

INTRODUCTION

Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia

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For many, autobiography is their only path to the past. Autobiography offers a way in which individuals can interweave their personal stories and memories with a public account of those major historical events that have social and political meaning within a given society. But how do autobiographies differ in their form, content, and purpose depending on their place or time? Do men and women write differently in given political, social, and cultural circumstances? And how far may the autobiographical genre be understood as a type of performance?

This book's aim is to begin answering these questions by theorizing the relationship between gender, history, and the self. It does so by looking at life histories and beyond to take a more complex approach to the history of women and their conceptualization of the self in South Asia. In particular, it explores how notions of "performance" and "performativity" might be especially useful in opening up the autobiographical genre. For a genre that is inherently confessional—an artifice insofar as it is about self-fashioning—the idea of performance teases out the choices made in terms of forms and narrative strategies employed, and the audiences addressed. In other words, if we look at autobiographical practice as a "self in performance," we begin to appreciate the historical, social, and cultural milieu in which the self was imbricated, and what enabled gendered subjectivity and speech. Linking this discussion then

is a new set of questions significant to the theory, methodology, and practice of women's history more broadly: what genres of self-representation do women employ in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial contexts? Were there common motivations, lingual and stylistic choices, preferences of genres, or issues that took center stage among women? Or do their disparate cultural matrices resist such a reading? And what happens when gender identity itself is not stable?

The chapters themselves examine the writings and experiences of a wide range of "women"—among them, a Mughal princess, a famous courtesan from Hyderabad, an ascetic from a minor sect in Punjab, a Bengali housewife, a singer from Bombay's Bohra community, an Urdu novelist from north India, an educationalist from Hyderabad, several Indian and Pakistani novelists, and even female impersonators in colonial Indian theater. This book thus moves away from the crevices created for women's subjectivity by the nationalist and reformist agendas to focus on historical circumstances and characters that have hitherto not received due attention. The list, however, is naturally selective. In part, it reflects the contributors' own research interests—but, as this is a book that focuses primarily (though not entirely) on the written life, these subjects are, in turn, limited by the requirement of literacy, a marker that remained woefully low in South Asia until very recently and, indeed, still does in certain sectors.¹ Significantly, some wrote in contexts of performative traditions; others performed selves under the aegis of specific sectarian affiliations with particular audiences in mind. Through the study of particular genres, language, and cultural codes, we seek to unravel (wo)men's attempts at engagement with and fabrication of the self that lie embedded in their personal narratives. As such, the chapters reach out to women (and men) from different walks of life, from different places and times, but all explore dimensions of expressing the gendered self through various modes of self-fashioning and representation—from poetry, autobiography, and novels to architecture and religious treatises. Let us explore these variant forms and histories of autobiography to begin.

Autobiography and Its Histories

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For there to be a history of autobiography, there needs to be a beginning. And, more often than not, that beginning is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, completed at the French Enlightenment's height by one of its denizens in 1770. Of course, as theorists recognize, there had been life writing before that time—who could forget St. Augustine's own *Confessions* (c. 400)? Or the memoirists of the Italian Renaissance: Petrarch, Cellini, Cardano. Rousseau though

represented something different and specific. As Jill Ker Conway summarizes, he kept the “inner story of the hero’s emotional life and conflicts,” but “without St. Augustine’s sense of sin”: “the trajectory of his life moves not toward God but toward worldly fame and success.”² As the “atomistic individual,” Rousseau set a pattern to be reproduced again and again throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. Hence, Roy Pascal, in his influential *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, could write in 1960 that a distinction needed to be made between the “memoir or reminiscence” that came before Rousseau and the “true autobiography” that came after.³ Even as scholars continue to debate how autobiography may be distinguished from other literary forms—biography, the novel, history—so “definitive” definitions continue to reflect Rousseauian origins.⁴ Consider Philippe Lejeune’s “pronouncement” in his influential *Lautobiographie en France* (1971): “We call autobiography the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality.”⁵ His subsequent work and that of other theorists may have “eroded” his definition, and yet it continues to be reproduced.⁶

But is this narrative of autobiography’s origins anything more than a historical construction? A “fallacy,” to borrow Dwight Reynolds’s provocative descriptor, promulgated by Western literary critics from the mid-twentieth century? Before this time, Reynolds argues, European scholars were often willing to consider autobiography as a literary genre that—comparable to biography and the novel—invited comparison across temporal and geographical boundaries. Then, abruptly, perhaps in response to the end of empire or out of fear for a new cultural relativism, autobiography began to be treated as the “exclusive creation of the modern West.”⁷ The clearest articulation of this stance came from Georges Gusdorf in a 1956 article: “It would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that had been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he had communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own.”⁸ Thus, as Pascal too recognized, other “civilizations” may have produced autobiographies “in modern times”—a notable example from South Asia being Gandhi’s *An Autobiography, or, The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1925–28)—but, in doing so, they had “taken over” a European practice. Even as Pascal recognized the existence of the Mughal emperor Babur’s often intimate sixteenth-century memoir, he proclaimed: “There remains no doubt that autobiography is essentially European.”⁹ In relation to South Asia, perhaps he was relying on the judgment of S. P. Saksena, who

had asserted a few years before in his important book *Indian Autobiographies* (1949) that “self-portrayal” was of “recent origin in this country” and “essentially the result of English education.”¹⁰ Even today, modern autobiography continues to be seen in South Asia as a legacy of the colonial period.¹¹

These presumptions then, as Reynolds asserts, have continued to underline autobiography studies until far too recently—and perhaps, in some quarters, still continue to do so.¹² The effect is that, where non-Western autobiographies have been addressed, they have often been cast as “exceptions” to the rule—however many of them there may be—and measured against an ideal type seemingly typified by Rousseau. We may consider, as an illustrative example, Marvin Zonis’s rather bleak pronouncement on autobiography in the Middle East: “Those works from the region that achieve the ‘true potential of the genre’ are few in number, limiting the utility of autobiography for illuminating Middle Eastern conceptions of the self.”¹³ In a South Asian context, Stephen Dale similarly notes of the aforementioned Babur that he “wrote autobiographically but did not produce a fully realized life of the 18th-century type”: while he conveys a “vivid and plausible individuality,” he is “not often introspective.”¹⁴ Inherent to both of these judgments is an assumption that autobiographical revelation—measured against the theoretical bar of definitions evolved almost exclusively in a European context—is a means to understanding cultural notions of self. “The almost inevitable result,” according to Reynolds, “is that other, particularly non-Western, forms of autobiography are discounted as immature and underdeveloped, as pale shadows of the ‘real’ or ‘true’ autobiography known only in the modern West, and therefore as literary productions clearly not born of the same sense of individual identity.”¹⁵ We return to this discussion of individuality and identity in the following section.

What is relevant here is that all these debates have had an important impact on nomenclature. Having read to this point, many readers may question how appropriate it is for this book to use the term *autobiography* in its title when it is so bound up in historical terms with the life narratives of the “atomistic Western male hero.”¹⁶ Indeed, many postmodern and postcolonial theorists have discarded the term on the basis that, as Smith and Watson summarize, “its politics is one of exclusion.”¹⁷ Not only does it fail to recognize the breadth of autobiographical practice around the globe and at different times—something this book aims to do—but, as we have seen, it also privileges a specifically “Western” notion of self, thus marginalizing other cultural forms of self and self-representation.¹⁸ Smith and Watson, in their authoritative reader on “autobiography,” consequently favor the terms *life writing* and *life narrative* on the basis that they are more “inclusive of the heterogeneity of self-referential

practices” and thus offer a means by which “a new, globalized history of the field might be imagined.”¹⁹ And yet scholars of South Asia have favored other terms: *life history* or, if concerned that the former would indicate some sort of truth-claim, *life story*.²⁰ The limited scholarship in South Asian languages similarly adopts conjunctive terms denoting one’s own life writing or story: the Persianized *khud navisht* in Urdu, *atma jiboni* and *atma carita* in Bengali, or *atma katha* in Hindi, and other vernaculars.²¹ *Autobiography* is sometimes used,²² but, as Arnold and Blackburn argue in the introduction to their important *Telling Lives in India*, its association with text means that it is understood “to privilege print over orality and to ignore the often fragmentary or allusive nature of many life-historical forms.”²³ For similar reasons, other South Asian scholars, particularly of women’s history, have preferred the term *personal narratives* on the basis that it includes not just “the more formal, full-length, structured autobiography,” but also diaries, letters, interviews, poems, stories, essays, and other “portraits from memory.”²⁴

Contributors to this book also consider a wide range of source materials, and thus the chapters employ and interrogate many of the terms discussed here. Indeed, it is the aim of this book’s part I to uncover the ways in which South Asian women have negotiated the autobiographical genre—so manipulated or disrupted the forms that had come to be accepted as standard or even proper by the late nineteenth century. Sylvia Vatuk, to begin, examines how a Muslim woman from Hyderabad, Zakira Begam (1922–2003), negotiated with available reformist models when writing in a family magazine in the early 1950s about her childhood in the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, Vatuk argues that Zakira Begam used fictional characters in Urdu novels—some of whom she identified as “worthy of emulation” and others whom she “disdained and resolved to avoid imitating”—as a means of articulating the adult self that she wanted to be. Like Zakira Begam, Nazr Sajjad Hyder (1892–1967), the focus of Asiya Alam’s chapter, published her life story in serial form in Urdu journals, but in two phases: first as a diary from 1942, and then, after Partition, as a memoir accompanied by letters from 1950. In Alam’s words, the narrative thus represents a “kaleidoscope of genres” that is especially distinguished by its recovery of “everyday life.” Ritu Menon, on the other hand, examines the autobiographies of well-known Indian novelist Nayantara Sahgal (b. 1927) as a “monument to a buried self” that deviated from accepted social and gender scripts for women in 1950s India. The final chapter in this section, by Shubhra Ray, takes the case of a relatively lesser-known Bengali autobiography, *Janaika Grihabadhur Diary* [The diary of a housewife], initially composed, as the title indicates, in diary form between 1847 and 1873, though published as a whole

only in 1952. Against a background of reformist politics, Ray shows how the author, Kailashbhashini Debi (c. 1829–1895), used her diary to express a self that, while aware of cultural constraints, challenged the way in which the “new woman” was being constructed.

Part II of this book also focuses explicitly on the question of form. It does so by examining the different modes employed by South Asian women—whether princesses, prostitutes, or Partition writers—to express a sense of female subjectivity from the Mughal period to the near present. In the first chapter, Uma Chakravarti examines three novels written by Pakistani women on the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 that she understands to be “deeply autobiographical in sentiment.” In particular, she makes the point that the novel form allows the female authors to “speak for a larger feminine self beyond personal experience,” thus amalgamating the individual self with history at South Asia’s “most intensely violent moment.” Shweta Sachdeva Jha’s chapter, on the other hand, examines how Maha Laqa Bai “Chanda” (c. 1757–c. 1824), a famous *tawa’if*, or courtesan, at the Hyderabad court, asserted her celebrity through various acts of self-fashioning—from building tanks and mosques to writing Urdu poetry that she then produced and circulated as a collection, or *divan*—which together, she asserts, may be read as “autobiography.” Similarly, Afshan Bokhari explores the “dual personas” of the Mughal princess Jahanara Begam (1614–1681) as a daughter of the emperor and a self-proclaimed spiritual authority of the Sufi Qadiriya order by examining her articulations of self in an autobiographical Sufi treatise, *Risalah-i-Sahibiyah*, and, intriguingly, sacred architecture, specifically mosque design.

The focus of part III is on destabilizing some of the categories that may otherwise be taken for granted when considering delineations of the self, notably religion and even gender itself. But the overlapping nature of this book’s three parts is perhaps most evident in that the three chapters located here also reflect very consciously on the question of genre. Anshu Malhotra’s essay examines how Piro, a Muslim prostitute in mid-nineteenth-century Punjab, used the poetic form of the *kafi*, a rhyming verse with simple meters, to narrate the “scandal” of her “conversion” to the establishment of a “Sikh” guru Gulabdas, particularly through reference to “fables and parables.” Malhotra thus concludes that “emulation, allusion, and allegory” offered means by which individuals in premodern societies could not only order and make sense of their life experiences, but also mold a self. That other narrative forms, like Bhakti devotionism, could offer a means of self-representation even in the modern period is explored in Siobhan Lambert-Hurley’s chapter. Here, the spiritual writings of a nominally Muslim devotee of Krishna, Raihana Tyabji (1901–1975), are

explored for their self-representation, Lambert-Hurley ultimately concluding that, in the tradition of Islamic life writing, the “miraculous” narrated should be understood as a “form of autobiography, if only the autobiography of the imagination.” The Indian theater autobiographies from late colonial India discussed by Kathryn Hansen are perhaps less controversial in terms of form, but, in narrating the experiences of male actors who performed as women on the stage, they too complicate autobiography’s identification with the “male hero.” As Hansen concludes, far from being “made mute through subordination,” her autobiographical subjects, Jayshankar Sundari (1889–1975) and Fida Husain (1899–2001), spoke in voices that were “often bold, daring, and feisty.”

As editors then, we take a conscious decision to reclaim the term *autobiography*—or, perhaps more correctly, its wide-ranging derivative, *autobiographical*—to apply to a diversity of forms, subjects, and expressions from the Mughal period to the regional courts of the eighteenth century, from the high colonial period into Independence. Some may critique this inclusive approach for bringing too much under autobiography’s umbrella: for collapsing the differences between genres and thus not drawing a sufficiently clear line between autobiography and its others. But, as Paul de Man asks, is not a major problem with autobiographical theory that it seeks to do just that: “to define and to treat autobiography as if it were a literary genre *among others*.”²⁵ Any historian in the field will know that autobiography in reality, if not theory, is a hybrid and elastic form that absorbs and intersects with other genres.²⁶ Hence, de Man concludes that autobiography is best characterized not as “a genre or a mode,” but instead as “a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts.”²⁷ Developing this approach, we reject autobiography’s politics of exclusion by which South Asian forms may be judged against a Western ideal by assuming an expanded, if simplified, definition replete with global and temporal resonances. What implications this inclusivity has for our understanding of self-representation, gender, and voice is explored further in the following section.

Self-Representation, Gender, and Voice

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It is somewhat of an axiom that South Asian societies privilege the social and communal over the individual. Yet what scholars of this region have made clear is that self-representation has been practiced in different ways and for varied purposes throughout South Asian history: from early Pali and Sanskrit narratives of the Buddha through to celebrated autobiographies by Indian nationalists

and beyond.²⁸ In order to construct life histories, historians have employed sometimes disparate and fragmentary sources. A useful example is the piecing together of the mystic poet Kabir's biography/hagiography through the use of "autobiographical" verses available in three different recensions.²⁹ Anthropologists, on the other hand, have used oral and folk traditions in order to understand the significance of life legends for storytelling.³⁰ Others, including literary specialists, have examined the specificities of a cultural milieu in an attempt to understand why an autobiographical narrative—like the eighteenth-century Mughal poet Mir Muhammad Taqi's *Zikr-i-Mir* analyzed by C. M. Naim—was constructed in a particular way.³¹ As Naim shows, Mir's self-image, personal agendas, and social expectations all played a part in shaping the tone and content of his autobiography. Life histories can thus offer a means, as Arnold and Blackburn assert, of countering an idea of India essentially made up of "castes, religious communities, and kinship networks": where "a sense of selfhood, of personal identity and agency, is muted and subsumed within large social and cultural domains."³²

At the same time a sharp distinction between the self and society needs to be qualified. What seems to define South Asian autobiography right into the twentieth century and perhaps beyond is the active dialogue between the "life of the individual" and the "lives of others"—or, put more simply, the "self-in-society."³³ It would, however, be wrong to assume that social and cultural norms always act as constraints that stifle individual expression. As Farhat Hasan has demonstrated in his reading of the early seventeenth-century autobiography *Ardhakathanaka* (Half a Tale), of a Srimal Jain merchant Banarsidas, that society was tolerant of and gave space to individual preference, agency, and autonomy. Though Banarsidas often reinforced social norms in reflecting on his life, he still made it a point to record his disagreements and resistances against social and familial values and expectations.³⁴ Indeed the idea of a "sovereign self," unified and autonomous, is increasingly perceived as a myth in the West where it originated, and where postmodernism and a variety of Black American and feminist critiques have put an end to the idea, instead looking at selves in "relational" terms. Besides the modern state's technologies of power that circumscribe individual lives, there is recognition that cultural norms exert their influence on people.³⁵ The difference is, as Hansen has argued recently, that in the West the move has been from looking at the self as sovereign to seeing it increasingly in relation to others; whereas in South Asia, instead of seeing the self as "fragmented" with weak individuality, the assertion is that all selves construct themselves in relational terms.³⁶

What is perhaps curious about this observation is that it is one more often applied to autobiographies written by women, wherever they may come from. Gender specialists have raised their own set of theoretical questions in relation to autobiography—among them, can women even write about their experiences in a genre shaped by misogynistic conventions that “denigrate the feminine”?³⁷ Others have focused on how women’s autobiographies may be distinguished from those of men in terms of structure and content, offering what Smith and Watson summarize as a “difference” theory of women’s autobiography.³⁸ Accordingly, women’s autobiographies are said to be more personal than political, focusing on the relationships of the domestic realm, rather than charting the accomplishments of a public life or career. They are also characterized as more fragmentary than linear, rejecting the coherent construction of self that distinguished the Rousseauian model in favor of a more disjointed telling of one’s past. Women’s narratives, we are told, are characterized by “understatements, avoidance of the first person point of view, rare mention of personal accomplishments and disguised statements of personal power.”³⁹ What this adds up to, as suggested already, is a narrative that is more collective than individual: less about the carefully crafted public self and more about the self-in-society. In seeking to understand why, the suggestion is that women, like minorities and those in colonized societies, have not had the “privilege” of thinking of themselves as individuals in the way that a “white man” has the “luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex.”⁴⁰ When women’s writing does not follow the given “feminine” script, we also tend to see their self-construction as “masculine”—in other words, the reader’s expectations of a text color its reception. Haimabati Sen, in Indrani Sen’s reading of her autobiography, casts herself in a “male-type” role, in her detached tone, rational and scientific attitude, and eye for empirical detail, and also presumably because she shares the particulars of her professional life of a medical practitioner.⁴¹

In this book Vatak takes up this question to understand the specificities of autobiography when written by women, emphasizing that when women speak, they often do so not only for themselves, but also for women generally, a point further examined below. It may be briefly noted that Sharmila Rege speaks of collective representation of pain and suffering in the context of dalit women’s autobiographies, calling them “testimonios,” witnesses to a community’s oppression (the term *testimonio* emerged in the context of Latin American individuals’ narratives of the exploitation of the indigenous communities). Acutely aware that the representation of pain should not become a spectacle, Rege emphasizes the significance of the collective voice as against what she refers to as bourgeois

individualism, exploring the possibilities of an emancipatory dalit feminism in politics and pedagogical structures.⁴² The politics of self-representation is thus, inevitably, about power. Appropriately then, what scholarship on South Asia specifically has shown is the importance of autobiography as a genre to marginalized groups such as women, religious converts, and dalits as a means to “talk back.”⁴³

An expression of a collective voice can be discerned in the manner in which biographies can be autobiographical; that is, sometimes an imperceptible fusion or extension of the self and the other can take place in the writing of the auto/biography. The link between biography and history, on the other hand, is a well-established one, for instance in the Islamic world, where biography, as elsewhere, is structured by history. As Judith Tucker has argued about Arab biographers, those individuals were always located within time, and so individual life served to illuminate its age.⁴⁴ In colonial India, as men took to writing “autobiographies,” they seldom wrote of their personal, intimate lives. This could be because the idea of a private life was not fully formed,⁴⁵ or because a self was not seen worthy to be written about, or because it was considered too egoistical to focus on the self (the trope of self-abnegation apparently not being exclusive to women though they may resort to it more frequently).⁴⁶ And so men wrote of their times, perceived to be out of joint. Documenting earlier times in a period of rapid mutations became a motivation to write, discussed by Venkatachalapathy through showing the persistent usage of the trope of “those days/these days,” in the redolent Tamil expression *antha kulam/intha kulam*.⁴⁷ However, the biographical as a ruse for the autobiographical, or the autobiographical incorporating the biographical, seems more often deployed by women in many parts of the world.⁴⁸

Marilyn Booth, studying biography and gender politics in a modernizing Egypt of the late nineteenth century, comments on the manner in which women used and changed the exemplary biography tradition of the Islamic world. Speaking particularly of the “obituary biography,” she shows how women inserted the autobiographical in its composition, and so the authorial “I” represented both an individual and a collective identity.⁴⁹ As Booth put it, a text cannot be read in isolation from its “pre-texts” and “con-texts,” pointing to what may prompt and promote women’s autobiographical initiative. A similar point is made by Vijaya Ramaswamy in her reading of the multiple narratives of Neelambakai Ammaiyar’s life, a woman deeply involved in the promotion of Tamil language in the early twentieth-century Madras. It is in Ammaiyar’s biographical sketches of women—white feminists as well as those from the Tamil society—that Ramaswamy finds a distinctly autobiographical “sub-text.”⁵⁰

In a subtle mixing of genres, Bharati Ray has recently written an auto/biography of five generations of women in her family, starting from her maternal great-grandmother, continuing through her grandmother and mother, to her, and mentioning her daughters.⁵¹ Ray, self-consciously feminist in her endeavor, both follows certain norms, for instance in omitting intimate details of the women's lives, including her own, and breaks new ground. The latter is visible in the pride she displays in her extraordinary achievements in public and professional life. One can even argue that the first three generations act as a foil to brighten her illustrious career, their biographies laying the ground for her autobiography. Mythily Sivaraman's effort to piece together the life of her maternal grandmother, Subbalakshmi, also grew out of her own feminist stirrings.⁵² Constructing the fragile life of Subbalakshmi (she appears so both in her projected persona, and in the scanty and tenuous contents of her archive, "the blue tin trunk") was possible through careful preservation of its contents by her daughter and Mythily's mother, Pankajam.⁵³ The collective and determined enterprise to write Subbalakshmi's story is obvious. Chakravarti, in this book, as noted earlier, uses three Pakistani women's novels on the Partition of India to elaborate on the multiple conjunctions in the lives of the women of the Indian subcontinent. Chakravarti not only shows how the novels were autobiographical but also weaves into her essay her own autobiographical interest in histories of violence and their impact on women's everyday lives. From her essay one can in fact surmise that the novelists' voice was the cathartic release of the congealed emotions of a generation or more of women affected by that tragedy.

But, to return to the question of autobiographical voice, can South Asian women actually "talk back"? Can they even speak? Gayatri Spivak famously asserted that the South Asian woman, so completely strangled by patriarchal modes of thought and discussion, had no real voice.⁵⁴ Certainly it has proved difficult for scholars to get at women's voices in light of the premium placed in South Asian culture on keeping women away from public gaze. These challenges have encouraged some anthropologists to undertake the project of deciphering women's songs, poetry, and folktales, while others have employed ethnographic methods to extract life stories in oral form.⁵⁵ Historians, on the other hand, have remained more focused on text, seeking to uncover written autobiographical narratives—a body of materials that is necessarily restricted by literacy and education, but still is perhaps not as limited as was once thought.⁵⁶ Hence, as probably indicated already, it is an underlying assumption of this collection that the challenges involved in recovering women's voice should not indicate a lack of voice. On the contrary, if women had the temerity to negotiate with their own cultures in order to speak, so do we have

a duty, as scholars, to uncover and understand the cultural context in which their speech was created. As the essays in this collection demonstrate, women's voices and thus their self-representation may be convoluted, elusive, paradoxical, and metaphorical—or, to borrow the lovely word applied by Booth to Egyptian women's autobiographical writings, "diaphanous"⁵⁷—*but they are still there*. South Asian women have always found ways, as we assert with our title, of speaking of the self.

A question remains, though, of the self of which they speak: is it necessarily a gendered self? Did the authors discussed here think of themselves as "women writers" at all? The last question is especially pertinent being that the authors discussed in Hansen's chapter are not, in fact, biologically women at all, even though they were known by female personas. In this context, we may question our role as editors in grouping these texts together: are we simply perpetuating the assumptions of nineteenth-century observers who categorized such writings as "women's texts"? Clearly there is not one answer here: some of the authors discussed in this collection thought of themselves consciously as women writing, while others were more aware of other roles and identities. And, whatever their intention in writing, the audiences by which they were read may have interpreted them as something different, particularly within the context of reformist and nationalist agendas. Nevertheless, we would assert that, even where these authors were not necessarily *writing* as women, they were—with the partial exception of Hansen's actors—still *living* as women, and thus the constraints of life within a specifically South Asian patriarchal society put constraints on their ways of writing as well, even if these choices were not conscious. Hence, in the end, we come to the conclusion that the authors discussed in this collection do fit together in that they all speak of a gendered self that is definably South Asian. The use of *gender*, rather than *women*, in the book's title is thus purposeful in that it reflects these underlying assumptions, while also acting as a strategy against the marginalization of women's history within the academy.

Still, it is fundamental to feminist writing to grant women agency, even as they may employ tropes of modesty in their autobiographical writings that deny their own importance or autonomy. In writing about autobiographies constructed within the long tradition of Islamic life stories, Barbara Metcalf makes the point that authors employ a "convention of passivity" according to which nothing that happens to them—including the very act of writing itself—is attributable to their own initiative.⁵⁸ A parallel may be drawn here with many of the writings discussed in this collection in that they too are, to quote Vatuk's analysis, "particularly deferential and apologetic"—and thus perhaps even definably

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“feminine” within their cultural context, though deference could be, as noted, formulaic and conventional. But, as in Metcalf’s case, modesty should not be confused with a lack of agency, nor self-effacement with a lack of self. Rather, Smith and Watson make the point that it is the very way in which people operate *within* constraints—changing existing narratives or “writing back” to scripted cultural stories—that can suggest “a strategy for *gaining agency*.”⁵⁹ Hence, Margot Badran goes so far as to claim that, for the Egyptian nationalist and feminist Huda Shaarawi (1879–1947), the very act of writing a memoir—of revealing her “private life, family life, inner feelings and thoughts” in a society in which these matters were “sacrosanct”—was a “feminist act.”⁶⁰ Similarly, Farzaneh Milani interprets the “literary misfit” of women’s autobiographical writing in Iran as the “ultimate form of unveiling”—and thus, in Smith and Watson’s understanding, the very definition of agency in that it is disruptive to “existing social and political formations.”⁶¹ Thus we wish to understand agency as more than resistance to patriarchal formations. While employing strategies and tactics to maneuver patriarchies is significant, it is also important to recognize how choices are made within the constraints placed on individual lives by cultures they are situated in. Women’s agency therefore is polysemic, and we have to uncover ways of locating and focusing on it.⁶² One of the ways in which agency can be grasped is to understand the heterogeneity of the self; that is, one can be a different person at separate times, underlining the salience of a performing self, a concept we explore in the next section.

Gender, Performance, and Memory

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Within the folktale tradition in India, scholars have drawn attention to a genre they refer to as “women’s tales,” insofar as women are its primary raconteurs and characters.⁶³ Categorizing these stories as those that revolve around the “innocent persecuted heroine,” Stuart Blackburn sees them as narrating life histories where the template of the denouement is about truth telling—when the suffering heroine is finally restored to her rightful place in family/society.⁶⁴ This occurs mostly when amnesia dissolves and memory returns. Such tales have a wide currency and are popular all over India.⁶⁵ Although not autobiographical, being cultural stories of generic characters, they throw up questions that are central to some of the issues about life writing that are discussed in this section. These relate to questions of memory—remembering, forgetting, and misremembering; and of the voice of the marginalized, mostly women of disparate classes and statuses—how do those who do not normally have a

voice in society speak? Do they follow coded patterns of self-revelation, as in women's tales above, or do they invent selves in new and unexpected ways? Also noteworthy is that storytelling (autobiographical narration included) is performative, requiring a performer and an audience, every fresh rendition of a tale, whether "on stage or page" different from any already performed or yet to be performed.⁶⁶

The term *performance* is used in this introduction for the various semantic and conceptual openings it makes for us. Though not relating to the actual performances of life narratives in theater, it is to the metaphorical and figurative aspects of life writing—that can be no less theatrical—that we refer.⁶⁷ The autobiographical "text" is never a transparent rendering of a life, nor is it a straightforward documentation of it. Deeply implicated in the politics of remembering and what is to be remembered, memory and what is to be memorialized, the autobiographical is intrinsically interpretive and performative. The subjectivity that the life writer wishes to create in the narration of a life is performative, both in the process of selection employed to create the text, and in the audience for whom it is practiced, which may include the self. The distancing between the self as a subject and an object—in Paul de Man's words that between the author "of" the text and the author "in" the text, a necessary aspect of the autobiographical practice—allows the self to be gazed at as in a drama.⁶⁸ De Man speaks of *prosopopeia* as the trope of autobiography, drawing attention to the author's simultaneous presence and absence in the text.⁶⁹ As Sidonie Smith writes, "Whatever that occasion or that audience, the autobiographical speaker becomes the performative subject."⁷⁰ In other words, self-referential materials are produced to relate "a" story about the self, not "the" story: a degree of design and its particular articulation is inherent in the genre. Naim's reading of Mir's autobiography, referred to above, uncovers intentionality as an aspect of autobiographical writing. Mir wished to present himself as a person of Saiyyad lineage and hoped to elevate his father to the level of a Sufi master.⁷¹ Hansen's masterly analysis of four Parsi theater actors and playwrights, two of the actors discussed in this book, shows their investment in creating particular self-representations. Jayshankar Sundari's feminine stage persona and his desire to present himself as a modern bourgeois subject seeking ideal heteronormative companionate marriage especially stands out, even as he attempts to smoothe the conflict over his ambivalent gendered self and sexuality.⁷²

The autobiographical narrative may be invested in perpetuating a specific image or a particular understanding of the self, among other rhetorical uses of such practice, for consumption among intimates or a larger public. The intersubjectivity of such a narration—the relation between the narrator and

the assumed audience—accounts for the assumption of a specific subjectivity, in a particular context, at a given time. If autobiographical practice is not transparent—akin to a mirror that refracts rather than reflects—then the issue of its reception becomes salient. Not only may the narrator imagine a specific audience when authoring an autobiographical tale; the putative audience is likely to impact and shape the telling itself—its manner, tone, or form. Sensitive issues related to the impact of self-revelation on the self and others are tied up with this question.⁷³ Vatak, in her reading of the memoir of Zakira Begam written in the 1950s, stresses this author-audience interaction. The memoir she reads began its life as a girls' journal circulated within the immediate family circle, her *khandan*, pushing its author to adopt certain specific modes of self-presentation, among them self-deprecation, as noted earlier.⁷⁴ However, despite this conventional modesty suitable to her gender, Zakira did go on to write at length about herself, acting out the painful memories of her upbringing whose onerous burden she wished her family to be acquainted with. Thus in two ways—in her deferential tone and in her recall of a wronged childhood—the family audience influenced her writing. At another level, Zakira's later commentary on her text to the researcher, a parallel retelling, allowed her to perform her life all over again, but for a different audience, and perhaps to different effect.

We may underscore this point about the performativity of the autobiographical oeuvre implicated in perpetuating specific agendas, particularly through the essays on the premodern period in this book. As noted, Bokhari, in writing of the unmarried Mughal princess Jahanara, uses both her Sufi treatise and her munificent architectural patronage to show how the princess produced her “dual persona.” She was simultaneously an imperial patron and a pious Sufi. In stretching the given norms of class and gender behavior within the Timurid imperial codes, Jahanara endeavored, as she performed, to give expression to herself and identity. Her stage was the Mughal imperium, where she set out to “light the lamp” of her piety, evocatively described by Bokhari. Sachdeva Jha also reads the multiple “autobiographical acts” of the courtesan Maha Laqa Bai Chanda—as a patron, a poet, and a builder—to show how she (re)invented herself. As a sophisticated performer of poetic *mujra* as of selfhood, Chanda insinuated herself in the power politics of the rich courtly world of Hyderabad in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sachdeva Jha uses deconstruction theory to make the important point that the autobiographical utterance resides in the act of reading/interpreting, including various self-representational acts. Similarly, Malhotra in her essay on the Muslim prostitute Piro, who went to live in a Sikh guru's establishment, enunciates the justificatory rhetoric of a self-fashioned saga. This autobiographical fragment

was what may be called a “conversion narrative,” where events move toward “the” transformative moment, and most things of note are referenced to its valence. In this narrative Piro gave no clue to the motive for her unusual step but used its theatrical mode to perform piety, loyalty, and allegiance to her new sect and its guru, even as she manoeuvred for acceptability within it.

Self-referential narratives, however, are not performative only in terms of the conscious or unconscious messages or images they carry. All autobiographical practice is based on memory, inherently selective and interpretive, and therefore performative in what/how it congeals or enacts, conceals, and reveals. Moreover, cultural codes often determine who remembers and what is remembered. Peter Burke has written of the “schema” that is frequently present in the organization of community and individual memories.⁷⁵ Indeed, even dreams people dream may be choreographed to cultural demands and expectations,⁷⁶ or form an important aspect of people’s lives, pushing them in given directions.⁷⁷ The making of cultural heroes or villains, the saintly, the godly, and the demonic, are embedded within this complex matrix of remembrances and memory. David Shulman, for instance, speaks of the dominance of the astrological or predictive forms of writing heroic tales in India, the unfolding of the saga as one already foretold, in a culture that believed that heroes are born for godly purposes and follow life patterns laid out for them.⁷⁸ Similarly one may draw attention to the genealogical and bardic tradition of remembering in India, the genealogists, bards, and astrologers crucial to the task of remembering and performing their feats of memory or prediction on public platforms.⁷⁹

The mythic as a model of remembering and organizing memories—both communal and individual—is particularly potent in South Asia. We may model our lives on values passed through characters of mythologies, and so reenact them, or we may mythologize people we revere. Sometimes we may live double lives, an exterior ordinary self, forming a carapace that shields an interior magical or a moral one. The topos of an exterior/interior duality was a common one in Indian Bhakti and Sufi literatures. Externals, including bodily comportment and rituals, were seen as unnecessary worldly accoutrements, while one may find God in the inner recesses of a being—in the heart/liver (*ur*, *hridaya*, *man*, *jigar*) continuum.⁸⁰ This interiority must be seen as different from the Western post-Enlightenment psychological development of bourgeois subjectivity, which stressed inner character development.⁸¹ However, in the case of Raihana Tyabji studied here by Lambert-Hurley, the inner world may have been constructed in both senses: as an interior pure/ethical self, and one where a person inhabited her private world. Raihana, a Sulaymani Bohra Muslim, in her mystical *The Heart of a Gopi*, portrayed her innermost being as that of

[16] Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley

a “gopi” Sharmila. While outwardly living the life of a Muslim and a staunch Gandhian, it was in the mold of the Vaishnava Krishna Bhakti model of a gopi’s erotic love of Krishna that Raihana fashioned herself. In other words, in her “inner” life she performed a role that Indian culture was familiar with. The more difficult question to answer in Raihana’s case is whether she affected this character because her cultural memory gave her a model to follow or because expressing her emotions and sexuality in these terms made it more acceptable?

On the other hand, Fida Husain, a stalwart of the Parsi theater, who throughout his career staged lives of Hindu gods and saints, seemed to blur the boundaries between his performative self and his constructed yogic one. Can one speculate that the purity demanded of him to perform saintly characters, particularly the fifteenth-century Gujarati saint Narsi Mehta, translated into Husain cleansing his somatic being? Hansen draws attention to his ambiguity about his Muslim background, as she does to his strict “oral and anal” regimentation, an ingredient of his disciplined self-construction. In her essay Malhotra too shows the willful impersonation of the abducted Sita by the Muslim Piro, making her guru assume the role of Rama rescuing her from her Muslim (demonic) captors. In these narratives of religious crossovers and performed personas, mythological memory becomes the central node around which a self is fabricated.

Another way of seeing these above-discussed case studies relates to the Indic tradition that emphasizes right remembering as essential to be fully integrated with oneself. A. K. Ramanujan indicates the significance of the remembrancer in many Indian literatures, a trigger for the flow of memory, as the ring in the famous tale of Shakuntala. He also makes the point that amnesia and misremembering in this cosmos lead to alienation from the self and its intimates.⁸² Although Ramanujan does not discuss the issue of a specific memory as the “right” one, or the only possible one of an event, it is important to underscore that the autobiographic impulse is often imbricated in ensuring the “right” projection of the self, the issue of image discussed above. To put it another way, the image one may be performing is the one that at some level we may feel most integrated with or we may feel is an integral part of who we are. This may well have been the case with Raihana, Husain, and Piro. Such an understanding leaves open the possibility of multiple identities/selves we carry and nurture, shattering the idea of a unified, coherent self. However, at the same time it creates the space to underscore that we may strongly relate to a certain aspect of ourselves at a given time.

Memory, as the use of oral sources has alerted historians, is notoriously unstable, sometimes telescoping time, and at others coagulating events in a

given format.⁸³ Personal narratives have to be read with this caveat. The acts of remembrance that create autobiographical narratives are selective, as noted above, and also variable over time. Asiya Alam's chapter in this book brings out this shifting, whimsical quality of memory and remembrance through showing the different narrations of her life by Nazr Sajjad Hyder over a substantial period of her life. Alam discusses her diary (*roz namcha*) that appeared in a serialized format in the journal *Tahzib-e Niswan*; her serialized account of past days (*ayyam-i-guzashta*) in the journal *Ismat*; her letters that accompanied many of her *Ismat* entries; and finally her daughter Qurratulain Hyder's collection of her mother's autobiographical narrations in a book (*Guzashta Barson ki Baraf*), heavily edited and prefaced with her own literary and contemporary feminist concerns. The mutable nature of Nazr's articulation, as Alam shows, was impelled by her changing circumstances and experiences, both personal and political. Her later accounts that commemorated familial life were her personal way of countering the fissures of Partition and its discontinuities. Beside Alam's, some other essays in this book are also sensitive to the variable and multiple versions of an individual story. Scholars have commented on the role of editors and other mediators who help reproduce earlier autobiographical texts (a number of women's nineteenth-century texts in India were made available to the public in the twentieth century through such intervention) and that they have their own reasons to do so.⁸⁴ It is like the use of oral sources by scholars, these sources become available necessarily mediated through them. The dialogic quality of such narratives needs to be recognized, not the erasure of the mediator, or a search for a (false) "authenticity" of a text, as Alessandro Portelli has underscored by insisting on seeing the "hybridized" and "mongrelized" quality of such discourses.⁸⁵ That memory is socially produced, both individual and collective, needs to be understood, even as we focus on individual life in that of a community.⁸⁶

Inner Lives and Performative Selves

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The modern notion of our "inner" psychological individual selves, of who we "really" are, also becomes important as we move into more contemporary times. This develops in tandem with the older idea of character building and introspection, of utilizing difficulties and obstacles in life to "learn lessons" in order to strengthen our inner beings. In the West this latter idea is as old as Augustine's *Confessions*, when his stealing of pears from a neighbor's orchard made him

learn a lesson for life.⁸⁷ In the early modern period it was Montaigne's retreat to his *arrireboutique*, "the back room of his mind," where he led his readers, that the invention of our psychological beings might be pegged, though its full realization perhaps occurred two centuries or more later, especially with Freud.⁸⁸ Interestingly, the early modern in Europe was a period marked by a struggle between being "sincere," attributed to Reformation's insistence on confronting one's God, and "prudence," according to the performative and dissimulating needs of courtly life captured in Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier*.⁸⁹ However, the conflict between sincerity and artifice, that is, between the revelation of the "inner-most" self and particular projections of the self, lies at the heart of the autobiographical practice and reception everywhere.

In the Indian context, colonialism and its disciplining of Indian habits, be they related to time or customs, may be compared to dissimulation for those Indians who necessarily entered the public sphere. This was the polluting world of interacting with the colonial state, the world of *chakri*, to atone for which many urban Bengalis trooped to the simple, and presumably cleansing, discourses of the guru Ramakrishna.⁹⁰ Did such daily transactions and transgressions—the double life of an inner and outer world—make a sense of the self more keen? It certainly led to a feeling of being witness to a unique phase of history, as noted earlier.⁹¹ Participation in the national movement and the accompanying imprisonment at the hands of the colonial power afforded many Indian men, including Gandhi and Nehru, with the opportunity for self-reflection, as it did for building steely characters.⁹²

What can be said about the inner selves of the modernizing Indian women? Partha Chatterjee sees change between the first woman autobiographer of Bengal, Rassundari Debi (1809–1900), who assigned Providence an important role in her acquiring the magical ability to read, and Prasannamayi Debi (1857–1939), who came to distinguish between an "inner" and an "outer" world.⁹³ Whereas Chatterjee speaks of the inner/outer distinction in the context of the patriarchal nationalist program that sought sovereignty over the former domain by taming women, the analogy may be stretched to include the inner life of an individual subject as an autonomous self. Chatterjee's analysis, which indicates a seamless "resolution" of "women's question" as one left the cogitations of the early and mid-nineteenth century behind, has been critiqued by feminist historians, who have stressed the conflict in the domestic domain, emphasizing the impossibility of resolution therein.⁹⁴ They have nevertheless shown the obsessive focus on issues of the everyday, domesticity, and making women the bearers of customs and rituals. It is in this locus of the domestic

as a conflicted zone, and in the contradictory demands that a modernizing patriarchy made of women, that one may find women's nascent voice articulating a self.

The moot question however remains whether women, adjusting lives to roles men laid out for them, claimed a relatively sovereign inner self. Did they too have a core self that was noncolonized by men? This question is likely to yield varying answers as embattled women juggled a known way of life with often persistent efforts of their husbands to transform them into their mold of modernity, or even when they became willing helpmates in this transformation. For some women the existence of their older devotional worlds, as that of Vaishnava Bhakti for Rassundari, left aspects of their lives where neither the colonial state nor their own men could intrude.⁹⁵ Tanika Sarkar, for example, points out the fleeting appearance of Rassundari's husband in her autobiography. For others, the knowledge of being colonized by their men, or that their ability to think for themselves was considered a rebellion—a "treason against men"—as with Kashibai Kanitkar, does indicate interior spaces all their own.⁹⁶ But few had the resources or the capability to make their rebellious lives true to their inner calling, and when they did, its consequences were perilous and isolating, as with Pandita Ramabai.⁹⁷ However, in Shubhra Ray's reading of the diary of Kailashbashini Debi, Kailashbashini emerges as someone inherently aware of herself being special. For Ray, Kailashbashini's diary does not fit into Chatterjee's reading of women who learned to adhere to the rituals of domesticity of the Bengali inner world. It was also not amenable to being read as a memoir that merely captured the changing social world of the *bhadralok*, the sociological interest in Bengali customs and rituals of the later editors of these writings. In her pleasure of the extraordinary, of travel, of being cared for by her husband, Kailashbashini displayed her sense of the self, at a time when the norms of what such a memoir was expected to be were still not worked out.

Ritu Menon, the biographer of Nayantara Sahgal—a niece of Nehru and the daughter of Vijaylakshmi Pandit—reads two of her autobiographical works to reflect on this conflict between the inner and the projected self. In many ways Sahgal's first autobiographical work, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), may be compared to the kinds of memoirs men wrote—their lives a reference point from where to observe momentous changes taking place around them, particularly relating to colonialism and nationalism.⁹⁸ Sahgal too, in this work offered a "ringside" view of history, recollecting her connections to the foremost families of modern India. However, in her second autobiographical work, *From Fear Set Free* (1962), Menon sees the conflict between her inner

self, straining to emerge, and the outward “women’s script” of marriage and domesticity, suppressing the claims of the inner being. In Sahgal’s inability to integrate the inner with the external, Menon sees Sahgal’s “polite exercise” in writing “a monument to a buried self.” We are undoubtedly at a postmodern moment of splintered and multiple selves, assigned and performing different roles. However, the ray of optimism for Menon comes from the fact that Sahgal persisted in writing, fiction and nonfiction, doggedly refusing to bury the burgeoning self.

The issue of performativity is significant also from the point of view of studying the “ego documents” of those who literally perform for a livelihood/ in a profession. The question of how to decipher what they perform in their various narratives, however, is more complex. In her essay, referred to earlier, Hansen centrally broaches the issue of gender impersonation when speaking of Sundari’s and Husain’s autobiographies, both of whom enacted women characters at certain times in their careers. Judith Butler’s concept of “gender performativity,” in the sense in which a subject is decided *by* gender, and not by a willful taking *on* of gender, points to the regulatory regimes that produce normative, heterosexual behavior.⁹⁹ The destabilizing of given gender norms in staged masquerades illuminates the power of *verfremdungseffekt*—“making the familiar strange so that we can understand it as neither natural, nor inevitable, and therefore something that can be challenged and changed.”¹⁰⁰ For us what Butler’s discussion on reiterative regulatory regimes does is to focus on the issue of how the marginalized may rupture the coherence of their culturally defined roles. Here we wish to reiterate how through autobiographical practice the marginalized assume “center stage,” overwriting the normative codes of behavior. The term *overwriting* is developed to emphasize the act of destabilizing the normative, and reinscribing social rules. Literally actors, what Husain, but especially Sundari, did by staging parodies of gendered identities was to undermine the definitiveness of such identities, “denaturalizing” the ostensible natural, “the always and the already.”¹⁰¹ In the role model that Sundari became for women, and in the passion that some men nurtured for “her,” Sundari allowed for the changeableness of our apparently enduring selves. The act of performing could thus transcend the limits of the proscenium, opening varied potentialities of the self. Smith, while discussing Butler and the manner in which agency may be garnered, notes that for Butler, the performance of a unified, coherent self is bound to be a failure because the “autobiographical subject is amnesiac, incoherent, heterogeneous, interactive.”¹⁰² In the ruptures between who we are, and what we are expected to be, lies the potential for grasping an agential self.

The theatrical metaphor of “staging” identities remains salient when considering some other performers. We wish to underline that those in performing professions are liable to be more sensitive than others to the multiplicities of identities within us, thus more successful in fabricating selves that undermine given norms while configuring new roles. Many of our autobiographers in this book were linked to performing professions. Maha Laqa Bai as discussed by Sachdeva Jha, or Piro of Malhotra’s essay were courtesans. Lambert-Hurley shows Raihana as an adept singer, performing and recording her songs. Princess Jahanara, Bokhari’s muse, was indubitably used to performing on an imperial stage. At a general level what these various performers had was the skill to articulate their personae. This skill may or may not have nullified the marginality of their specific circumstances. However, what it did give them was the ability to reimagine and re-present themselves in varied ways. Their extraordinary situation—liminality in social intercourse with the skilled ability for vocalizing selves—made them inimitable performers of their own identities.

One last issue needs to be taken up when we speak of the performing self/selves. How do we relate the autobiographical to truth claims? Multitudinous selves and the contingent nature of performances, bound to questions of space and temporality, undoubtedly dilute the relationship between the two. Philippe Lejeune in his “autobiographical pact” speaks about the contract between the author and the reader, “a contract of identity sealed by a proper name,” an assurance, in other words, that a person exists in history.¹⁰³ But is that enough to render the autobiographical “truthful”? The relationship between fiction and the autobiographical nonfiction is notoriously unsteady, and the demand of authenticity cannot be met by autobiographical practice steeped in performativity. Both the scholars and the practitioners of the autobiography and the memoir are conscious of the thin line separating fiction from an autobiographical work. While Milani, the scholar of Iranian women’s autobiographies, insists on a fundamental distinction between the two—no other genre of literature claims this correspondence between the writing and the writer, she notes—she nonetheless concedes that the self at the center of all autobiographical narratives is a fictive structure. “Self-representation is an extension of fantasy rather than a platform of Truth,” she writes.¹⁰⁴ Paul de Man, on the other hand, argues that the distinction between autobiography and fiction is “undecidable,” looking at the autobiographical discourse as one conflicted between mortality and restoration, giving a face and “defacement.”¹⁰⁵

Are we then to negate any association of “truth” and the autobiographical? Conway, while introducing black slave narratives, notes that many were produced under fictitious names and with the help, and sometimes tweaking, of

their white facilitators.¹⁰⁶ Did such editorial or pseudonymous interventions take away the “truth” of unbearable suffering, or that of the triumph of the will? A similar question may be posed in relation to many dalit autobiographical accounts in India. But it is just not pain, suffering, and humiliation that are at the core of the issue, we may be “artful” or “truthful,” in equal or awry measure, about other facets of our life. While we may all be performers—whether assiduously working toward a self-fashioning or unwittingly projecting a personality—we are in the business of representing ourselves the way we can, or wish to. This may not be “the” truth, but certainly it is “our” truth, or at least some version of it, unless we deliberately choose to misrepresent. And our version of the truth, of course, may be fiction to you, unless we can use a remembrancer to set off the flow of right memory, or concoct a potion to induce amnesia in you . . .

IN THIS WIDE-RANGING INTRODUCTION we have tried to grapple with contemporary global understandings of autobiography, and the manner in which personal self-representational narratives have been a part of South Asian culture. We have attempted to recuperate the term *autobiography* for the varied ways in which a self is represented, fashioned, and articulated. Aware of the changes that modernity may have introduced to life writing as a textual practice, we have used autobiography for a range of autobiographical materials and ego documents. Equally we have sought to focus on how women’s autobiographical oeuvre may be different or similar to that of men in South Asia. Our emphasis on a relational self as against the idea of an autonomous sovereign self is important in the context of men as of women, though we have emphasized women’s greater recourse to it, as to self-deprecatory intonation. Women’s auto/biographical practice has shown their investment in relational selves, though there will always be many exceptions, particularly as we move toward the contemporary times. However, we have wished to iterate that women through different times spoke for themselves, though this could come through in coded or allegorical expression or in more individualistic, self-reflexive ways. We have also hoped to show the performative nature of storytelling, whether presented as a life story or served in poetic, or novelistic, fictional mode. The nature of memory and its selective use, so intrinsically a part of the autobiographical practice, make it a genre of design and fabrication, and so of performance. Nevertheless, we do not wish to sever it from truth claims, for both the nature of truth, illusive and elusive, and of life writing is complex, as it is conflicted. That the oeuvre of autobiography has lent voice

to the marginalized underlines the need to take it with the seriousness it deserves. We hope the essays that follow will highlight the autobiographical as a genre both personal and political, illuminating people and their times.

NOTES

- 1 According to the 2011 census, India boasts a functional literacy rate of 74.04 percent, up from just 12 percent at Independence in 1947. This figure, however, hides gender, regional, and social disparities. Female literacy remains lower at 65.46 percent, though this represents a marked increase from just 18.4 percent in 1971 and 0.9 percent in 1901. "Census of India," accessed January 8, 2013, <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/>; *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* (Delhi: Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 1974), 94.
- 2 Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks: Exploring the Art of Autobiography* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 8.
- 3 Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 5, 26–31.
- 4 Summarizing these debates is Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), chap. 1.
- 5 Philippe Lejeune, *Lautobiographie en France* (Paris: Colin, 1971), 14. This translation is from *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*, ed. Robert Folkenflik (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 13.
- 6 Lejeune, *Lautobiographie*, 14. For another example, see Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 1.
- 7 Dwight F. Reynolds, ed., *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 17.
- 8 Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. and trans. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 29.
- 9 Pascal, *Design*, 22.
- 10 S. P. Saksena, *Indian Autobiographies* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1949), v, vii.
- 11 A. R. Venkatachalapathy, "Making a Modern Self in Colonial Tamil Nadu," in *Biography as History: Indian Perspectives*, ed. Vijaya Ramaswamy and Yogesh Sharma (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 30–52.
- 12 Reynolds, *Interpreting*, 19.
- 13 Marvin Zonis, "Autobiography and Biography in the Middle East: A Plea for Psychopolitical Studies," in *Middle Eastern Lives: The Practices of Biography and Self-Narrative*, ed. Martin Kramer (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 61.
- 14 Stephen Frederic Dale, "Steppe Humanism: The Autobiographical Writings of Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, 1483–1530," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22 (1990): 39.

- 15 Reynolds, *Interpreting*, 19.
- 16 Conway, *When Memory Speaks*, 3.
- 17 Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 3.
- 18 For a development of this idea, see Julie Rak, *Negotiated Memory: Doukhobor Autobiographical Discourse* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), ix.
- 19 Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 4–5.
- 20 David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn, eds., *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2004), 9. In defence of the latter position, see J. L. Peacock and D. C. Holland, “The Narrated Self: Life Stories in Process,” *Ethos* 21 (1993), 367–83.
- 21 See, as example, Wahhaj al-Din Alvi, *Urdu Khud Navisht* (New Delhi: Maktaba Jamia, 1989). For a discussion of *atma carit* or *atmacharit*, see Sudipto Kaviraj, “The Invention of Private Life: A Reading of Sibnath Sastri’s Autobiography,” in Arnold and Blackburn, *Telling Lives*, 84–85. Kaviraj discusses the term *carit* as encompassing the character—*charitra*—of a person as well as the recounting of that story. *Carit* in early Pali and Sanskrit meant both history and legend. See “Introduction: Life Histories in India,” in Arnold and Blackburn, *Telling Lives*, 7–9.
- 22 See, as an example, Udaya Kumar, “Autobiography as a Way of Writing History: Personal Narratives from Kerala and the Inhabitation of Modernity” in *History in the Vernacular*, ed. Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008), 418–48.
- 23 Arnold and Blackburn, *Telling Lives*, 9.
- 24 Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 12; Aparna Basu and Malvika Karlekar, eds., *In So Many Words: Women’s Life Experiences from Western and Eastern India* (London: Routledge, 2008), viii.
- 25 Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” *Modern Language Notes* 94:5 (December 1979), 919, emphasis added.
- 26 On this conflict between autobiography in theory and reality, see Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, “Life/History/Archive: Identifying Autobiographical Writing by Muslim Women in South Asia,” *Journal of Women’s History* 25.2 (summer 2013), 61–84.
- 27 de Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” 921.
- 28 For a useful overview of “life histories in India,” see David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn, “Introduction: Life Histories in India,” in their *Telling Lives*, 6–9.
- 29 Charlotte Vaudeville, ed., *A Weaver Named Kabir: Selected Verses with a Detailed Biographical and Historical Introduction* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 30 See, as an example, Stuart Blackburn, “Life Histories as Narrative Strategy: Prophecy, Song, and Truth-Telling in Tamil Tales and Legends,” in Arnold and Blackburn, *Telling Lives*, 203–26.
- 31 C. M. Naim, introduction to *Zikr-i-Mir: The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal Poet: Mir Muhammad Taqi “Mir,”* ed. C. M. Naim (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1–21.

- 32 David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn, "Introduction: Life Histories in India," in Arnold and Blackburn, *Telling Lives*, 5.
- 33 Arnold and Blackburn, "Introduction," 20–21.
- 34 Farhat Hasan, "Presenting the Self: Norms and Emotions in Ardhakathanaka," in Ramaswamy and Sharma, *Biography as History*, 105–22.
- 35 Roy Porter, ed., *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- 36 Kathryn Hansen, *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011), 299–314.
- 37 Conway, *When Memory Speaks*, 3–4.
- 38 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices" in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 18.
- 39 Gwen Etter-Lewis quoted in Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 89.
- 40 Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 75.
- 41 Indrani Sen, "Resisting Patriarchy: Complexities and Conflicts in the Memoir of Haimabati Sen," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47.12 (March 24, 2012), 55–62. Sen does point to the contradictions in Haimabati's self-portrayal, of her slipping into the role of a dutiful wife.
- 42 Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006), 9–91. On Dalit women's autobiographies, also see Raj Kumar, *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010)—especially chapter 6: "Beyond the Margin: Dalit Women's Autobiographies."
- 43 For a theoretical discussion of how autobiography may be used by those "excluded from official discourse" to "embody subjectivity" or "talk back," see Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). For South Asian examples, see Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998); Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban; A Modern Autobiography* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999); Kumar, *Dalit Personal Narratives*.
- 44 Judith Tucker, "Biography as History: The Exemplary Life of Khayr al-Din al-Ramli," in *Auto/Biography and the Construction of Identity and Community in the Middle East*, ed. Mary Ann Fay (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 9–17.
- 45 Kaviraj, "Invention," 83–115.
- 46 Kumar, "Autobiography."
- 47 Venkatachalapathy, "Making a Modern Self."
- 48 The point about women speaking for collective others has been made in contexts of other cultures as well; for example, Hanadi Al-Samman emphasizes how Arab women in diaspora often write of a collective "we," including in their authorial "I,"

- “mothers and others,” making for a “mosaic autobiography.” For her, autobiographies and autobiographical fiction are genres used to resist erasure, a point also made in the context of women’s and dalits’ autobiographies in South Asia. Hanadi Al-Samman, “Mosaic Autobiography,” in her *Anxiety of Erasure: Trauma, Authorship and the Diaspora in Arab Women’s Writing* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013). We thank the author for sharing this chapter with us.
- 49 Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
 - 50 Vijaya Ramaswamy, “Muffled Narratives: The Life and Times of Neelambakai Ammaiyar,” in Ramaswamy and Sharma, *Biography as History*, 123–51.
 - 51 Bharati Ray, *Daughters: A Story of Five Generations* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011).
 - 52 Mythily Sivaraman, *Fragments of a Life: A Family Archive* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006), xi–xxi.
 - 53 Uma Chakravarti underscores the fragility of Subbalakshmi’s life and her archive. See her afterword, “The Blue Tin Trunk,” in Sivaraman, *Fragments*, 186–207. Chakravarti’s own commitment to air Subbalakshmi’s story also comes through in her film *A Quiet Little Entry*.
 - 54 Gayatri Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society IV*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 330–63.
 - 55 See, as examples, Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold, *Listen to the Heron’s Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Josiane Racine Viramma and Jean-Luc Racine, *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (London: Verso, 1997).
 - 56 See, as examples, Sylvia Vatuk, “*Hamara Daur-i Hayat*: An Indian Muslim Woman Writes Her Life,” in Arnold and Blackburn, *Telling Lives*, 144–74; Basu and Karlekar, *In So Many Words*. On the breadth of source material available for a study of autobiographical writing by South Asian Muslim women specifically, see Lambert-Hurley, “Life/History/Archive.”
 - 57 Marilyn Booth, “Subjectivities on the Nile, 1890s to the 1920s: Intellectual Openings in Egypt and Gendered Representations of the Self,” paper given at the conference “Women’s Autobiography in Islamic Societies: Context and Construction,” India International Centre, Delhi, December 16–18, 2010.
 - 58 Barbara D. Metcalf, “What Happened in Mecca: Mumtaz Mufti’s ‘Labbaik,’” in Folkenflik, *Culture of Autobiography*, 149–67, quotation p. 157.
 - 59 Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 235.
 - 60 Margot Badran, in the preface to *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, ed. and trans. Margot Badran (London: Virago, 1986), 1.
 - 61 Farzaneh Milani, *Words, Not Swords: Iran Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), xix; Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 235.
 - 62 On the wider connotations of agency, see Anshu Malhotra, “Miracles for the Marginal? Gender and Agency in a Nineteenth-Century Autobiographical Fragment,” *Journal of Women’s History* 25.2 (summer 2013), 15–35.

- 63 A. K. Ramanujan, "Towards a Counter-System: Women's Tales," in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 429–47.
- 64 Stuart Blackburn, "Life Histories as Narrative Strategy: Prophecy, Song, and Truth-Telling in Tamil Tales and Legends," in Arnold and Blackburn, *Telling Lives*, 203–26.
- 65 Both Ramanujan and Blackburn give examples from Kannada and Tamil literature respectively of the heroine telling a doll her story. The doll motif is similar to the tale of "sister Viro" that is recounted in North India when women observe married women's fast of *Karva Chauth*.
- 66 We borrow the expression *on stage or page* from Sherrill Grace, "Theatre and the Autobiographical Pact: An Introduction," in Sherrill Grace and Jerry Wasserman, eds., *Theatre and Autobiography: Writing and Performing Lives in Theory and Practice* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2006), 13.
- 67 In some Western countries the performance of autobiographical narratives in theater has become common and has been theorized. See Grace and Wasserman, *Theatre and Autobiography*; Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
- 68 de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," 923.
- 69 de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," 926.
- 70 Sidonie Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," in Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 108.
- 71 Naim, *Zikr-i-Mir*, 11–12.
- 72 Hansen, *Stages of Life*, 321.
- 73 In repressive societies, for instance, an autobiographer has not only to be careful about what and how much to reveal, in order to avoid self-revelation becoming self-destruction, but also to be constantly aware of a secondary audience of censors, and so deploy self-censorship to ensure self-preservation. These points came across in Azadeh Moaveni's paper "After the Fact: Hedging, Self-Censorship, and the Prospect of Return in Iranian Memoir" in the conference "Unveiling the Self: Life Narratives of Muslim Women in the Middle East and South Asia," held October 29–30, 2012, Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures. Also see Farzaneh Milani, *Veiling and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 201–28.
- 74 Vatuk, "Hamara Daur-i-Hayat."
- 75 Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory," in his *Varieties of Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), 43–59.
- 76 Peter Burke, "The Cultural History of Dreams," in his *Varieties of Cultural History*, 23–42.
- 77 Tucker, "Biography as History."
- 78 David Shulman, "Cowherd or King? The Sanskrit Biography of Ananda Ranga Pillai," in Arnold and Blackburn, *Telling Lives*, 175–202.
- 79 On orality and memory, see Rustom Bharucha, *Rajasthan: An Oral History; Conversations with Komal Kothari* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2003).

- 80 Kabir, the foremost of Indian Bhakti saints, often spoke about looking inside the heart for God. J. S. Hawley and M. Juergensmeyer, eds., *Songs of the Saints of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 52. Similarly, within the Islamic Sufi tradition the emotion of love was situated in the heart and god/liness in the *ruh*, spirit. Scott Kugle, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2009).
- 81 On "archetypal life scripts" see Conway, "Memory Plots," in her *When Memory Speaks*, 3–18.
- 82 A. K. Ramanujan, "The Ring of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting in Indian Literatures," in Molly Daniels-Ramanujan and Keith Harrison, eds., *A. K. Ramanujan: Uncollected Poems and Prose* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 83–100.
- 83 Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998).
- 84 Linda H. Peterson, "Institutionalizing Women's Autobiography: Nineteenth-Century Editors and the Shaping of an Autobiographical Tradition," in Folkenflik, *The Culture of Autobiography*, 80–103.
- 85 Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 76.
- 86 Perks and Thomson, *Oral History Reader*, 4.
- 87 Conway, *When Memory Speaks*, 7–8.
- 88 Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 47.
- 89 John Martin, "Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe," in *The Renaissance in Europe*, ed. Keith Whitlock (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 11–30. In this context the paradoxical use of "self-fashioning" for this period by Stephen Greenblatt is revealing: it points to the ability of the men of this age as never before to write their destinies, as at the same time this self-fashioning also makes them puppets in the hands of power structures including the growing monarchical power. See his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
- 90 Sumit Sarkar, "Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti: Ramakrishna and His Times," *Economic and Political Weekly* 27.29 (July 1992), 1543–66.
- 91 Kumar, "Autobiography," 418–48.
- 92 David Arnold, "The Self and the Cell: Indian Prison Narratives as Life Histories," in Arnold and Blackburn, *Telling Lives*, 29–53.
- 93 Partha Chatterjee, "Women and the Nation," in his *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 135–57.
- 94 Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of Women's Question," in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 233–53. For a critique of Chatterjee, see Tanika Sarkar, "Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal," in her *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 23–52.

- 95 Tanika Sarkar, "A Book of Her Own. A Life of Her Own: Autobiography of a Nineteenth-Century Woman," in Kumkum Sangari and Uma Chakravarti, eds., *From Myths to Markets: Essays on Gender* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 85–124.
- 96 Meera Kosambi, *Feminist Vision or "Treason against Men"? Kashibai Kanitkar and the Engendering of Marathi Literature* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008), 3, 21.
- 97 Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*.
- 98 Kumar, "Autobiography"; Kaviraj, "Invention."
- 99 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), x. Also see Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). While for Butler gender performativity refers to the repetitious acts that "naturalize"—the repeated stylization of the body—we use "performativity" in this introduction in the sense of a cultural act, a performance.
- 100 Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, 1.
- 101 For a discussion of Butler's concept of performativity, see Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver, *Judith Butler and Political Theory: Troubling Politics* (London: Routledge, 2008), 34–50.
- 102 Smith, "Performativity," 110.
- 103 Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 11. Also see Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, 8–9.
- 104 Milani, *Veiling and Words*, 203–4.
- 105 de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement."
- 106 Conway, *When Memory Speaks*, 43, 47–48.