maybe with an eye for texts not linked so obviously to urban centres or the well-known families of articulate authors; else produced by younger authors born in independent India and with a different historical background, maybe even from the periphery, from Kashmir or Assam.

It was also interesting to learn of the initiative of the Oxford University Press in Karachi in commissioning new and reissuing previously published autobiographical writings, some dating to the 19th century, and to be reminded of the work done in India by the feminist press Zubaan, which indeed has published a number of books authored by Muslim women in its autobiography list. It brings to one's mind the Literary Autobiographies Series (*Sāhitak sva-jīvnī laḍī*) conceived and published by the Department of Punjabi Literary Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala. In view of the (probable) absence of comparable, concerted efforts in other linguistic areas (such as Urdu letters), it makes one realize to what extent this undertaking is a unique and far-sighted way of documenting the intellectual life of the community. The first book in the series was published in 1985, with almost 50 volumes of autobiographical writings in diverse formats, authored by contemporary Punjabi intellectuals, appearing till now, but tellingly, only three or four by women, and as far as I know, none by a Muslim.