

Significance of Personal Narratives in Gender Research Methodology

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Abstract

The Colonial archives constitute a significant resource base for studying the modern Indian history. However, it is inadequate for reflecting upon the history of women. Crucial efforts have been made to fill the silences in the official archives by exploring an ever-expanding variety of biographical writings by and about women, their lives and lived experiences. The critical study of these biographical works has itself become an integral methodological trope to investigate issues of liminality, identity and agency. The methodological approach dealing with biographical/personal narratives has created innovative avenues for engaging in interdisciplinary research on gender.

This paper proposes to present an analysis of how this approach lends itself to pursue gender-related research – citing examples from the field of social history of health and medicine from the colonial Indian context. History of India's earliest women doctors, child birthing practices, norms and experiences, the medicalization of Childbirth, domestic arrangements promoting/depleting health among Indian women are among a wide range of issues that can be critically explored with the deployment of this approach. This paper will attempt to address some of these aspects and raise relevant questions for proceeding with further research. Indian women since the 19th century have been prolific writers who wrote intelligent insightful accounts in the form of life narratives, dairy entries, travelogues, prison memoirs and others. Their significance in enriching gender history/studies will be assessed. The dynamic role of memory, nostalgia and the politics of selective recounting of life and events will be assessed to underline the significance of memory as a strategic tool to write life narratives.

Keywords: *gender, autobiography, memory, methodology, health*

Introduction:

The concerted efforts towards mainstreaming women's role and gender related issues in historical writings became evident around the final quarter of the 20th century with the objective to recognize and appreciate the persistent need to revisit and rewrite histories with greater gender sensitivity. Gender perspective in historical research brings into focus issues that have the potential to review and re-interpret the past with greater precision. Joan W. Scott introduced a fresh theoretical premise of discussing gender issues in history when she referred to gender as a useful category of historical analysis (Scott 1986). Scholars addressing gender related issues in research have entered into vibrant dialogues with relevant aspects of feminism, sexuality and masculinity. Women's fictional and non-fictional writings across time and geographical contexts have served as precious reservoirs that have buried women's voices, choices and agencies from various historical contexts. The recovery and revelation of these have thus come to constitute important resources for undertaking incisive historical analysis. In the context of South Asia scholars like Kumkum Sangari, Sudesh Vaid, Tanika Sarkar, Geraldine Forbes, Uma Chakravarty, Charu Gupta, Shalini Shah, Ruby Lal and Anshu Malhotra, to name a few, have explored new avenues, consolidated and nuanced the study of gender and women's history from the ancient to the modern period.

This paper aims to investigate the significance of gender as a trope for undertaking research in disciplines such as history, sociology, literature and anthropology among others in relation to women writing about themselves, narrating their lives, experiences and recounting their historical and social circumstances that shaped and sharpened their individual identities and/or crafted their public image. This paper will present how the analysis of auto/biographical writings have itself become an integral methodological trope to investigate issues of liminality, identity and agency. The paper will argue that this methodological approach has generated innovative avenues for engaging in interdisciplinary research in the field of gender studies. The paper is going to begin with a discussion of personal narratives as a genre of women's writings that have multifariously lent itself as a precious resource base for researching interrelated fields of gender issues. As these narratives are constituted by relying upon one's perception of the past in the light of the present, the second section of this paper is going to be an analysis of the dynamism of 'memory' as a socio-culturally imbued facet that played an integral role in the constitution and representation of self in women's writings. The third section of the paper is going to reflect upon the usefulness of women's personal narratives in undertaking research. Examples from some women's narratives will be cited to substantiate how such personal narratives can provide crucial, rare and invaluable insights in the realm of social history of health and medicine.

The Biographical Turn in Social Science Research

Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research in biographical genre emerged around the 1980s and became a mature approach over the 1990s. Historian Simone Lassig referred to this as representing a “biographical turn” wherein a critical method of research and investigation of various themes of history was undertaken through biographical research (Lassig 2008). The area of research dealing with biographies is in itself a complex mosaic of debatable terminologies, approaches and the politics of exclusion and differentiation on various grounds. However, they are commonly reflective of individual agency, experience and self-representation serving as methodological tools offering the opportunity for critical research.

The range of works that constitute this field of enquiry include life histories, life writings, biographical narratives, autobiographies and autobiographical articulations. Each of these have their respective modes of expression, intent and formulation. Autobiography as a genre of writing developed in the West as part of the literary and cultural traditions that were inspired by ideas of individualism and selfhood. Writing of memoirs and autobiographies in India was an outcome of the experience and influence of colonialism. Colonialism introduced new ideas, ideals and modes of expression. Women writing about their life and experiences was an important outcome of creating opportunities for women to acquire an

education thereby giving them a voice, the ability and confidence to express themselves. As far as this paper is concerned, the focus is on women writing self into history. Women’s writings about the self and the circumstances surrounding the self are predicated upon an individual woman’s perception of self and her aspiration to portray a specific image of herself to the audience that the writings are intended for. These writings cover a wide spectrum of formats including memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, letters, poems and stories among others. Collectively these are called personal narratives by scholars of women’s history.

While attempting to incorporate women’s voices, presence and experience into history or exploring women’s role and contribution in any given historical context, historians have recurrently faced the challenge of paucity of sources. The conventional sources for writing history are frequently seen to either gloss over or be silent about women. For instance, the official archival records maintained in the colonial Indian context have sparse references to women. For that reason, scholars of modern Indian history have creatively explored a wide variety of resources to piece together and reinstate women into history. Reading against the grain, acknowledging and engaging with the silences and omissions, minute attention to details of structures and functions indirectly or implicitly bearing consequences upon women’s lived experiences have been some of the strategies deployed by historians to write women’s histories. Women’s writings have by far played the most integral role in retrieving

women's voices, their experiences and distinctive worldviews. A remarkably gender sensitive and intuitive analysis of these have enabled scholars to appreciate and highlight the unique character of the feminine presence and agency in diverse historical contexts.

This paper seeks to underscore the significance of engaging with women's biographical writings as a crucial methodological trope. The contributors in Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley's edited volume *Speaking of the self*, have made scholarly attempts at 'theorizing the relationship between gender, history and self' through close reading and analysis of women's autobiographical writings (Malhotra & Lambert-Hurley 2015). They have pointed towards the importance and relevance of a keen gendered analysis of women's autobiographical writings recognising the multiple "selves" in relational terms used as a trope of self-representation. They argue that women's autobiographical genre is 'intrinsically interpretive and performative' wherein women's voices must be understood in the larger cultural and historical context in which they style themselves as actors assigning to themselves an image and role that they are willing to present before an audience. They argue that women's writings in general are evidently more personal than political as women present intimate and intricate details about their life experiences, living circumstances and their perseverance to cope with them. Antoinette Burton in her monograph *Dwelling in the Archive* has presented different facets of the space of home and the memories associated with

the living space as being important preserves for writing women's history (Burton 2003).

Ann Oakly has pointed out that 'Like biographies, autobiographies are not simply compendia of facts, but constructed narratives; these offer a coherent retrospective life story which has been manufactured from the actual fabric of a life...' (Oakley 2010). The constituting of a life story thus involves exercising meaningful agency on the part of the writer. In the case of women writing about their own lives and experience, women are performing multiple roles. They are simultaneously asserting their selfhood, presenting their perspective and exercising their agency within the larger context of social and cultural circumstances which may be alternatively restrictive, prescriptive, prohibitive, supportive or liberating. David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn have attested to the fact that the familiar, accessible and presumed to be important sources often silence or ignore women's individual voices and the underlying subversive messages in their records (Arnold & Blackburn 2004). An insightful analysis of auto/biographical writings facilitates in recovering and rescuing these lost/ unheard voices and brings to the surface- narratives of suffering, deprivation, gendered discrimination, subversion, perseverance and triumphs which enriches the field of women's history. These create possibilities for scholars to explore uncharted territories to make sense of the past from unique perspectives. These factors among others make the genre of auto/biographical writings worthy of systematic analysis. A "biographical turn" in research in the social

sciences has been recognized to have been underway since the final quarter of the 20th century wherein engagement, scrutiny, critical analysis and research of auto/biographical writings/ tellings (as in the case of orally narrated lives and interviews) have been acknowledged as serious scholarly methods of investigation across inter-disciplinary domains of historical, anthropological, sociological, psychological, literary and economic research (Hans 2017 and Chamberlayne et al. 2000).

Gender, Memory and History

Remembering one's life's experiences is akin to piecing together a complex puzzle which is most satisfyingly complete when some pieces are deliberately left out. Memory woven into the process of narrating one's life thus includes the politics of remembering, chronicling and selectively incorporating and leaving out details. Memory inevitably is an interpretative activity and is a reflection on the process of negotiation with the past that carries on through socio-culturally shaped perceptions of the past, present and future. Memory may be looked upon as a relationship that an individual/collective has with the past from the standpoint of the present context. It may be argued that through the very act of recounting from memory, an individual seeks to constitute and forge her/his identity within a familiar socio-cultural framework. Such socio-culturally shaped memories are embodied in and give meaning to actions, practices and expressions that provides clues to answer questions of

identity and agency. Personal narratives are reflective of the interplay between individual and collective, private and public memories that are systematically (re-)arranged to present a coherent account of one's life and times. These are simultaneously independent, interdependent and corroborative and consequently historically relevant in comprehending the past.

The crucial inter-linkages among history, memory and auto/biographical writings address questions of power, agency, liminality and normativity. In the context of its increasing relevance in researching on gender, Bose has pointed out that 'Autobiography has gained currency and access increasingly in literary, cultural and historical scholarship, drawing attention to the ways in which the self is conceived, represented and recreated historically' (Bose 2020). Nostalgia being one of the most prominent traits and sentiments expressed in and through women's accounts renders memory the potential to be dynamic, productive and performative in intent. In women's efforts to reinstate themselves in history through personal narratives, memory participates in the portrayal of current social reality in correlation to the past. These narratives are often constitutive of memories that are shared and transmitted across generations and over time permeates into historical accounts. As part of the research imperative a researcher participates in the process of critical exploration of such biographical accounts in an attempt to discern aspects of life and experiences that are

privileged, remembered, recorded, recounted in contrast to those that are forgotten or deliberately left out. Thus, the historian attempts to understand the narrator's relationship, negotiation and nature of reconciliation with the past. This may be understood as the politics of selective remembering, reliving, reviewing and recounting one's own past. However, it is important to note that in any particular point in an individual's life, memory dwells in the present and is subject to be influenced by changing circumstances and the resultant change in worldviews. Personal narratives constituted from memory should therefore be read as being implicitly imbued with politics of power, identity and agency and accordingly be relied upon with caution as a critical resource for the writing of women's and gender histories. In the light of the potential tensions that persist among gender, memory and history, it is worth asking Which/Whose memories are privileged and documented? What are the factors that determine what is worth remembering? How do dominant cultural discourses manipulate and/or obfuscate the history and memories of individuals/collectives?

Relevance of Personal Narratives in Research of Social History of Health and Medicine

Research in the field of social history of health and medicine has steadily evolved and enriched in scope, content and sophistication of theoretical approach and methodological intervention. Personal narratives of women and

biographical works by and about women have unveiled a plethora of material to investigate gender dimensions of health, medicine and epidemiological causations among others. This section will discuss three auto/biographical narratives of women from colonial Bengal to present the potential of critical reading and analysis of such texts as constituting an important methodological tool of research in this field.

The first autobiography by a Bengali woman was *Amar Jiban* by Rashsundari Debi published in Bengali in 1868. This book represented the life-story of a woman who overcame all the obstacles of her generation to teach herself to read and write. The autobiography not only discussed the life of a woman in her various roles as daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother but also is a testimony to the deep religiosity to *bhagavat bhakti* of the woman writing it. Tanika Sarkar in her minute analysis of the intricate details has revealed sharp insights about socially determined status of health of a housewife in 19th century Bengal. Sarkar points out that Rashsundari was trained like a caged bird to conduct herself in an acceptable and appreciable manner. Further the kitchen is described as being her world (or the site of drudgery) which in turn served as a physically and laboriously restrictive domain. Sarkar further extends the cage metaphor to encompass the understanding of her sexual body in reflecting on how a young woman's body served as the means for giving birth to twelve children over a span of approximately twenty-

three years (18 to 41 years of age for Rashsundari) (Sarkar 1993).

A second personal narrative is that of Haimabati Sen (1866-1932), who was one of the earliest women in India to become a professionally qualified doctor in the late nineteenth century in India (Forbes & Raychaudhuri 2000). She lived an exemplary life beginning her childhood in a conventional orthodox Hindu family, going through multiple tragedies and challenges in her life to finally realise her destiny as a lady doctor. Haimabati's detailed autobiography in Bengali from the 1920s remained unpublished until long after her death. The manuscript of her memoir along with her notebook were passed on to the two successive generations until its worth and merit was recognized and it was translated, edited and published by Geraldine Forbes and Tapan Raychaudhuri in 2000.

Haimabati's account is extremely valuable for research in the field of gendered social history of health and medicine as it provides a thorough account of the novelty, experiences and challenges of becoming a part of the professional medical cadre, a predominantly male domain, for young Indian women in the 19th century. Gender and racial discrimination were interrelated experiences in the years of learning wherein the female students' abilities and potential were suspect and under unfair scrutiny. In Haimabati's experience of decades of medical practice she narrates about her wide range of duties and responsibilities towards a steadily increasing number of female patients she treated. In addition she provides a glimpse

of the unsavoury experiences of sexual and professional harassment by senior male doctors and instances that demanded her to resort to unethical medical practices (like falsifying reports on cause of death under pressure). Her narrative provides an in-depth description of women's experiences as professionals in the medical arrangements of late colonial Bengal. This narrative like other writings by and about earliest Indian women in the medical profession, inspires readers, scholars, researchers and gender enthusiasts to applaud their accomplishments especially for introducing a distinct feminine essence into the profession of medicine within India, while simultaneously challenging the sex-stereotyping of 'doctor' as male and 'nurse' as female. It is a testimony of how women doctors were forging their respectable and independent identities within a critical colonial-patriarchal context.

The third narrative for discussion is that of Shudha Mazumdar, born in 1899 in an upper caste and wealthy family of a respected landowner (Mazumdar 1997). Although Shudha spent her entire childhood in her Khidderpore home in Calcutta, her ancestors originally belonged to the Khulna district of East Bengal. Her autobiography, *A Pattern of Life: The Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, is a lucid disquisition of the contemporary times and its peculiar norms, mores, customs, and, taboos as perceived by a woman who lived a remarkable life as she experienced the contrast of being in and subsequently emerging from within the *pardah* (Ray 2015).

Yet again aspects of health, medical care and associated issues are interwoven in Shudha's memoir. The woes of *pardah* bound customs came to haunt Shudha at the time of the birth of both her boys in two distinct ways. At the first instance when Shudha went into labour, the local midwife was called upon for the delivery of the child. Shudha recalled that arrangements made to ensure the welfare of the mother and child was "traditional rather than scientific" (Mazumdar 1997: 130).

I remember being tormented by thirst as it was thought water might be injurious for my health. Nor was fresh air considered beneficial so the windows were closed to prevent my baby and myself from catching cold. A great fetish was made about 'touch'. I was not permitted to emerge from the room nor were visitors allowed to pick up the baby or touch me... (Mazumdar 1997: 130)

I was confined in the accouchement chamber for a full month. It was a hard time with its many restrictions, but youth is resilient in body and spirit and I survived the ordeal (Mazumdar 1997: 132).

The birth of her second son was yet another novel experience for her as well as for her family

as for the first time in the family's history a 'male' doctor was called upon to assist in the birthing process. Unlike the previous time, Shudha was initially entrusted under the care of a trained midwife, but the latter after realising that Shudha's labour was too prolonged which might complicate the delivery, advised that a doctor should look into her case. After much deliberation and hesitation (especially on Shudha's mother's part), Dr. Biman Das Mukherjee was reluctantly allowed to look into the matter and he saved the lives of both the mother and son. This near-death experience left an indelible impression upon Shudha's psyche. The contrasting experiences of Shudha at the time of childbirth have important insights for researchers in this field. First, these are indications of the lack of choice or authority to voice one's opinion regarding such crucial issues. Second, this is a portrayal of the changing scenario of childbirthing in Bengal, with the inception of medicalization of child birth, the presence of trained midwives (even female doctors) and the reliance upon professionally qualified doctors. Finally, this and similar accounts give a glimpse of the arrangements of confinement within homes as segregated spaces which has often been implicated to have health depleting and life-threatening consequences upon the mother and the new born.

Conclusion

'Women's writings' per se have been extensively explored from various disciplinary perspectives. Nonetheless, the genre of auto/biographical writings or personal narratives of women

continues to hold tremendous possibilities and scope for critical research. Historians are particularly interested in writings that date long back and provides the opportunity to understand the past more comprehensively with greater accuracy through the reinstatement of the women lost and silenced in standard historical records. In addition, from a historical perspective, scholars have attested to the impending need to recognize and contextualise the distinctiveness of each of the text/narrative and value these for their individual worth, while not hesitating to study these in juxtaposition to one another for comparative analysis as and when required (Lambert-Hurley 2018).

Women assume the role of a contemporary observer, participant as well as commentator in the narratives that they put together. Their worldviews, insights, opinions, assertions and emotions are intermeshed together in a complex web which requires intelligent, in-depth, nuanced, critical and sensitive analysis of their narratives. As nostalgia constitutes a potent sentiment in their representation of the past, the historian needs to carefully engage with the skills of skimming through memory lanes, recognising inherent biases, glossing over of facts in order to be able to reconstruct a history which is largely objective. Like any other source of history, auto/biographical writings also have their respective limitations. These limitations can be successfully negotiated (albeit in certain cases) to an extent by corroborating these narratives with other contemporary sources for a more accurate analysis.

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