

**Opening up Intimate Spaces. Women’s Writing and
Autobiography in South Asia:
An Introductory Essay**

I remind myself of the fundamental notion of what it means to be a writer.
A writer is the one who controls the narrative.

(Kandasamy 2017: 207)

The present volume of *Cracow Indological Studies. Opening up Intimate Spaces: Women’s Writing and Autobiography in South Asia*, brings together, mainly though not exclusively, articles based on papers presented at the workshop “Opening up Intimate Spaces: Women’s Writing and Autobiography in India”.¹ The workshop—conducted under the aegis of the European Association for South Asian Studies and co-funded by Adam Mickiewicz University along with the Institute of Advanced Study of the University of Warwick—was held at the Chair of South Asian Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, on the 19th and 20th May, 2016. It was organised by Tara Puri (at that time at the University of Warwick, at present at the University of Bristol), Nora Melnikova (then at Charles University, Prague, at present at the University of California, Berkeley) and Monika Browarczyk (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań).

To our regret, and for different reasons, the contributions of two of our participants—Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (Department of History, University of Sheffield) and Anne Castaing (Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Paris)—are not included. With great pleasure,

¹ The credit of coining the workshop’s title goes to Tara Puri.

however, we welcome articles on the subject from other scholars who have kindly accepted our invitation. These include Ulrich Timme Kragh, who attended the workshop, participated in the discussions, and writes about Tantric women-masters; Maria Skakuj-Puri, who talks about the recent book by a well-known Hindi writer; Ewa Dębicka-Borek, who analyses personal documents of a Polish social activist settled in India; and Tatiana Szurlej, who scrutinises the testimony of an Indian female rebel and its cinematic retelling. These contributions enrich the scope of the volume.

Most studies on South Asia tend to focus on the public and the political, viewing them in entirely masculine terms. Women's lower levels of literacy, their containment within the ideologies of femininity and domesticity, compounded further by the deafening silence of the imperial archive regarding women's experience have led to the relegation of women's writing to the margins of mainstream history. This volume—keeping in mind the workshop's presentations and the attending debate—bears witness to the significant shift in the study of South Asian history and society with regard to the reappraisal of women's role in the making of South Asia (be it medieval, pre-modern or modern) by re-focusing on women's narratives in general and their writing about their own lives in particular.

Critical and theoretical reflections on women's writings, in particular life writings, are located at the intersection of post-colonial, cultural and women's studies, opening up a broad spectrum of interdisciplinary research. The convolutions of women's positioning in South Asian society impact both the source texts as well as their reception and study, revealing the complexity and interconnectivity of social and cultural changes taking place in South Asian society at different historical periods and in various regional dimensions. The inclusion of such earlier marginalised perspectives brings about a more nuanced reading to South Asian history with its multiplicity of social and cultural tensions.

This volume, therefore, proposes to bring into focus the need to include these ‘other’ (and ‘other’-ed) voices by examining women’s writing—not merely autobiographical narratives—and the ways in which their authors use the language of religiosity/spirituality, privacy, domesticity, femininity and intimacy to raise other serious questions.

Today the field of autobiography studies is a witness to two gradual processes taking place side by side. Firstly, there is a tendency to redefine the genre and include other forms of narratives, so not only written autobiographies but also oral tradition, performing arts and fine arts, artefacts etc. within scholarly purview. Secondly, there is a strong trend to rewrite the canon so as to incorporate works by those earlier excluded from it, e.g. in the South Asian context Dalits, Adivasis, and women. Thus, under the pressure of feminist and post-colonial critique the concept of the genre of ‘classical’ autobiography as it originated in the West is being constantly challenged and redefined forcing us to take a fresh look at auto narratives (and not necessarily only the written ones) and refocus our attention on women’s texts seen now as a site of resistance to the dominant discourse, and narrated by those earlier marginalised or ignored.

Motivated by the noticeable shift towards expanding the autobiographical source base, the present collection explores not only texts long considered as fitting the category of ‘classical’ autobiography, i.e. autobiographies written and published as books (contributions by Alessandra Consolaro and Monika Browarczyk) or those belonging to the more general class of life writings, for instance, travelogue (Tara Puri), reminiscences-cum-memoirs (Alaka Chudal and Barnita Bagchi), personal documents (Ewa Dębicka-Borek), and witness testimony (Tatiana Szurlej), but also spiritual treatises (Ulrich Timme Kragh), medieval oral hymns (Nora Melnikova), devotional epic poetry (Lidia Sudyka), and contemporary prose writings (Maria Skakuj-Puri).

Narratives of personal experience often flip over to reveal articulations that are more politically aware, frequently disturbing seemingly stable stories of the religious or domestic life. The home and the world are then not as separate as they may seem but make continuous inroads into each other. Tanika Sarkar’s work on Bengali women’s histories

in the nineteenth century and especially women's autobiographical writing in the period has become a landmark for subsequent scholars.¹

Apart from Tanika Sarkar, other academics have also undertaken interdisciplinary research into women's writings in South Asia, and from South Asia, amongst them, Malavika Karlekar (social anthropologist), Ranjana Harish (scholar of English studies), Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy (both historians). Our collection proposes to follow these seminal works. It also seeks to endorse the critical approach of David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (*Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and History*) and Kathryn Hansen (*Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies*), specifically their critique of the over-generalised concepts of an alleged absence of the self in the narratives from India and the assumed hegemony of a group identity over an individual one in life writings from the region. An important question raised by Arnold and Blackburn in the context of women's narratives is the weight that persistent privileging of literature over orature carries on in researching personal narratives in India, particularly those authored by women. Questioning thus the claimed nonexistence of autobiographical narratives in non-Western cultures, we intend at the same time to counter the ensuing presumption that those that do exist are entirely informed by the legacy of the West.

Further, we draw from work of Uday Kumar (*Writing the First Person. Literature, History, and Autobiography in Modern Kerala*) on autobiographical tradition across various genres in modern Kerala, and from a volume edited by Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (*Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia*) on women's auto narratives dating to various historical periods and drawn from across Indian subcontinent, with special focus on Muslim women. The articles collected in this volume bring into sharp relief "challenges involved in recovering women's voice" which however "should not indicate a lack of voice" (Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 2016: 11).

¹ Unfortunately, Prof. Sarkar, invited as keynote speaker, had to withdraw from the workshop in Poznań because of ill health.

We are pleased that two books authored by the last two scholars and documenting recent research on autobiographical writings are reviewed in the present volume. These are Anshu Malhotra's book on Piro, a Punjabi courtesan turned mystic and poet (*Piro and the Gulabdasis. Gender, Sect and Society in Punjab*, 2017) and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley's study of Muslim women autobiographical writing from the Indian subcontinent (*Elusive Lives. Gender, Autobiography and the Self in Muslim South Asia*, 2018).

We invite readers of this volume to read articles in two ways—in chronological order i.e. the sequence proposed in the contents, and in a more imaginative order—following the grouping we propose below. With a view to exploring writing by women in South Asia as a continuum of their presence during different periods of history, in different regions and in different capacities we have decided to arrange the articles in this volume in chronological order, which is borne out by the contents. However, as already indicated at the beginning of the introduction, the contributions could be also grouped in accordance with the already mentioned, discrete categories subsumed in the genre of the autobiographical, therefore the starting point then could be the 'classical', published autobiography. From there we could proceed to other groups of texts arranging them, whenever possible, chronologically within each group. We propose these two ways of sequencing and reading the articles in order to bring into focus the continuity of the auto expression by women in South Asian tradition across languages and times. At the same time, we try to draw readers' attention to various forms of auto narratives that tend to criss-cross the boundaries of genres.

What if we were to read **Monika Browarczyk**'s article first and be introduced to autobiography at its most classical? The article explains the reasons for the growing number of Indian women's autobiographies in Hindi, apparently a fairly recent development in the literature of that language; a development which gains strength in the mid-1990s and the first decade of the 2000s. Browarczyk introduces the first researchers on life writings by women in India and briefly reviews

this type of writing in Hindi. Thereafter, she concentrates on two women both of whom have followed their first volume of autobiography by a second. They are Krishna Agnihotri and Maitreyi Pushpa. Agnihotri is one of the first women to write autobiography in Hindi. Her *Lagtā nahī hai dil merā* ('My Heart Is Not in It') appeared in 1996 and was followed in 2010 by *Aur, aur... aurat* ('And, and... Woman'). Maitreyi Pushpa published *Kasturī kuṇḍal basai* ('Kasturi and Her Jewel of a Daughter') in 2002, and *Guṛiyā bhītar guṛiyā* ('A Doll within a Doll') in 2008. Browarczyk examines narrative strategies adopted by both the authors, analyses the peculiarities of their language and style, and shows that studying ways of constructing 'narrative selves' can be a captivating and instructive exercise.

Alessandra Consolaro undertakes the analysis of Prabha Khaitan's autobiography, *Anyā se ananyā* ('From the Other One to the Only One'). Prabha Khaitan, born in 1942, was a successful Marwari businesswoman with a PhD in existentialist philosophy, feminist activist, writer and translator. She always followed her own path making unconventional and bold choices in her life. Consolaro chooses three analytical tools to study Khaitan's autobiography: the existentialist concepts of immanence and transcendence, and Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection. Such a choice of tools is justified by Khaitan's philosophical and cultural formation as well as her cosmopolitan environment. Adopting these methodologies shows Khaitan as undergoing the process of abjection and at the same time, in Consolaro's words, struggling "to make sense of the Sartrean claim of the indestructibility of freedom even in the face of the most extreme objectification by the other". What has enabled her to face such challenges? Consolaro submits that it was her local cultural milieu, precisely the *satī/sakti* ideas that influenced her choices and can be found in her autobiography. Though there is no explicit discussion on those notions in Khaitan's autobiography Consolaro argues that its very structure as well as certain hints in the text suggest links with Bengali *śākta* Tantrism and evoke *satī* and *pativrata* ideals, which were strongly recommended as role models for Marwari girls.

Alaka Chudal analyses Shivarani Devi's (1890–1976) literary memoir-cum-biography focused on her husband Premchand, one of the most celebrated Indian authors. Shivarani Devi writes about her life with the famous husband and it is mainly for this reason—namely to get fuller knowledge of Munshi Premchand, the pioneer of Hindi literature—that her confessions attracted attention. The fact that at the same time Shivarani Devi speaks about herself within the space of Premchand's house was quite often neglected or overlooked. Did she consciously and if so, then to what extent, create her 'self' in *Premchand ghar mẽ*? Chudal in her essay looks for the answers to this and other important questions. Also, she examines Shivarani Devi's account of her husband's domestic life as Shivarani Devi's own autobiography.

The autobiographical writings are also often presented in literary forms, which may be described for different reasons as located somewhere between fiction and non-fiction. **Barnita Bagchi** examines the autobiographical writings of Lila Majumdar (1908–2007), a Bengali writer, best known as the author of books for children and young adults regarded now as classics. In her writings for children she used to create alternate worlds and defamiliarize the real but her autobiographical works also display this turn. Bagchi investigates utopian resonances in three interrelated autobiographical works by Majumdar: *Ār konakhāne* ('Somewhere Else' [1967] 1989), *Pākdandī* ('Winding, Hilly Road,' [1986] 2001), and *Kheror khātā* ('Miscellany' or 'Scrapbook' [1982] 2009). Utopias as the longing for elsewhere are evoked even in the titles, for example in *Ār konakhāne* ('Somewhere Else'). Bagchi points out to the presence of female-centred heterotopia in Majumdar's works and the women-carved liminal spaces in the everyday world. According to Barnita Bagchi, Majumdar's writing "moves imaginatively and continuously through the otherwheres or '*ār konakhāne*' of utopia and heterotopia".

Tara Puri proposes to view Mary Bhow's self writing as an attempt to turn her own experience gained in England in the years 1898–1900 into a kind of guide for her contemporaries. She notes that

Bhore does not write about her personal life there but situates *herself* in public spaces and shows that *Some Impressions of England*, in accordance with Foucault's statement, were written not "to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self" (Foucault 1997: 210–211). Thus Bhore's text is about a self-formation that can be held up as an exemplar to its readers.

The title of **Tatiana Szurlej**'s contribution to the present volume "From Heroic Durga to the Next Victim of an Oppressive Patriarchal Indian Culture: Too Many Variants of Phoolan Devi's Biography" emphasizes the testimony and the biography as the genres under consideration. In fact the famous, or rather ill-famed, "Bandit Queen", as Phoolan Devi used to be called, has become the heroine of many biographies, also biographical films dramatizing her short but adventurous life. However, in response to and as protest against Mala Sen's book and Shekhar Kapur's film, Phoolan Devi published her own account of her life. She lived and died quite recently, having been born on August 10th 1963 and died on July 25th 2001, yet it is not so easy to establish the truth about her life. To what extent is it possible to find it between the lines of many biographies, in a biopic, or her own testimony? The book *I, Phoolan Devi* is again a very special kind of autobiographical writing. Not written by Phoolan, but instead composed out of selected interviews with her, the account was put together by skilled ghost-editors and then approved by Phoolan. Szurlej examines the scenes from Shekhar Kapur's biopic and compares them to what one can find in Phoolan's personal testimonies. Such an analysis shows that although the image is quite complex, the narrator in *I, Phoolan Devi* comes across as more authentic than the person shown by Shekhar Kapur, even if the strategies of creating the narrating "I" (consciously or not, dictated by Phoolan Devi's or her publisher's choices?) and the final result are ultimately the same: Phoolan is shown as a victim, and the image of a rebellious low-caste village woman transforming herself and her life is lost.

Maria Skakuj-Puri focuses on Krishna Sobti's recent book, *Gujrāt pakistān se gujrat hindustān tak* ('From Gujrat, Pakistan, to Gujrat, India', 2017). Judging exclusively by the narrative techniques, the book could have been easily termed a novel if not for the fact that events described evidently match those in the life of its author. The interviews with Krishna Sobti turn into certainty the assumptions that the book indeed narrates the author's personal experiences of the Partition and the two post-Partition years of her life though in a reworked form. Maria Skakuj-Puri's insightful study, supported by theoretical considerations of scholars working with life writings as well as her vast knowledge of Sobti's earlier writings which could be called autobiographical and marked with traumatic memories of the Partition, shows that Sobti masterfully created a piece of autobiographical writing which one does not read "like a witness account but a story or a novel", its ring of authenticity intact.

Yet another type of texts, namely personal documents, are examined by **Ewa Dębicka-Borek**. She uses so far unpublished letters of Wanda Dynowska-Umadevi in order to discuss the process of the author's self-creation. Wanda Dynowska-Umadevi (1888–1971) was a Polish theosophist, poet, writer and social worker, who spent most of her life in India, and one of the goals she intended to pursue during her stay there was to popularize India in Poland (and vice versa). The letters in question concern this matter directly as they are addressed to Tadeusz Szukiewicz, Dynowska's literary representative in Poland in the years 1938–1939. Dębicka-Borek looks at Dynowska's correspondence from the perspective of a researcher aware that these documents are also literary pieces, and self-creation as well as fiction are part and parcel of them all. The meticulous analysis of these letters shows an interesting and multilayered image of Dynowska and her many identities as projected by herself. Of special interest is the fact that the study of personal documents produced by Dynowska, who was not a representative of the hegemonic culture of the British colonialists, opens a less known but worth exploring perspective on South Asia's

cultural and religious heritage, and on India at the time of struggle for independence.

The next group of articles expands the notion of the ‘autobiographical’ to women’s writings that reveal their authors’ spiritual growth and personalities. The first of them authored by **Ulrich Timme Kragh** restores to the history of women’s writing in Sanskrit the very little-known contribution of seven Tantric women-teachers from the Swat Valley. The women active in the area from the eighth to the eleventh century AD left an indelible mark on religious imagination and development of Tantrism. Their works encompass ritual treatises, texts on practice of meditation, mystic poems and forms introduced by Kragh as spiritual biographies and autobiographies empowered by a place, that is Swat, named as Uḍḍiyāna and listed in Buddhist and Śaivite Tantric sources among the twenty-four localities of special religious importance.

The heroine of the article by **Nora Melnikova** is Mīrābāī, the 16th-century female mystic. The early sources mentioning Mīrā are very poor in details concerning her life. With time the “data bank” grows bigger but the pieces of information contained in it are very often contradictory, a fact which can be associated with the origin of the available material, namely the legends and songs preserved in various forms in the oral traditions of different regions. But it is not due merely to the nature and way of transmission that whatever is possible to collect, including poetry ascribed to Mīrā, provides a picture of her depicting her either as a saint or as a rebel as Melnikova asserts in the title of her paper. All these pieces of information put together by different scholars of Mīrā, collectors and translators of her *padas* in Brajhasha and Rajasthani, leave enough “space for imagination and projection, which results in interpretation that often tells us more about the author than about Mīrā herself”—concludes Melnikova.

Lidia Sudyka’s paper entitled “The *Santānagopāla* as a Narrative Opening up Intimate Spaces. Lakṣmī Tampurāṭṭi and Her Poem” is devoted to a woman who lived a peaceful family life, though marked by the tragedy of losing her newborn children. This fact led Lakṣmī

Tampurāṭṭi (1845–1909) to write a devotional poem, *Santānagopāla*, based on a story found mainly in Puranic literature about a pious Brahmin and his wife who, through Viṣṇu's grace, recovered their lost children. Her composition written in spotless Sanskrit unveils some details concerning her private life and her personality.

It is pertinent to take into consideration sensitization of the audience to the importance of the social, cultural, political, regional, and historical milieu in which the autobiographical and women's narratives are played. Thus, the collection *Opening up Intimate Spaces: Women's Writing and Autobiography in South Asia* published in *Cracow Indological Studies* in some ways follows and further explores the paths opened up by earlier research on autobiographical writings and women's writings from the Indian subcontinent, and updates the debate by bringing together scholars from a number of different, though allied, disciplines into conversation with each other. The project of the recovery of female voices of the past is still underway, and this volume intends to be a platform where some of these new discoveries can be shared, as well as a space where such writing can be analysed closely, and its implications drawn out.

With this intention in mind, our authors present articles that span various regions of the Indian subcontinent and various historical periods that extend from the early centuries AD to the modern times and focus on a range of Indian languages: Sanskrit (and Tibetan translations of texts originally in Sanskrit), Bengali, English, and Hindi, with an interesting and unexpected turn, namely a contribution that analyses personal documents of a Polish woman, Wanda Dynowska, a person, who relentlessly worked towards creating a link between India and Poland.

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