

Acts of Selfhood—A Review of Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (eds.). *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance and Autobiography in South Asia*. x + 312 pp. New Delhi: Zubaan. 2017, isbn 978-93-85932-38-0.
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The surge in research on autobiographies in the past two or three decades has compelled scholars of the humanities and the social sciences to recognize first-person life narratives as unveiling a significant layer of historical experience. This insight has particular relevance in South Asia, where autobiographical genres have become a powerful host for voices that have been underprivileged or silenced in public discourses. *Speaking of the Self*, edited by Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, first published by Duke University Press in 2015, has recently been brought out in an Indian edition by Zubaan. The volume, dedicated to Avril Powell, renowned for her scholarship on Islam and gender in South Asia, contains ten fascinating essays, along with a detailed introduction in which the editors review significant theoretical scholarship on selfhood and autobiographical narration. The three headings under which these essays are grouped—“Negotiating Autobiography: Between Assertion and Subversion”, “Forms and Modes of Self-Fashioning”, and “Destabilizing the Normative: The Heterogenous Self”—appear to offer a synoptic description of the volume’s principal concerns: it charts diverse modes assumed by women’s self-inscription in its relationship with structures of power and normativity, ranging from ambivalent negotiations to transgression and subversion.

Textual scholarship on autobiography has often focused on detailed readings of single texts. Many of the essays assembled here offer a welcome change by engaging multiple texts, thereby opening up fresh analytical possibilities and methodological issues. Sylvia Vatuk's study of Zakira Begam's memoir, drawing on the autobiographical text as well as the author's oral commentary, offers a fascinating account of the role played by reading, of conduct books for women and more importantly of Urdu novels, in the formation of female subjectivity in a Hyderabad Muslim context in the 1920s. The paper constructs a nuanced delineation of the scene of reading and selfhood, where the topography of the house, practices of seclusion, boundaries of visibility and agency, and the affective and thematic dimensions of fictional texts play crucial roles. Vatuk shows how identification with the universe of novels served as a tool for imagining and rehearsing possible lives especially for women readers like Begam whose interaction with the social world was restricted. The preoccupation with multiple texts and forms of expression is continued in Ritu Menon's essay which addresses Nayantara Sahgal's two autobiographies as well as unpublished letters and personal interviews Menon had access to as biographer. Menon traces the story of Sahgal's selfhood through a reading of two autobiographical texts, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) and *From Fear Set Free* (1962), and argues that the difference in tone and texture between them manifests the impact of the intervening years of crisis in Sahgal's marital life, leading to a concealment of the personal and a muting of the political in the later narrative. Menon discerns the emergence of the possibility of an alternative trajectory of life and its subsequent closure in letters from this time, and underlines the close connection between the crisis in Sahgal's personal life and her dissonance with dominant norms. The juxtaposition of diverse narratives appears again in Asiya Alam's discussion of Nazr Sajjad Hyder's diary and memoir, assembled posthumously by her daughter and renowned writer Qurratulain Hyder. Alam reads these as documents of everyday life as well as of reform and activism, which bring up issues of intimate private experiences and their public articulation in women's writing.

Interestingly, events of importance find mention not in the memoir but in the diary, while the former serves as a repository for ordinary experiences. The context of social reform is continued in Shubhra Ray's essay on the diary of Kailashbhashini Debi, who has received scholarly attention in the context of nineteenth-century women's writing from Bengal. Tracing signs of subtle forms of agency in the diarist's self-positioning, Ray argues that the text exceeds the frame of reformist patriarchy within which it is often placed.

If essays by Vatuk, Menon, Alam and Ray capture the interplay between attitudes of conformity and non-conformity in women's autobiographical writing, the ensuing three essays effect a remarkable pluralization in our conception of self-articulation by going beyond familiar boundaries of the autobiographical genre. Uma Chakravarti's fascinating paper considers three novels written by Pakistani women authors—Mumtaz Shah Nawaz, Khadjia Mastur and Zaheda Hina—against the background of the partition. While these fictional texts do not count as autobiographies according to strict generic definition, Chakravarti reads them productively as 'autobiographies of sentiment', proposing an extension of Philippe Lejeune's influential conception of the 'autobiographical pact' beyond the author, the narrator and the reader to the protagonists of these novels, who offer a locus for the presentation of sentiments lived in by the author. If Vatuk's essay had considered the reading of fiction as a resource for self-constitution, here fiction takes on the role of the medium for oblique or displaced autobiographical writing. The modified autobiographical pact suggested here would need to be thought in relation to the difficult figuration of the subject in traumatic experiences, such as the partition. If Chakravarti takes autobiography outside its generic limits, the essays that follow extend it beyond the domain of writing. Looking closely at Mah Laqa Bai "Chanda", a famous *tawa'if* from late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Hyderabad, as poet and as patron, Shweta Sachdeva Jha considers the use of "conventional acts of imperial image-making such as composing poetry, architectural patronage and commissioning chronicles" as important acts of authorship and

autobiographization. Jha's essay contextualizes such meaning-making in relation to the declining Mughal control and the emergence of regional courts. Afshan Bokhari's paper pursues a similar line of enquiry in the context of the Mughal court with Jahanara Begam, the eldest daughter of Mumtaz Mahal, who became the keeper of the harem after her mother's death. Sensitive to the nuances of relationships of power and the authority of discourses, the paper argues that while Jahanara Begam's two Sufi treatises—written in the context of her discipleship to Mullah Shah Badakshi—draw on her female identity in an idiom of mystical union with the male *pir*, her historical texts, as well as her commissions for architectural projects and mausoleum, assume a masculine mode in tune with the idioms of imperial authority.

Female self-articulation in the spiritual domain and the relationship of devotion and authority with the master recur in Anshu Malhotra's study of Piro, a low caste Muslim prostitute from the nineteenth century who joined the Gulabdasi sect. Piro is credited with the authorship of 160 *Kafis*, which—in the face of accusations of a sensuous relationship with her Guru—stress the purity of her new self and a distancing from her earlier community. This paper too pays careful attention to acts of self-fashioning in forms that are not avowedly autobiographical. Forms such as the *kafi* and the *qissa*, and the invocation of character figures such as Sita and Hir, become important resources and props in Piro's acts of self-presentation.

We turn to the twentieth century in the last two essays in the volume, which continue the volume's sustained exploration of practices of self-making and expression. Siobhan Lambert-Hurley's essay reads Raihana Tyabji's practices of *bhakti* devotionism as a mode of self-representation. A Muslim woman with Sufi inclinations, Tyabji was also a devotee of Gandhian thought and practice, and composes an unusual text titled *The Heart of a Gopi* in what she describes as a state of possession. The paper foregrounds several situations—of possession, devotion, and conscious and unconscious dimensions of sexuality—that raise important questions about agency. For instance, is the narrative of possession better read as a recourse to the resources of tradition

or as an instance of active choice? Possession marks a situation where the subject's activity cannot be distinguished from or contrasted with its passivity and receptivity. Kathryn Hansen's essay on two renowned actors of Parsi theatre—Jayshankar Sundari and Fida Husain, the only male autobiographers studied in the volume—explores the interlinkages between theatrical acting, the performance of gender identities, and questions of religious faith. As in Hansen's other work, this paper too pays meticulous attention to the institutions and practices of theatre and the texture of negotiations of private lives within this professional context. The self-narratives of Sundari and Husain have been the result of collaborative authorship, deepening the interface between performance, publicness and self-articulation.

The diversity of fields and the commendable sense of detail in the essays in the volume no doubt make it an important resource for students of history, particularly women's history in South Asia. An equally—perhaps even more—important contribution of the volume is found in the fresh analytical moves it makes, which in my view are ahead of the mainstream theoretical scholarship invoked at times in the volume. Many of the essays, as noted above, move away from a consideration of self-writing in terms of features of autobiographical genres to other kinds of texts such as novels, devotional texts, mystical writing and historiography. As we saw, some essays go beyond textual modes to foreground acts of self-authorship and self-inscription, as seen for instance in the commissioning of chronicles, architectural projects and other acts of patronage. The deeper question that comes up repeatedly in this volume concerns the status of agency. Tropes of performativity, devotion and possession that appear in the volume point to a need to reconsider our conception of agency and the way we use it in the study of self-articulation. It is not surprising that this volume, devoted to gendered identities and women's lives, would be the place where this need would arise. The essays collected here persuade us to reconsider the location of gender in the scene of autobiographical articulation in finer terms, taking cognizance of practices with complex and ambivalent figurations of agency and autonomy.