Speaking of the self

In the last few decades, scholars of South Asian history have disputed the notion that South Asian cultures do not possess the autonomous representation of the individual, particularly in documenting histories, compared to their European counterparts. To that end, the numerous ways in which self-representation has been practiced in this region in different forms and time periods have been increasingly explored in scholarship. The rich collection of essays in this volume, edited by Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, challenges the existing boundaries and discourses surrounding autobiography, performance and gender in South Asian history by presenting a varied and fresh selection of women's autobiographical writing and practices from the seventeenth to mid-twentieth centuries. The compelling choice of authors explored in the essays include Urdu novelists, a Muslim prostitute in nineteenth century Punjab, a Mughal princess, a courtesan in the Hyderabad court and male actors who perform as female characters. It moreover challenges conventional narratives in the field of autobiographical studies by relying in careful detail the different forms which ought to be encompassed within the genre of autobiography, such as poetry, patronage of architecture and fiction.

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The collection grapples with several key questions: how does one define autobiography? Does women’s autobiographical writing differ from men’s? And how do gender and performance relate to the autobiographical format in South Asian history? To this end, the book is divided into three parts, Negotiating Autobiography: Between Assertion and Subversion, addressing the ways in which women have negotiated autobiographical practices from the late nineteenth century. Sylvia Vatuk begins with a compelling account of the writing and life of Zakira Begam (1923-2003), whose writings and reflections on the early parts of her life in Hyderabad in a conservative and educated Muslim household emphasized her love of Urdu literature and its role in defining her sense of self. Ritu Menon’s essay on Nayantara Sahgal and the Indian novelist’s autobiographical works provides rich grounds in which to explore the peculiar demands of not only the autobiographical form but a scholar’s own engagement with such works. The memoir and diary of Nazar Sayyid Hyder (1892-1976), and the sensitization of her works in Urdu women’s magazines in the 1950s by Anjum Aslam. Shubhra Ray explores the autobiography of a young Bengali woman Kailashbasi Debi (c.1829-1895) and how her form of self-representation both located her within the social and political milieu of her time and reform movements, yet also transcended the politics and expectations of her at the time. All four authors in Part 1 astoundly understand about the role of literature in creating selfhood from existing scholarship. The collection proceeds into more unconventional and fascinating territory in respect of the autobiographical form and its subversion in Parts 2 and 3, Forms and Modes of Self-Fashioning and Destabilizing the Normative, respectively. Urvashi Butalia’s essay “Autobiography: Between Partition on Partition written by Pakistani women, which she considers to be autobiographical in quality, and how memory, violence and public narrative complicated and embedded themselves in such practices. Maha Lapa Bai, an Illustrous townswoman (courtesan) at the Hyderabad court, is the focus of Shweta Sachdeva’s essay and how an autobiographical record left by the courtesan, as a defiant form of reinvention, through different acts such as constructing mosques and composing poetry. Afshan Bokhari’s account of the Mughal princess Jahanara Begum (1516-1618) similarly looks at Mughal women’s power and agency in the period and focuses on masculine strategies adopted by the princess to wield power, with particular attention on Safavid and passionate architecture. Bokhari’s essay, with its vivid accounts of the life of Jahanara Begam and use of visual materials, is a particularly notable example of the ways in which women sought to navigate the political milieu of their time and represent themselves in the face of various challenges.

Anshu Malhotra’s essay on Piro (d.1872) a Muslim prostitute in Punjab in the mid-nineteenth century, deftly examines how the poetik kof song was used by Piro to narrate the astounding events of her life and her beliefs, particularly in respect of living with a guru of Sikh lineage and navigate her existence “on the edges of her society” (p.226). Siobhan Lambert-Hurley explored the writings of Rashana Tyabji (1901-1975), a devotee of Krishna and nominally Muslim. The clearest assertion of the book’s goal is expressed here by Lambert-Hurley who states, in using the word autobiography in respect of Tyabji’s form of Bhakti devotionalism, that the book hopes to “disrupt the established Western canon of autobiography” (p.247). Finally, Kathryn Hansen’s essay on the autobiographies of two male actors, Jayshankar Sundari and Tida Husain, who primarily performed as women. In complicating the boundaries of women’s autobiography in this way, the collection encourages a bold revaluation of central assumptions in the field of autobiography and gender. The collection stems from activities associated with the research network Women’s Autobiography in Islamic Societies and thus naturally tends to focus on the autobiographical practices of Muslim women. Greater inclusion of writing beyond Muslim women’s writing would perhaps have more accurately reflected the collection’s expansive title of Gender, performance, and autobiography in South Asia. The authors nevertheless present a significant corpus of scholarship relating to autobiography and gender which can apply broadly not only in South Asia but beyond. By carefully exploring important examples of autobiography, the authors open new ground and sources to critique autobiographical writing and methods. The collection’s contribution to the field and will be of considerable interest to both scholars and enthusiasts of autobiography and gender in South Asia.

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