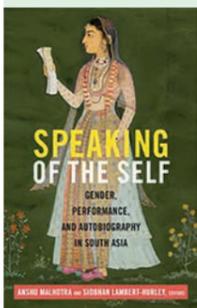


Speaking of the self

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, challenge 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 relaying in careful detail the different forms which ought to be encompassed within the genre of autobiography such as poetry, patronage of architecture and fiction.

Reviewer: Niroshini Somasundaram



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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*, *Forms and Modes of Self-Fashioning* and *Destabilizing the Normative*, with an excellent introductory chapter. The introduction provides a clear and comprehensive account of the autobiographical form in various literary traditions, the propensity to locate autobiographical writing as a Western field, challenges to such beliefs and debates surrounding the use of the word 'autobiography' itself. It is most convincing in arguing that autobiographical accounts ought to be more widely considered in illuminating the social and political worlds of the respective authors.

Part 1 of the book, *Negotiating Autobiography: Between Assertion and Subversion*, addresses the ways in which women have navigated and disrupted autobiographical practices from the late nineteenth century. Sylvia Vatuk begins with an absorbing account of the writing and life of Zakira Begam (1922-2003), whose writing 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 Nazr Sajjad Hyder (1892-1967), and the serialization of her works in Urdu women's magazines is addressed by Asiya Alam. Shubhra Ray explores the autobiography of a young Bengali woman Kailashbhashini 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 augment understanding 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. Uma Chakravarti's thoughtful essay explores three novels 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 Laqa Bai, an illustrious *tawa'if* (courtesan) at the Hyderabad court, is the focus of Shweta Sachdeva Jha's essay and how an autobiographical record was 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 Begam (1614-1681) 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 respect to her treatises on Sufism and patronage of 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 poetic *kafi* form 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 Raihana Tyabji (1901-1975), a devotee of Krishna and nominally Muslim. The clearest assertion of the book's goals is expressed here by Lambert-Hurley who states, in using the word autobiography in respect of Tyabji's form of Bhakti devotionalism, that the collection hopes to "disrupt the established Western canon of autobiography" (p.247). Finally, Kathryn Hansen discusses the autobiographies of two male actors, Jayshankar Sundari and Fida Husain, who primarily performed as women.

In complicating the boundaries of women's autobiography in this way, the collection encourages a bold reevaluation 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 theoretical aspects and alternative examples of autobiography, the authors open new grounds and sources to critique autobiographical writing and methods. The collection is a significant 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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the jokes and stereotypes of Filipinos as being uneducated, speaking poor English, eating dogs, and being hyper-sexualized. In Chapter Two, Labrador explores how these stereotypes play out through local humor. He notes a variety of jokes and comedians that poke fun of Filipinos, jokes laughed off as part of the Hawaiian experience, but which also sustain Filipino insecurities. While it may be tempting to see Filipinos simply as marginalized, Labrador goes further, situating Filipinos in relation to indigenous Hawaiians. Filipinos are part of two colonialisms: colonized by the United States in the Philippines, and part of US colonialism in Hawai'i. The Filipino Hawaiian narrative rarely mentions the appropriation of native Hawaiian lands or understands Filipinos as part of the colonial project. Labrador tackles this difficult topic rather fearlessly, locating the position of Filipinos amidst a variety of ethnic communities.

The diversity and status of Filipinos in Hawai'i are important factors in local efforts to create a sense of shared identity. In many ways, this study is not about building a Filipino Hawai'i, but is instead about building 'Filipinos' in a Hawaiian context. This project is carried out in part through university organizations, where more standard narratives of Filipino nationalism and instruction in Tagalog help to construct modern Filipinos, even among those who have never set foot in Southeast Asia. The book details efforts to construct a diasporic identity, creating "born-again Filipinos" (93). Labrador reminds us that

this is also a class project, with powerful business leaders creating community centers and announcing the 'arrival' of Filipinos as a modern community. Efforts to unite and uplift Filipinos in Hawai'i have not been entirely successful though. The book concludes with a glance to electoral politics, which shortly after the creation of a shared community space, laid bare the ongoing divisions among Filipinos in Hawai'i.

Labrador's accounts of Filipino diversity, status, and search for unity are compelling. This said, the book is written according to the conventions of ethnic studies, an intensely personal style that is not for everyone and which may block some avenues for analysis. The personal style is especially strange given how dated many of the accounts appear to be, with material taken mostly from the 1990s. For example, Labrador discusses a racialized Philippine Christmas song that circulated in 1994, but does not offer any recent accounts of such materials or note that this song continues to be sung today. The book's personal approach allows Labrador to capture rich detail, but falls somewhat short in terms of providing a sense of wider context or magnitude. The linguistic and class diversity of Filipinos is clear, but Labrador then treats white, Chinese, and Japanese communities as givens. For example, Chinese migrants have also featured a stunning range of dialects, divided political allegiances, and important class divisions; it is not clear if Filipinos are exceptional here. The book almost gives the sense of entirely distinct, separate ethnic communities,

as there is no mention of Chinese Filipinos or Moros, and there is only limited discussion of persons of Filipino descent who do not identify as Filipino or of persons claiming mixed descent. In terms of magnitude, it would be useful to provide a sense of the frequency of the book's many anecdotes. Labrador mentions local greeting cards with crude jokes, but it is not clear if these were produced by hand one time, or if they are manufactured for sale in stores. Without a sense of who makes these jokes, buys these albums, and exchanges these cards, it is not clear how pervasive these anecdotes are.

All told, *Building Filipino Hawai'i* provides a fascinating account of Filipinos in Hawai'i, noting their fragmentation and locating them in a broader ethnic landscape. It will be of interest to scholars of Hawai'i and migrant identity, as well as anyone interested in Filipino identity writ large. Although it takes place in Hawai'i, many of the issues are those that continue to confront the Philippines as a whole, making the discussion of Hawaiian Filipinos especially important and timely.

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