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From the Other One to the Only One
Prabha Khaitan and Her Autobiography

SUMMARY: The article examines autobiography of Prabha Khaitan with reference to plausible global and cross-regional inspirations, and studies the narrative to track down some of the author's individual strategies of constructing the narrative self. Prabha Khaitan enters into a discussion with autobiographical texts of global and cross-regional importance. Apart from being a prolific Hindi writer, she combined multiple roles of a feminist, an intellectual, an entrepreneur, and a philanthropist in her lifetime. Her autobiography reveals various, often contradictory, identities illustrating thus a fairly liminal and dynamic positioning of a woman in the contemporary Indian society, which results from the interaction of various factors. Khaitan accounts her life as that of a rebel against social norms and breaks 'the aesthetics of silence' (Ritu Menon's concept) imposed on women of her class and caste. She both challenges and to some extent complies with the dominant orthodox discourse on womanhood by introducing the imagery of the archetypical female divinity, both Saṁī and Śaktī, which also explores much more subtle and entwined coexistence of women's submission and subversion.

KEYWORDS: Hindi literature, dalit literature, autobiography, feminist writing.

To me telling the story of my growing up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without really having to die. I wanted to kill that self in writing. Once that self was gone—out of my life forever—I could more easily become that me of me... Until I began to try and write an autobiography, I thought that it would be a simple task this telling of one's story. And yet I tried year after year, never writing more than a few pages. Remembering was a part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, 'the bits and pieces of my heart', that the narrative made whole again. bell hooks (1989: 158).

Without falling into the trap of judging a book by its cover, let us, nonetheless, start by giving our book a brief look-over. The cover of the book in question engages the reader in a peculiar kind of ‘a picture within a picture’ narrative. What we see is a photograph of a modern painting in a black frame against a white wall, but the snapshot seems to have been taken off-centre, a bit from the right, which gives the impression of viewing the painting almost as if in passing. Figures of two women dominate the canvass; they appear as patches of colour against a monochromatic yellowish background. The women are dressed in red and purple *kurtas* and long skirts, their heads covered with shawls; one of them is sitting on the ground, her right hand supporting her cheek, the other is lying on the bed with her body turned towards the woman on the floor and the centre of the painting, and she is clasping her hands in front of her. It is significant that—for reasons known only to the anonymous painter—the portrayed women have no features, their faces are just blank ovals, and distorted black shadows of their figures create a disturbingly dramatic effect against the minimalistic off-white setting. Women’s clothes and the shapes of their bodies resemble each other, which opens up a possibility of interpreting the twin figures as one person captured simultaneously in two different poses, a convention not untypical of Indian art. This reading seems even more plausible when we glance at the title of the book, *Anyā se ananyā*, or ‘From the Other One to the Only One’ printed in bold yellow above the picture of the painting, at the top of the cover, and below, in much smaller letters—the author’s name, Prabha Khaitan.¹

The book in question was published in 2008 by Rajkamal Prakashan, Delhi, one of the leading Hindi publishing houses with a vast distribution network in the Hindi speaking belt, but it was earlier serialised in *Hans*, a well-known Hindi literary magazine, and since its very first appearance it was widely discussed in the circles of literary critics and readers. The visual message, of the narrative being an autobiographical account—not so obvious from the first glance at the Hindi

¹ Khaitan 2008.

book—dawns instantly when scrutinizing the cover of the English translation published in 2013 by a feminist publishing house Zubaan. Almost the whole frame of the book cover is taken over by a sepia-coloured, hauntingly melancholic photograph of a woman—her head turned slightly to one side, long loose black tresses, eyes gazing somewhere away from the observer. The title, translated as *A Life Apart*,² along with the subtitle, *An Autobiography*, is printed at the bottom of the portrait,³ and below on a narrow brownish strip we read the names of the author, Prabha Khaitan, and the translator, Ira Pande.⁴

Be it for marketing, aesthetic, editorial or other purposes, stark difference between the layouts of the two book covers—that conceivably aim to respond to the expectations of different target groups of Hindi and English readers in India—is conspicuous. The cover of the Hindi book gives the narrative an appeal of a novel or a fiction story⁵ whereas the book in English

² Compare a biography of a famous Hollywood actress Greta Garbo written by Karen Swenson and published in 1997—*Greta Garbo: A Life Apart*.

³ Another black-and-white picture of the author—with similar expression hued with sad pensiveness—sitting in a chair in front of a desk, dressed in a stylish sari, turned towards the viewer and looking directly into the camera lens, is printed on an even page opposite an odd page that opens the autobiographical narrative.

⁴ Khaitan P. 2013. *A Life Apart. An Autobiography*. Transl. Ira Pande. New Delhi: Zubaan. Ira Pande is a renowned translator and a daughter of a popular Hindi woman writer Shivani. In 2005 she translated into English and edited a volume of extracts from her mother's writings, weaving them into an auto/biographical account of her mother's life (2005. *Diddi. My Mother's Voice*. Delhi: Penguin Books.).

⁵ It requires a further study, but interestingly it seems to be a general preference of the Rajkamal Prakashan to publish autobiographies without reference to the portraits of their authors on the book covers. At present, out of twenty-two books on sale on the publisher's website under the category of autobiography (<http://rajkamalprakashan.com/default/autobiography>) only seven carry pictures of the authors. From among four autobiographical narratives by women (some of them are available at previous website address and others at <http://rajkamalprakashan.com/default/autobiography-biography?p=2>), Prabha Khaitan, Ismat Chughtai (renowned Urdu writer), Maitreyi Pushpa (two volumes) and Johra Sehgal, only the last showcases the picture of the autobiographer, a popular theatre and cinema actress, her image well known to cinema lovers. None of the other covers of Hindi autobiographies written by women and printed by other publishers (Kausalya Baisantri, Krishna Agnihotri,

tenaciously clings to the stereotypical appearance of an autobiographical volume adorned with a portrait of the author thus drawing attention of a prospective reader—interested in self stories—by foregrounding a tentative link between the book narrative and the lived experiences of the portrayed individual.

One may consider the striking dissimilarities in the appearance of the two book covers to be an eye-catching visual comment on an on-going debate on the genre of autobiography and life writings in general. Autobiography, once occupying the same shelf as books on history and reportage, later on, due to theoretical reflections on the construction of identity, subjectivity, and agency, was relegated to the realm of fiction, and at present is often considered an intra-genre, an in-between literature of facts and fiction.⁶

The liminal location of the autobiography genre, i.e. its positioning between the fictional and non-fictional writing, broadens its scope to represent multiple, changing and often contradictory identities of the autobiographer. Moreover, the inherent and still expanding liminality of the autobiography genre itself meets the challenges of the ‘liquid modernity’, to apply Zygmunt Bauman’s term.⁷ His argument that current, persistently growing anxiety and insecurity, both in the society at large and within the individuals themselves—caused by constant transformations brought about by globalised markets, rapidly developing technologies, and more fluid forms of social life etc.—lead to the annihilation of a coherent and durable personal identity.

Kusum Ansal, Mannu Bhandari, Ramnika Gupta) display portraits of their authors. It seems that publishers tend to avoid explicitly visual marking of these books as self narratives. However, the book covers of Hindi translations of autobiographical stories by women written in other languages (e.g. Amrita Pritam and Nalini Jamila) display the images of their authors.

⁶ Compare Lynch 2010, “Trans-genre Confusion. What does autobiography think it is?”.

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman discussed the concept of ‘liquid modernity’ in several publications: *Liquid Modernity*, 2000; *Liquid Times: Living in the Age of Uncertainty*; *Culture in Liquid Modern World*, 2011.

The dispute on identity or subjectivity and agency⁸ led to the autobiography's troubled relationship with feminist and postcolonial criticism as well. The genre, along with its canon—whose development was governed by Western notions and narratives of the rational self of the Enlightenment, the individual of the Romanticism and the self-made man of the Industrial Revolution—was marked out as a “male-oriented ‘master narrative’ of Western bourgeois culture” (Smith, Watson 2001: 4). The feminist and post-colonial thinkers' analysis reworked the classical concept of the autobiography and redefined it as a self narrative, not always literary, that forms a site of resistance to the dominant discourse for those earlier marginalised or ignored. Such perspective emphasized sensitivity to various autobiographical narratives, including those outside the traditional form of autobiography expressed in various forms of human creativity—oral lore, dance, paintings, performances etc.—in diverse cultures across different historical periods.

Theoretical reflections on the autobiography genre have been recently driven by concepts of performativity; Smith and Watson (Smith and Watson 1995: 214) describe “autobiographical occasions as dynamic sites for the performance of identities constitutive of subjectivity” Developing this line of thought, Paul John Eakin and some other literary critics and theoreticians, draw also from the philosophical thought on the nature of the subject as a ‘narrative self’.⁹ Their reasoning is that an endeavour of an author writing an autobiography is to construct a persona of the self through narration and subsequently claim an individual version of life's development to disarm fear of a future

⁸ Compare Eakin 1992: 88: “Autobiography is by its very nature a distinctly ambiguous mode of self-assertion, for the self is shaped by culture every but as much in its writing as in its living”.

⁹ Adriana Cavarero, Alisdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricoeur, Charles Tylor, amongst others contemporary philosophers, speculate that narratives constitute selves. Adriana Cavarero (*Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood*. London–New York: Routledge, 2000: 3) writes: “every human being, without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a narratable self—immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory”.

that remains unknown.¹⁰ The thinkers also argue that the subject's auto-narration is interdependent with self-narratives of others and that the process is culturally and historically specific (MacIntyre 1984: 99).

With the 'narrative self' concept providing an individualised approach to the heterogeneity of life writings as the theoretical framework for further analysis, I would like here to examine Prabha Khaitan's autobiography with reference to plausible global and cross-regional inspirations, and study the narrative to track down some of the author's individual strategies of constructing the narrative self.

It appears—in the light of feminist and postcolonial criticism of the genre and its literary canon—that writing an autobiography is a very particular kind of creative statement for Hindi women writers, who took to it only very recently, namely sometime in the middle of 1990s.¹¹ By adopting the genre they entered into a debate not only with the global canon of autobiographies, both traditional and those contesting tradition, but also with acknowledged autobiographical writings in Hindi and other Indian languages,¹² for as Judy Long (Long 1999: 16) elaborates: “Shaping a life into an autobiography evokes earlier texts

¹⁰ Eakin (Eakin 1992: 45-6) writes: “Every autobiography is of course repetition of the past, but a repetition with a difference (...) the difference at issue involves 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”.

¹¹ Contemporary autobiographies by women in Hindi in chronological order: Kusum Ansal, *Jo kahā nahī gayā*, 1996; Kausalya Baisantri, *Dohrā abhiśāp*, 1999; Maitreyi Pushpa, *Kasturī kuṇḍal basai*, 2002 and *Gurīyā bhītar gurīyā*, 2008; Ramnika Gupta, *Hāḍse*, 2005; Prabha Khaitan, *Anyā se ananyā*, 2007; Mannu Bhandari, *Ek kahānī yah bhī*, 2008; Chandrakiran Soneraxa, *Pinjre kī mainā*, 2008; Krishna Agnihotri, *Lagṭā nahī hai dil merā*, 2008 and *Aur, aur... aurat*, 2010. Suman Raje, referring to cross-regional literary influences in the subcontinent (Rāje, *Hindī sāhitya kā ādha itihās*: 295–6) in her study of women's writings in the literary tradition of Hindi, deliberates upon the lack of potent, honest and interesting Hindi autobiographies by women, in comparison with the abundance of such texts in Urdu and Punjabi.

¹² On the development of autobiographical writings in India and in Hindi literature see: Browarczyk 2013: 80–85.

and the readers who controlled their selection. A process of matching and shaping connects the subject's writing with the tradition in print".

I have already taken this statement further on a number of earlier occasions¹³ and argued that the emergence of women's autobiographies in Hindi is linked directly to the rise and growing visibility—amongst literature scholars, critics and the reading audience—of the Hindi Dalit¹⁴ autobiographies in the 1990s.¹⁵ I am not drawing a parallel between the content of these life narratives, my point is that the recent prominence of Dalit autobiographies brought the genre into notice of women writers as well.

Various—global, intraregional and local—crosscurrents find their echoes in the autobiographical account of Prabha Khaitan (1942–2008).

¹³ For example in a paper *Contemporary Women's Autobiographies as New Developments in Hindi Life Writings* at the conference *Beyond the Subject—New Developments in Life Writings*, Conference of International Auto/Biography Association Europe (Ludwig Boltzman Institut, Vienna University, November 2014) and in the paper *The Others and the Only Ones* or Hindi Autobiographies by Women at the workshop *Life, Memory, History and Society—Life Writings from Northern South Asia* (Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, University of Vienna, May 2015).

¹⁴ Dalits or the 'oppressed', a term of self-definition used by the castes perceived by the Hindu orthodoxy as the lowest.

¹⁵ Dalit autobiographies in Hindi emerged in the middle of the 1990's, but they were earlier serialized in literary magazines. Critically acclaimed life stories were written by Mohandas Naimisharay (1995), Omprakash Valmiki (1997), and Surajpal Chauhan (2002). Hindi Dalit life writings in their turn—in accordance with the process of cross-fertilisation prevalent in the subcontinent's literary traditions—were greatly inspired by Dalit literature in Marathi published from the 1950's onwards, which in turn is a part of a larger political movement for Dalit emancipation (see: Mukherjee 2010: xii). The first Dalit autobiographies published in Hindi were works translated from Marathi (compare the development of Dalit writings in: Hunt 2014). Due to geographical considerations South Asian traditions have always been enriched by constant cross-regional exchanges brought about by the linguistic diversity of the area; at the same time, they have been also nourished by literatures of intraregional or sub-continental range (Sanskrit) as well as those with global reach (earlier Persian and later on English). Many scholars research on the transregionality in South Asia (compare, amongst others, a volume edited by Pollock in 2003).

Apart from being a prolific Hindi writer, in her lifetime she combined multiple roles of a feminist, intellectual, entrepreneur, philanthropist and, last but not least, a lover of a married man. The tapestry of her autobiography is woven from sub-tales of her various, often contradictory identities illustrating thus a fairly liminal but at the same time dynamic positioning of a woman writer and a successful businesswoman (with a complicated personal life) within the contemporary Indian society, a positioning which was an outcome of an interaction of many factors, such as gender, religion, caste, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, age and education among others. Khaitan, like other women autobiographers, adopts in her writing various narrative strategies in order to negotiate the tensions resulting from her multi-layered identities.

The public domain¹⁶ provides the following information on the life of Prabha Khaitan: she came from a conservative Marwari Baniya family of industrialists settled for generations in Calcutta (now Kolkata). She obtained her Ph.D. (with a thesis on existentialist philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre) at the local Presidency College. Though educated in English, she chose to write in Hindi, which in the context of the dominant position of English as the language of Indian cosmopolitan high-class and one of the two official languages recognized by the state (Hindi being the other official language or official language-in-waiting, but at the same time the medium of communication for regional North Indian elites), situates Khaitan in a very specific place. This location is furthermore convoluted, as it very often happens in multilingual India, by at least two other influential linguistic factors shaping her artistic sensitivity: Marwari spoken at home, and Bengali and its literary culture as the environment, where she matured as a person and a writer.

Prabha Khaitan authored—apart from various essays, articles, short stories published in magazines—six collections of poems,¹⁷ six

¹⁶ Popular Internet resources in Hindi that provide this information are: [https://hi.wikipedia.org/wiki/ प्रभा_खैतन](https://hi.wikipedia.org/wiki/प्रभा_खैतन), http://ehindisahitya.blogspot.com/2008/09/blog-post_21.html.

¹⁷ She debuted at the age of 12 publishing a poem in a literary magazine (http://ehindisahitya.blogspot.com/2008/09/blog-post_21.html).

novels, six books of essays on philosophy and feminism, and some translations, including—for she was an outspoken feminist—the translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* into Hindi. Her perseverance in obtaining college education in philosophy, likewise her dedication to literature and feminism were not typical choices for a woman from a conservative Marwari family but rather amounted to an open rebellion.

At the same time, following the footsteps of her industrious, business-minded Marwari ancestors, Khaitan efficiently developed a parallel career of a successful business entrepreneur, which again was not typical of a woman from such a conservative community. In 1966, after training in the USA, she launched the very first women's beauty and health care company in India, and in 1976 created a leather export firm. Her business acumen was acknowledged with her being elected the first female president of the Calcutta Chamber of Commerce. She also started a foundation, later named after her, dedicated to the welfare of women, education and culture. Throughout her life she pursued both intellectual as well as business interests, which is not a common combination.

Prabha Khaitan's autobiography offers us a distinctive perspective of the author's life through a persona of the narrative self that retells her life as a mixed account of some above-mentioned facts, critical glimpses of the social, political and economic situation in Calcutta and in India between 1960s to early 1990s, and observations from her visits abroad (mainly the USA and Hong Kong). Her life story is, however, predominantly a narrative of her private and intimate relationships, as the storyline is to a great extent dominated by her account of a troubled, lifelong relationship with a married man and only to a lesser extent, by her ceaseless dwelling on the emotional rejection she suffered from her widowed mother. The autobiography clearly reveals a liminal and dynamic positioning of the author in the society, for Khaitan views her life as that of a rebel against social norms. A rebel who, because of her unorthodox life choices, alternates constantly between the society's centre (after all she was a member of an educated upper

middle class) and the periphery, repeatedly shifting positions between that of an influential intellectual and a successful businesswoman, and a woman ostracised because of an illicit and long-lasting affair with a married man. The narrative meanders through the constructs of Indian womanhood prevalent in the dominant discourse, at times opposing and at times assenting to them.

Three autobiographies by women—texts significant in the feminist discourse as works struggling with cultural constructs of women in their societies—are reminiscent of this rebellious account of female life by Khaitan, i.e. Simone de Beauvoir’s autobiographical writings,¹⁸ Amrita Pritam’s *Rasīdī Tikāṭ* (1976), and Kamala Das’ *My Story* (1976). Khaitan mentions in her autobiography both Simone de Beauvoir and Amrita Pritam (1919–2005); she writes about reading the autobiography of the French author, and about a memorable and inspiring meeting with Amrita Pritam. Khaitan was presumably familiar with the contesting and contested life narrative of Das precisely for all the controversy that it stirred in India; she might have known Das personally too, because they both were, though probably at different times and in different linguistics milieus, a part of Calcutta literary circles.¹⁹

Khaitan completed her Ph.D. on existentialism, wrote two books in Hindi on it, and translated de Beauvoir’s *opus magnum* into Hindi, so she would have been well acquainted with the French author’s essentially autobiographical oeuvre, encompassing all of her writings, not only autobiographies *per se*—defined by de Beauvoir as “fictions of selfhood” (McClintock 2010)—but also novels and essays. Of those unequivocally autobiographical volumes the first one, *Mémoires d’une*

¹⁸ Most of de Beauvoir writings was autobiographical, including her novels and essays, volumes marked as autobiographies: *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée* (1958, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*); *La Force de l’âge* (1960, *The Prime of Life*); *La Force des choses* (1963, *Force of Circumstance*), *Une mort très douce* (1964, *Very Easy Death*); *Tout compte fait* (1972, *All Said and Done*), *La Cérémonie des adieux* (1981, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*).

¹⁹ In spite of many attempts to confirm this presumption I did not find any reference to Kamala Das in Khaitan’s writings.

jeune fille rangée (*Memoirs of the Dutiful Daughter*, 1958), and the last one, *La Cérémonie des adieux* (*Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, 1981), display some elements of particular relevance to Khaitan's life narrative. The former work, amongst others, is de Beauvoir's account of her distraught relationship with her parents, and her defiant opting for a life of an intellectual that was against their wishes, and was perceived by them as an indecorous act of revolt for a woman of their social class (influential, well-to-do, though later impoverished, bourgeoisie). The latter work centers on Sartre's last years, and is "Beauvoir's merciless account of Sartre's decline" (Smith 2005). Mounting anxiety about failure of her continuing relationship caused by disenchantment with her lover's personality is a recurrent theme of Khaitan's work too.

Another conspicuously recurring thought of Simone de Beauvoir is her constant intellectual preoccupation with constructs of propriety imposed on women by society and culture or what Anne McClintock (McClintock 2010) designates as her concern with *the crime of female independence*, and its crucial relevance to the existentialist freedom. This independence is an underlying concern of Khaitan's narrative as well.

Amrita Pritam was a well-known Punjabi poet, who also wrote prose both in Punjabi and in Hindi. Her writings—popular among booklovers—were widely translated into other Indian languages. Pritam, carrying on the strong tradition of Punjabi autobiographical writing, published two autobiographical volumes: *Rasīdī Tikāṭ* (1976, 'The Revenue Stamp') and *Akṣārō ke Sāye* (1997, 'The Shadows of Words'). *Rasīdī Tikāṭ* is not limited to a mere narration of events and facts but includes also some poems, letters written by the author as well as numerous passages of poetic prose, for example descriptions of her dreams. The book gained great popularity amongst readers but the reaction of literary critics was more complex as some praised the work for its unique poetic imagery and language while others detested it for being self-indulgent, artificial and repetitive (Varma 2002: 53).

Pritam weaves an autobiographical account of a lonely and sensitive child (she was orphaned by her mother in her early teens but, although very close to her father, had no friends), a poet restrained and a woman who after

a painful failure of her marriage had some love affairs (with an Urdu poet, Sahir Ludhianvi for one), and a long relationship with a painter (Imroz), whom against the pressures of censorious Indian society she never married. Pritam openly writes on the subjugation of a woman in an arranged, socially approved marriage that limits the creative yearning and personal space of a woman and a writer. She strongly advocates a rebellion against an oppression governed by constructs of a sanctified marriage in order to ensure freedom of a woman as an individual and a poet. Bhagyashree Varma (Varma 2002: 54) praises Pritam thus:

The “Revenue Ticket” confirms the account of the woman who suffered and the poet who cherished her own private vision of life. Being a poet with convictions she preserves her creativity while narrating the story of her life. Emerging victoriously out of all deadly suffocations in a conservative social frame, she nowhere tries to conceal even those facts of life that give birth to hypocrisy in society.

The autobiography of Kamala Das (1934–2009) was, just like Amrita Pritam’s, both fiercely criticised and amply praised in India.²⁰ The author was a poet and writer, popular for her prose in Malayalam, and fiction and poetry in English. She lived for some years in Calcutta, earlier with her parents and later on with her husband, and was strongly connected to the circle of English Indian poets debuting there. Khaitan, prolific reader, well versed in English and with strong interests in poetry must have known Das’ English oeuvre. Both authors were educated in English, but while Khaitan did most of her creative writing in her mother tongue (Hindi), Das wrote both in English as well as her mother tongue (Malayalam), a fact which positioned them in a liminal location between multiple languages and their cultures, yet more so for their connection with Calcutta, which brought into play another cross-current, that of the Bengali cultural milieu.²¹

²⁰ The reception of Das’ work and mixed response to it, in India and abroad, is discussed in an article by Shirley Geok-lin Lim (Lim 1988: 346–369).

²¹ Lim (1988: 352) in reference to Das’ autobiography describes this liminal positioning as follows: “rupture between the English language woman-writer, engaged

My Story was serialised in the Malayalam magazine *Malayalanadu* in 1972 and a year later published as a book and subsequently translated into English by the author herself. What gave rise to the controversies, even to the extent of her family members protesting against the publication of the book, was the author discussing—in a manner taken as overtly bold—her sexuality, marital rape, sexual desires, illicit relationships etc. Das herself, however, professed afterwards, possibly giving in to the pressure of severe criticism, that the narrative was largely fiction. Somewhat in spite of this denial Lim (Lim 1988: 349, 353) emphasizes that:

Das's writing and life display the anger, rage, and rebellion of a woman struggling in a society of male prerogatives. Das's autobiography specifies the connections between personal/sexual and societal/political struggle for a female protagonist in this traditional male-dominated society. (...) The autobiography is itself a gesture enunciating the empowerment of the female when she speaks in protest, in rejection, in an infinitely recessive 'desire' within a restrictive psychosocial matrix.

Hostile reception of Das' oeuvre—including that by some feminists—was the result of her writing being classified as “sexual neurotic” though friendly readers acknowledged her as the voice of “feminine longing” (Lim 1988: 347).

What, yet again, can be assumed to be the common source of an almost instinctive feeling of repulsion and disgust to the autobiographical texts by de Beauvoir, Das and Khaitan on the part of the audience is that the [women writers'] “transgression of social decorum and traditional behavior still affect literary evaluation” (Lim 1988: 366). In an Indian setting maintenance of this decorum calls for an internalised need on the part of middle class women to refrain from speaking up on many matters, and not merely such as could be considered private but also those simply entailing expressing views, opinions,

in Westernized project of claiming her own subjective autonomy and traditional patriarchal Indian society”.

judgements, and emotions on subjects that in Indian socio-cultural context could be construed as transgressing the so-called 'women's domain'. Ritu Menon describes this tendency of Indian middle class women as 'the aesthetics of silence', an auto-censorship of women in reaction to censorious Indian society.²² In her observations on Hindi poetess Anamika²³ Menon elaborates on how the task of writing, and presumably even more so writing about the self, poses a great challenge for Indian middle class women trained in appropriateness, and appears as going against the grain of social and cultural constructs of ideal womanhood.

Both the disapproving and the admiring responses to Khaitan's autobiography within the circle of Hindi readers and critics are the result of her effort to break the 'aesthetics of silence' by consciously exposing in her narrative her independent personal life choices that more often than not violated the code of middle class woman's appropriate behaviour.²⁴ Khaitan determinedly unveils what at times transpires in Indian middle class families but is not to be disclosed publicly: a childhood rape, an illicit relationship, an abortion, a nearly lesbian experience, sexual desires etc.; aware that all these subjects

²² Ritu Menon (*Respectability. Hindi Writers' Workshop*, www.world.org/programs/regions/india/respectability.htm, March 20, 2011): "The enormous pressure exerted by cultural censorship on women's sub-conscious makes the conflict between public and private unbearable. Anamika said that in her 15 years of writing experience, she had imposed a kind of 'spiritual dieting' on herself. She spoke eloquently of the 'needle-and-thread' syndrome in women's lives, keeping their lips properly sealed, observing a stern 'aesthetics of silence'. For middle class women like her, this aesthetics has been particularly oppressive. Even now, she says, she cannot write directly about religion, politics or personal relationships, and the fear of hurting others by exposing oppression remains".

²³ In this context her pen-name, Anamika (Hindi: *anāmikā*) or A 'Nameless One', hinting at anonymity of her creative writing, becomes a poignant one.

²⁴ An Indian friend—an upper-caste, middle-class, well-educated housewife—described Khaitan's autobiography as self-obsessed, extravagant and emotionally overloaded. These epithets, obviously, hinted at the dubious affair described in the book and her intention was to discourage me from reading the book.

are taboos. Listing such incidents on the fliers of the Hindi edition, the publisher describes the book emphasising for marketing purposes the content which may have a titillating effect for some readers and thus attract them towards the book: “This autobiography serialised in *Hams* was both praised abundantly as a courageous story of bold and fearless self-acceptance, and proclaimed as repulsive shamelessness of an immodest and presumptuous woman stripping herself in the middle of the crossroads”.²⁵

The semi-sarcastic comment or a back-handed complement refers possibly to a passage from Khaitan’s self narrative itself, where she compares the act of writing an autobiography to stripping:

Writing of one’s life is like a striptease act: you are exposed to hundreds of eyes watching you uncover your naked self. This may sound odd but it is also true that most of us take an exhibitionist’s pleasure in doing so. The truth lies in the eyes of the beholder on the one hand, and on the other in the reader’s perception of truth. The strength of an honest bit of writing has its own pull and this is probably why an honest autobiography has a longer shelf life than a work of fiction. One reason for this is that such a work becomes a bond between the writer and the reader and although an interpretation of the text may vary with each generation, the power of its narrative can never dim. In writing this memoir I have tried to look at everyone—most of all at myself—as honestly and dispassionately as possible. I learnt a lot about life by living it as passionately as I could: ever setback and every mistake became a lesson to be learnt and this is how I came to terms with my circumstances (Khaitan 2013: 261, transl. Pande).²⁶

²⁵ Khaitan 2008: “hams mẽ dhārāvahik rūp se is ātmakathā ko jahā ek bold aur nirbhīk ātmasvikṛti kī sāhsik gāthā ke rūp mẽ akunṭh prasansāẽ milī haī vahī besharm aur nirlajja strī dvārā apne āp ko caurāhe par nanga karne kī kutsit beśārmī kā nām bhī diyā gayā”.

²⁶ Khaitan 2008: 255–6: “vaise ātmakathā likhnā to stripṭis kā nāc hai. āp caurāhe par ek-ek kar kapṛe utārte jāte haī. Likhnevāle ke man mẽ ātmapradarśan kā bhāv kisī-na-kisī rūp mẽ maujūd rahta hai, man ke kisī kone mẽ halkī sī cāhat rahtī hai ki log use galat nahī samjhē ki jo kuch bhī vah likh raha hai use sahi paripreksya mẽ liyā jae, par darśak vṛnd apnā-apnā nirnay lene mẽ svatantr hai. Unkā man ve is nāc ko dekhē yā phir palaṭkar cale jāē. Spaṣṭ rūp se likhī gaī ātmakathā kā apnā mahatv hai. Itnā bhī jāntī ki upanyās se adhik dinō tak ātmakathā jīvit rahtī haī. Kisī bhī ātmakathā mẽ ek maī hai jo prāmāṅik rūp se

Ira Pande, Khaitan’s translator, together with the editor of the book, take considerable liberties in rendering the Hindi original into English, often omitting certain fragments or paraphrasing the actual words, which is also the case with the quotation discussed here. If we read the Hindi passage, we see that it equates the act of writing an autobiography with an act of striptease-like self-exposure, the author leaving it to the readers whether they want to go on with it or not. In the first part of the passage Khaitan notes soberly and in a most straightforward manner: “Writing an autobiography is like doing a striptease. You stand at the intersection and take off your clothes one by one”.²⁷ But close reading of this and the subsequent sentence shows that in Khaitan’s view it is the reaction of the audience to the ‘uncovering’ of the self that matters as much or maybe even the most: “readers are free to decide. If they want they may watch the striptease or else turn around and walk away”.²⁸ As every metaphor this one too is open to a variety of multi-layered and nuanced interpretations. For one, Khaitan might be volunteering here an observation that even though an act of self-expression such as writing an autobiography could be a desperate act of daring for a woman, or to be more precise, for her, it may not result in being even ‘noticed’, or even worse, deemed a cheap entertainment not worth making much of.

apnā yātrā kar raha hai jise khārij karna kisī ke lie sambhāv nahī hai. Pāṭhak bhī is viśeṣṭā ko, viśeṣ vyaktitv ko pahcāntā hai. Pāṭhak aur lekhak ke bīc ek sājhedārī hai. Dasakō bād bhī yah kahānī zindā rahtī hai aur zindā rahegī—hā, isko paṛhne kā tarīkā zarūr badaltā jāegā. Āj jis rūp se ise paṛhā jā rahā hai sambhav hai us rūp mẽ yah kahānī bhaviṣya mẽ na paṛhī jāe magar ātmakathā apne pāṭhakō ko bādhyā kartī hai ki ve khud bhī apne āp se savāl karē evam varg, jāti evam sanskriti ke prabhāv ko samjhē. Is ghaṭnā ke bād man ne bhāṭaknā choḍ diyā har roz, har pal apne astitv kī agni paṛikṣā dī hai maīne. Pāṭhey ke rūp mẽ sirf mere guṇ-avaguṇ upalabdh rahe mujhe. Gurumantr thā—kisī kī parvāh mat karo, bas kām karnā hai aur kartī raho”.

²⁷ “vaise ātmakathā likhnā to stripṭis kā nāc hai. āp caurāhe par ek-ek kar kapṛe utārte jāte hā” (*ibid.*).

²⁸ “darśak vṛnd apnā-apnā nirnay lene mẽ svatantr hai. Unkā man ve is nāc ko dekhē yā phir palaṭkar cale jāē” (*ibid.*).

The quoted passage and the simile in it are built on a metaphorical image of 'striptease' as an act that involves both 'being looked at' and 'looking'. The notion of 'the gaze'²⁹ is a concept variously defined, interpreted and theorised by scholars of psychology, philosophy, feminism and autobiography theory and is often connected with the recognition of identity and subjectivity.³⁰ Moreover, it is of crucial importance to de Beauvoir's understanding of the power structure of relations between men and women and in this capacity it has been discussed in *The Second Sex* (McClintock 2010), a work that was influential to Khaitan's intellectual development as a feminist.

The 'gaze' in the passage quoted above is not presented as a neutral act; it is described as an act of audaciousness both for the writer, who hopes to find sympathetic audience of her daring act of 'uncovering' of the self; and for the imaginary readers, at least those who understand the courage, that is required to display such honesty, but not those, who withdraw under the pressure of decorum. Urvashi Butalia, the editor of the English translation, addressing readers in the publisher's note appended to the English edition, declares Khaitan's autobiography an unparalleled undertaking in Hindi literature by virtue of its honesty: "the frankness and openness of [Khaitan's] autobiography, something that was fairly unusual and remains so in the world of Hindi writing

²⁹ A similar simile, i.e. of standing naked in the spotlight in the middle of a restaurant appears in another passage, where Khaitan refers to a conversation with an American, whom her American roommate wanted her to date. She felt exposed when asked by the man if she could live all her life unmarried and childless because of her faithfulness to a married man. The reference to children brings into her mind the abortion and as a consequence her infertility (Khaitan 2008: 146).

³⁰ McClintock 2010: "The intellectual tradition of the gaze reaches back to G. W. F. Hegel and has been taken up in recent times by Sartre, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and a certain tradition of feminism. But it is de Beauvoir's special distinction in *The Second Sex* to have been the first to flesh out the geometry of the gaze and transform the idealist Hegelian ontology of self and other, frozen in faceless combat, into a politics of seeing and being seen, governed by socially consecrated rituals of dominance and submission and violently scored by history and gender".

by women”.³¹ Namita Gokhale, a renowned English writer herself, in a forward to the book, commenting on Khaitan’s openness in sharing publicly what otherwise would have remained undisclosed, says: “Prabha Khaitan’s story of her life and times is possible one of the most honest books I have ever read. Sometimes it cuts too close to the bone of middle class comfort, unsettling the safety net and entitlements of complacency and convenience. All her life, she swam upstream, defying convention, defying prejudice, questioning choices”.³²

The narrative is basically dissenting and subversive towards the constructs of Indian womanhood in Khaitan’s social sphere, but at the same time it also appears to shift constantly between opposition towards these constructs and an effort to somehow subscribe to them. The tartest confession that Khaitan’s narrative reveals is that of a passionate love that has failed and turned bitter, which is her personal rewriting of the dominant discourse on romantic and everlasting love ever-present in Indian culture. In the Indian context love is often perceived as an experience unrelated to marriage defined predominantly as a social contract between families and not an emotional and sexual bond between two people.³³ Narratives of everlasting love in Indian folk tales and literature are very often abruptly ended by hostile circumstances leading to the death of the lovers; in Khaitan’s life story the theme is retold; hostile conditions, i.e. society’s abhorrence of the relationship, are seconded by the description of lovers growing indifferent or hostile towards each other and the ultimate depletion of

³¹ Urvashi Butalia “Publisher’s Note” in: Khaitan 2013: 278.

³² Namita Gokhale “Foreword” in: Khaitan 2013: vii.

³³ Compare Mody (Mody 2008: 7): “In North India, marriage amongst Hindus is seen as a religious union. Among Muslims it is viewed as a contract. (...) Marriage, then, is not concerned with whether or not the couple are ‘in love’—in fact in the case of Hindus it is geared around the assumption that ideally the girl and the boy are strangers to each other and it is their obligation to their parents that makes them sometimes reluctant, though consenting parties to the marriage. (...) Hence, the construction of the relationship between love and marriage is that love should never precede marriage; but equally, marriage does not preclude the possibility of a loving and intimate relationship”.

love. The storyline in Khaitan's autobiography develops thus in contrast to the narrative tradition of conventional Indian love stories. The narrator gives voice to her mounting disenchantment with her lover and the very notion of passionate love, and seems to look at herself and her partner from a distance that the process of writing offers her.³⁴

The autobiographical narrative dwells at length on high personal costs—these being predominantly her enormous and constant anxiety and unease brought on, on the one hand, by her internal judgments and, on the other, by society's repugnance of her life—which the narrative self is made to bear for lifelong commitment to an illicit relationship. However, it is worth noting that constancy and loyalty to the forbidden love are foregrounded as well. Almost throughout the narrative there is a strong emphasis on the fidelity of the narrative self towards the lover, which can be seen as an element of conforming to the widespread Indian concept of a woman's commitment to one man, a sacred monogamy that sanctifies the woman (*ekpativrata*) and makes her whole.³⁵ For the narrative self it seems a sad, somewhat karmic consequence of her independent choice, a sort of punishment she is willing to accept for taking the step traditional Indian society abhors. Being an illegitimate partner corresponds to a rebellious act, but what makes the narrative self relate to the dominant construct of Indian womanhood is her faithfulness towards her illicit lover.³⁶ Admitting the emotional dependence on a man is also an act

³⁴ Compare Khaitan (Khaitan 2007: 175): “Slowly with passing time I started to realise that the moon, which I and Mr Doctor saw together, was a fake moon (...) the bird, who saw us at first clinging to each other, sat on our window by mistake, because he lost his way, and that he was supposed to be somewhere else. (Dhīre-dhīre vakt ke sāth mujhe patā calne lagā ki maī ne aur dākṭar sāhab ne jis cāḍ ko sāth-sāth dekhā, vah ek naklī cāḍ thā (...)) jis cīṛiyā ne hamē pahle-pahal ek dūse se lipṭe hue dekhā vah bhūle-bhaṭke hamārī mūḍer par ā baiṭhī thī, anyathā us cīṛiyā ko to kahī aur honā thā”.

³⁵ Compare Nijhawan 2012: 147–8.

³⁶ Compare Mody 2008: “(...) love, which is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and which closely follows ideas about female sexuality being given to just one man, sets up truly ‘Indian’ love as that which culminates in a marriage to the object of their

of honesty for the narrative self as it is in stark contrast to the author strongly advocating the need for women's independence, and feminist criticism of the autobiography raises this point. Somewhere at the end of the story the narrative self shares with the readers the experience of cheating on her partner but that too only in response to him forming other sexual relationships; however that short affair ends abruptly as there is no emotional engagement of the narrative self.

Khaitan employs in her narrative some archetypes of Indian womanhood from Indian mythology, rereading and reinterpreting them to her end. In the light of Spivak's commentary on mythical lore in non-Western traditions as 'regulative narratives' (Spivak 1989) we can interpret these archetypes as cultural signifiers for constructs of womanhood in India. Two such models are of special importance to the autobiographer: Satī and Śakti.

The title of Khaitan's book *Anyā se anyā* alludes to one of the forms of female divinity thus revealing its polyvalent meaning. *Ananyā* ('unique', 'unlike the others', 'different from others') is one of the epithets used for Śakti or the powerful Goddess that destroys all evil. In 1993 Khaitan authored a novel, with extensive autobiographical motifs, named after another mighty form of feminine divinity *Chinnamastā*. *Chinnamastā* is a powerful, self-sacrificing Tantric goddess, whose iconography pictures her as a woman holding her own severed head in her hand and drinking blood gushing from her slit throat. It may be taken as an evidence of an alternative vision of womanhood that existed outside the dominant orthodox Hindu discourse, which to a great extent shaped paradigms of women's appropriateness amongst the middle classes. It seems that mythological figures embodying powerful womanhood are important to Khaitan's vision of the Indian woman's identity. The images of Śakti are also strongly rooted in Bengal's Hindu heritage, where the cult of feminine divinity dominates, encompassing ambiguous i.e. benevolent as well as terrifying forms of goddesses.

desire." And (*ibid.*: 14): "(...) the declaration of 'love' between the conjugal couple is seen to upset the ties of duty and obligation that govern extended family".

The word ‘*anyā*’ may be decoded with reference to the author’s own status of being ostracised by the conservative Indian society as ‘the other’ woman. Apart from constant feeling of not fitting well within the society because of the illicit relationship, it may also allude to another dimension of the narrative self’s experiences of not belonging,³⁷ i.e. the sense of alienation she felt in her family because of being rejected by her mother and siblings, and in Kolkata amongst the Bengalis, who discarded her as an outsider, a Marwari, despite her persistent efforts to blend in.

Such designations, i.e. ‘the other one’ and ‘the unique one’, ostensibly suggest that the story of Khaitan’s life is a narrative of a painful process of transition from the other woman to the only one, who is unlike all the others. It is interesting to note that the title points to the uniqueness of the protagonist, which somehow legitimates the self-narrative and brings us back to the crucial undercurrent of feminist and post-colonial reflection on the value of every autobiographical narrative, which makes every life story unique.

The imagery alluding to both forms of female divinity, *Satī* and *Śakti*, and thus to two different Indian constructs of womanhood reappear in the narrative and it seems both from the title and from the invocation that the autobiography is a monologue of a rebellious *Śakti* relegated to a submissive *Satī*. The text opens with an invocation to Mother *Satī*, the wife of *Śiva* who immolated herself to protect her husband’s honour and hence embodies the all-pervasive vision of the Indian woman as a sacrificing wife described as the ideal of womanhood:

I bow to Thee, Sati! Oh Mother Sati! You have always been my ideal, I tried to form myself according to this tradition of your [sacrifice]. To me Sati meant complete devotion to one and only husband, dedication of everything to him, not even raising an eye to look at a strange man. But today I bow to the remnants of a woman inside me.³⁸

³⁷ Not belonging, something that haunted both de Beauvoir and Das too. Khaitan, who pined for belonging to the place she was born, was enthusiastic in embracing Bengali culture, but often experienced being treated as a ‘foreigner’ by those Bengalis who disliked Marwaris and their powerful hold over Calcutta’s industries and business.

³⁸ Khaitan 2008: 5: “*satī ko praṇām! satī mā! terā ādarś mere sāmne hameśā rahā, māī ne khud ko usī paramparā mē dhālne kī kośīś kī. mere lie satī kā arth thā, pati*

The opening of the autobiography with the invocation to the goddess Satī is a purposeful stylistic device; in this manner the story of Khaitan's life is shaped into a soliloquy of a rebellious Śakti entrusted to subservient Satī. However, there is another person invoked in these opening sentences who is the addressee of the life story too, i.e. the author herself or rather, as framed by the imagery, 'the remnants of a woman inside me'. Both invoked recipients reveal a multi-layered and subtle reading of the life story through the cultural markings of mythological topos and constructs of womanhood: the cost of freedom gained by Khaitan through her rebellious life choices is very high, as being an independent woman in live-in relationship with a married man she occupies a shifting and precarious position corresponding to incompatible and dissimilar models of Indian womanhood or Satī and Śakti. Thus Khaitan, a constant nonconformist, always standing for her independence and freedom, nonetheless had to make relentless compromises, which brought her to near self-destruction.³⁹ In this way Khaitan makes her audience mindful of the fact that a woman occupies a more liminal space than the two extremes of complete submission and total subversion.

Another aspect of the cultural construct of womanhood in Indian culture evoked in the self-narrative is the ever present and

kī ekaniṣṭh bhakti, sūcā samarpan, kiśī parāye mard kī or ākh uṭhākar bhī nahī dekhnā. lekin āj mere bhitar ki bacī huī stri ko praṇām". Compare with the English translation of Ira Pande, which omits the culturally marked content and presents an abbreviated extract of a longer opening paragraph, of which only a few sentences are presented in my translation above: "In Indian mythology, Sati—the consort of Shiva—is the embodiment of a woman who dedicated her whole life to a single man, and to him alone. I was always drawn to her and today, as I review my long life of over half a century, I bow to her; I also salute the remnants of the woman I once was" (Khaitan 2013: 1).

³⁹ In this context the last sentence of the autobiography is very telling: "There was no mention whatsoever of the woman called Prabha Khaitan" (Khaitan 2008: 287: Prabhā Khetān nāmak strī kā kahī bhī zikr nahī thā). Khaitan closes her work with a scene of the after-death ceremonies, when she is allowed to look at the dead man she spent her life with only after all the female family members, then male members have had a viewing, almost as in an afterthought. Summing up the addresses offered at the memorial service she expresses her bitter and wistful regret.

well-internalized association between women and suffering, and between suffering and righteousness. Exposure to suffering in everyday life, and experiences of constant emotional suffering and anxiety appear time and again in the text and are perceived as a part of an individual and universal feminine experience. In the following extract the concept of suffering as a common experience of women is voiced through the metaphorical image of crying, which in the colloquial language is a common articulation of the distress of women's daily experience: "Should the whole universe of a woman sink into a single tear drop? Why? What for? Crying and only crying, an ocean of tears, a river of tears, and you [have to] always swim in it"⁴⁰

The autobiography takes the suffering of women as a constant reference and presents alternative models of feminism⁴¹ within the traditional structure of Indian middle-class society, which however tend to go unnoticed by some Western feminist discourse on India. Khaitan's widowed mother, for whose acceptance and love the author craved her whole life, struggled financially after her husband's death to bring up Khaitan and her many siblings. In accordance with dramatically changed circumstances she transformed herself from a submissive and dependant wife into a woman aware of the importance of financial independence for her daughters, and the autobiographical self recognizes her mother's role in shaping her own strong need for economic self-sufficiency.⁴²

There are multiple dimensions to autobiographical reflection connected to breaking 'the aesthetics of silence'. The autobiographical narrative lays open the hidden and hideous facts and possibly initiates the process of healing the victim's pain. In just a few sentences Khaitan mentions rape by a close male relative in her childhood—a similar

⁴⁰ Khaitan 2007: 45: "Kyā ek b̄ūd ā̄nsu mē strī kā sārā brahmān samā jāe? Kyō? Kis lie? Ronā aur keval ronā, ā̄suō kā samandar, ā̄suō kā dariyā aur tairte raho tum".

⁴¹ I owe an acknowledgement here to Lim's reflections on some female ancestors of Das in her autobiography as 'early sources of her feminism' (Lim 1988: 356) that inspired my line of thought.

⁴² Compare: Khaitan 2007: 41.

motif appears also in her novel, *Chinnamastā*. Khaitan was sorely traumatised by this sordid incident and then traumatised even further by being prevented by her *ayah*, who was practically her foster mother, from talking to anyone about that deeply wounding and distressing experience. The whole appalling incident is narrated in very few sentences; here the paucity of words corresponds to near impossibility of expressing shock and pain of the abused child, and the silence between the sparse lines becomes more eloquent than what is actually voiced.

Like with so many independent and confident choices Prabha Khaitan makes in her life, it is also a matter of her personal choice to fictionalise her life in a manner of a novel. Blurring thus the line of the autobiography genre, she transposes it into a compelling story. Khaitan's autobiography progresses in a non-linear manner. It opens with an experience of emotional catharsis dating from the second half of her life, and from there on meanders back into childhood, leaping to and from between events of different times. It seems that Khaitan tells her life following the whimsical mechanisms of memory, and thus one event brings out others, not chronologically but following a subjective, emotional arrangement. This strategy builds a potent narrative, which reflects overpowering and emotional reactions to disturbing experiences in the author's life. Consequently the reader is left with an image of a fragmented narrative self and the pulsating restlessness of life filled with emotional turbulences and anxiety. This impression however is a result of the author's creative effort; it is in fact a life story performed by the narrative self.

In her autobiography Khaitan breaks 'the aesthetics of silence' imposed on women of her class and caste. Her honesty, perceived by some as impropriety, stirred many controversies amongst the readers, and influenced literary evaluation of her work. Her narrative consciously enters into a discussion with autobiographical texts of global and cross-regional importance. She both challenges and to some extent complies with the dominant orthodox discourse on womanhood by introducing the very Indian imagery of archetypical female divinity,

both *Satī* and *Śakti*, which also allows her to explore much more subtle and entwined coexistence of women's submission and subversion.

Claiming the right to self-expression is a powerful form of revolt against society's rigidity and censure. And yet faithfulness to life choices, even the bad ones, and guarding freedom and independence gained by exercising these options is self-destructive for the narrative self. The narrative self is never at ease, feels out of place all the time, has no sense of belonging and constantly craves acceptance, which brings to mind the words of Helen Cixous: "I think the feeling of being a woman, womanbeingness—let us forge this word womanbeingness—is foreignness. All women are foreign in society and if they don't feel foreign it is because they have abolished their reality".⁴³

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