



Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, eds.,
*Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography
 in South Asia*

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This work is a panoramic compilation of ten essays that explore women’s autobiographical writings from South Asia. The central argument of this book, fleshed out in an erudite stand-alone introduction, is that autobiographical writings articulate performing selves—not a priori, autonomous, and decontextualized givens. Performing selves, or more aptly performing bodies, are polysemic and relational—the locus of multiple, often conflicting identities. Premised on this idea, each essay unravels how “one can be a different person at separate times” (13), always imbricated with, informed by, and responding to varied social, historical, and religious contexts.

The understanding that autobiography is a male European prerogative, Rousseau’s *Confessions* being the prototype, emerged in mid twentieth-century literary discourses “in response to the end of Empire, or out of fear for a new cultural relativism” (3). This book systematically debunks a cluster of implications of this persuasion: that women’s autobiographies lack introspection, individuality, honesty, and linear narration; that they make for poor social documentation; that they are all too easily subsumed into dominant nationalist and imperial ideologies; and importantly, that they are self-deprecatory, apologetic, and aesthetically sub par.

The first section is comprised of essays by Sylvia Vatuk, Ritu Menon, Asiya Alam, and Shubhra Ray. Vatuk explores how Urdu fictional novels shaped Zakira Ghouse's sense of adolescent self. In her memoir composed in the 1950s, Ghouse retells her childhood passion for reading as a meticulous, even desperate search for women role models that granted imaginary mobility in a highly circumscribed and conservative household. Vatuk argues that contrary to displaying "structural features of femininity" (49), Ghouse's memoir is informed by her education in the Islamic Indo-Persian biographical tradition, and an acute awareness of possible audiences.

Menon explores what writing meant for Nayantara Sahgal across her long career as a public figure. Going beyond the private–public binary, Menon traces a "secret" (67) that undergirds the differences in Sahgal's memoirs. In the former, "the author's personal and political selves are a harmonious whole" (68), optimistic about the promises of a nascent Indian nation and middle-class conjugal respectability. Menon argues that the latter, read alongside Sahgal's personal letters and private interviews, is a "monument to a buried self" (70) that emerged and deceased in years of marital crisis between the publication of both volumes, and a simultaneous disillusionment with bourgeois aspirations.

Alam and Ray's essays foreground an important methodological assertion of this book. Autobiographical writings "must be viewed through a lens of multiplicity where it is composed of different styles of self-narration and is closely related to the contexts of production" (73). Both essays argue against the thesis that women's autobiographies, and therefore the personas they document, are uncritically subsumed into larger political ideologies. Alam reads Nazr Sajjad Hyder's personal letters, diaries and memoirs that were eventually serialised in Urdu magazines, and Ray reads Kailashbhashini Debi's diary and personal letters, to reveal selves that negotiated reformist politics in colonial India. These negotiations are subtle (for instance, Hyder risked making her emotional life public to push against the presumed passivity of Muslim women, and Debi noted her reflections on instances of casteist hypocrisy in reformist Bengali households), but they are there nevertheless. The autobiographical self must, therefore, be sought in a "kaleidoscope of its genres and its contexts" (90) far beyond the conventional likes of a first-person monologue that celebrates public achievements and teleological consistency.

The second section has essays by Uma Chakravarti, Shweta Jha, and Afshan Bokhari. Chakravarti analyzes novels to understand how Partition is remembered by Pakistani women writers Mumtaz Nawaz, Zaheda Hina, and Khadija Mastur. Why does violence not find mention in representations of violent pasts? Chakravarti argues that an emergent collective biography can be read in autobiographical accounts portrayed through fictional characters; the lack of explicit violence in narratives that are pervaded by it leads to "a cathartic release of the congealed emotions of a generation," (138) ultimately healing public archives of Partition memories.

Jha and Bokhari's essays explore how architectural monuments could also be understood as public announcements of selves. Mah Laqa Bai (1767–1824), courtesan in a princely court of Hyderabad, authored *ghazals* and patronized an *ashurkhana* (temporary prayer house). Doing so, Jha argues, gave her public memory a distinct religious connotation. In addition to being a courtesan, Mah Laqa Bai is thus remembered as "a pious women... as a patron, a regal woman of talent and honor" (157). Bokhari's essay discusses how Jahanara Begam, daughter of Mughal emperor

Shah Jahan, established her public memory in the Timurid-Mughal patrilineal history. Jahanara used masculine modes of self-expression to sustain Mughal sovereignty and advance Shah Jahan's imperial agenda. Importantly, Jahanara also patronized building mosques and *khanaqahs*, and composed the Sufi treatises *Munis al-arvah* (1940) and *Risalah-i-Sahibiyah* (1641). In addition to being a Mughal Princess (often considered incidental to the Empire's achievements), Jahanara established herself as a devout Sufi in her own right. Mah Laqa Bai and Jahanara Begam's public personas are preserved in both texts and monuments—together, they represent stories that consolidate reminiscent, agential selves.

The third section is comprised of essays by Anshu Malhotra, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, and Kathryn Hansen. Each essay explores the intersections between gender and religion in autobiographical writings, and cumulatively they illustrate persevering selves (otherwise theorized as subordinate, subaltern, or mute). Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley closely analyze two texts, *Ik Sau Sath Kafian* by Piro (d. 1872), and *The Heart of a Gopi* by Raihana Tyabji (1901–1975). Why did Piro write about her move from a brothel to Guru Gulabdas's religious establishment, and why did Muslim-born Tyabji write of her 'mystic' encounters with Lord Krishna as a *gopi*? These questions, Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley poignantly suggest, can be addressed in light of the literary and devotional histories that endow Piro and Tyabji's "individual experiences with a kind of validity not achievable otherwise" (241). Contrary to "displaying an obsession with novelty and autonomy" (207), a presumed characteristic of 'good' autobiographies, Piro and Tyabji's texts borrow "cultural practices and mental habits that belonged to an earlier episteme" (206). The authors deploy recurring tropes, literary conventions, and religious themes not for lack of better options or creativity; instead, their attempt is to be remembered through familiarity, in societies that are by and large hostile to their life decisions.

Hansen's essay discusses autobiographies authored by male actors Jayshankar Sundari and Fida Husain, who performed as women. Their writings reveal a "doubled performativity" (256), through public and on-stage personas. Hansen argues that the very act of writing functioned to bust the commonly held belief that theatre actors are shallow and immoral; Sundari and Husain asserted their "self-regard, self-mastery, and self-determination" (277) as artists and individuals on the fringes of social normativity.

Speaking of the Self is relevant across academic disciplines, particularly South Asian studies, religion, comparative literature, history, gender, and performance studies. The sheer diversity of primary material included, crisp writing style, and careful treatment of issues relating to gender, performance, and autobiography make for an accessible, theoretically insightful, and delightfully engaging academic work.

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