

Panel 14: Speaking of the Self? Women and Self-Representation in South Asia

Conveners:

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Panel Abstract

South Asian societies are known to privilege the social and communal over the individual. Nevertheless, it is clear that self-representation, as a means of interlocution with the self and the society at large, was practiced in different ways and for varied purposes. Historians have used sometimes disparate and unpromising sources to construct life histories – for instance the use of ‘autobiographical’ verses of Kabir available in at least three different recension traditions to construct his biography/hagiography (Lorenzen, 1991; Vaudeville, 1993). Others have attempted to decode the specificities of a cultural milieu to understand why an ‘autobiography’ was thus constructed (Naim, 1999). Scholarship on the emergence of autobiography as a genre and its relevance to marginalized groups such as women, religious converts and dalits has further drawn attention to the history of autobiography and the politics of self-representation (Smith, Watson, 1998; Chakravarty, 2000). It has been more difficult to get to women’s ‘voices,’ especially as the South Asian culture gave premium to keeping women away from public gaze (Raheja and Gold 1994; Khare 1996; Vatuk 2004). However, the difficulty of gaining access to women should not indicate a lack of voice (cf. Spivak 1985). If women negotiated their own cultures in order to speak, so must scholars uncover and understand the cultural context in which their speech was created.

This panel will bring together papers that reach out to women from different walks of life and from different times, but all explore dimensions of expressing the self through various modes of self-fashioning and representation. Our aim will be to theorize the relationship between gender, history and self by going beyond the use of life-histories to take a more complex approach to the history of women and their conceptualization of the ‘self’. Recuperating hitherto lesser known voices, the papers will examine a wide range of women such as a famous courtesan from Hyderabad, a Mughal princess, an ascetic woman from a minor sect in Punjab, a singer from Bombay’s Ismaili community and contemporary Islamic feminists. Through the study of particular genres, language and cultural codes we hope to unravel their attempts at engagement with, and fabrication of the self that lie embedded in their personal narratives. Some of these women wrote in contexts of performative traditions, others under the aegis of specific sectarian affiliations with particular audiences in mind. An analysis of these structures of institutional or familial support, private or public patronage will lead us to a new set of questions that are significant to the theory, methodology and practice of women’s history. Linking women’s history to the formation of new female subjectivities in contemporary India, we will also enquire into the historical memory of women’s movements and the relevance of narrative strategies for feminist actors.

Some of the questions that will be thrown up by the panel then are: Were there common motivations, lingual and stylistic choices, preferences of genres, issues that took centre-stage, among the women discussed? Or do their disparate cultural matrices desist such a reading? What

genres of self-representation did women employ in pre-colonial contexts? How useful are French feminist theories of *écriture féminine* to understand women's writing in South Asian contexts?

Speakers and Paper Abstracts

1. The Heart of a Gopi: Bhakti Devotionalism as Muslim Self-Representation?

In 1924, a young woman called Raihana Tyabji 'suddenly felt', in her own words, 'a tremendous, an irresistible urge to write'. She sat down at her desk 'with sheets of foolscap and poised pen' and, over the next three days, poured out the story of Sharmila, a gopi, or milkmaid, enraptured by Krishna in his guise as the cowherd at Vrindavan. At the time, she understood this narrative to be, as she called it, a 'Fragment of a Gopi's Diary'. But, in time, she recognised that what had been revealed to her – for she understood herself to be 'possessed' at the time of writing – was the very soul, the inner self, of the gopi and, through that, an understanding of Lord Krishna himself. Hence, when her tale was eventually published in 1936, she gave it the evocative title, *The Heart of a Gopi*. Subsequently, her little book went into several reprints and editions in its original English (1941, 1953, 1971), while also being translated into several European languages, including French (1938), German (1977) and Dutch (1995). Excerpts from the French edition, *L'Âme d'une Gopi*, were even crafted into songs sung by Raihana herself, certainly in a recording for the American composer and choral singer, Catherine Urner (1941-2). Today, the book is still available and often quoted in a most diverse set of contexts – from academic studies of Hinduism (2001) to a blog on 'Godwriting'.

Yet Raihana Tyabji is best known to history, not for her writing or rarely even her singing, so much so as a devotee of Gandhi. She is attributed with having encouraged him to incorporate verses from the Qur'an into his prayer meetings, commented on his Tantric tendencies, and taught him Urdu while living and working at his ashram at Sevagram. Accounts of Gandhi's closest associates always mention her, sometimes as a Krishna bhakt, or devotee, though 'born into a Muslim family', and elsewhere as a 'devout Muslim', but 'with respect for all religions'. Alluded, if not stated explicitly, is that she was the second daughter of Abbas Tyabji, a Chief Justice at the Baroda High Court and later Gandhian, and his cousin-wife, Amina, herself an educationalist and Congress supporter in the footsteps of her renowned father, Badruddin Tyabji. The family belonged to the Sulaymani Bohra branch of Bombay Muslims intent on proving its Islamic credentials in this period, not least through intermarriage with Sunni Muslims from other parts of the Indian subcontinent (Wright 1976). Yet the openness with which many of the Tyabji clan still approached other faiths is evident in the numerous autobiographical works that they produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (e.g. Fyzee 1921).

Raihana Tyabji left not a memoir, but, rather enigmatically, a few letters, some recordings, a couple of thin books in Hindi, plenty of memories, and this piece of bhakti devotionalism. To be considered in this paper is the question of how far the latter may still be read as a kind of personal narrative, an evocation of the self. In the tradition of Islamic life writing, can the gap between the miraculous and the mundane be breached in order to understand the mystical experience charted here as a kind of autobiography? Even from the rationalist's perspective, should not the life of the imagination still be considered part of the life? And, if so, how do we separate out the author's 'self' from the literary conventions – in this case, the gopi tradition – that structure the story? Does the referencing of a great epic give the author's feelings and

experiences, especially as a Muslim woman devoted to Krishna at a time of increasing religious rigidity and growing communal strife, a kind of validity not achievable otherwise?

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2. A Scandal, Abduction and an Account of Religious Conflict: Self-Representation in Peero's *160 Kafis*

Sometime in the middle years of the nineteenth century in Punjab, when it was still under Sikh rule, the Muslim prostitute Peero left her clan, guardians, profession and apparently religion, to 'cross over' to the establishment of a 'Sikh' guru Gulabdas. Her unprecedented move into the Gulabdasi *dera* caused a furor and a scandal that came to be reported in some indigenous historical accounts. How was this occurrence alluded to in Peero's *160 Kafis*? How did she fashion a self while constructing an account of this transformative and transgressive event? These will be some of the questions that will be taken up in this paper. The reflexivity and intertextuality that inform Peero's writing are of special interest as they show the cultural repertoire that she mined in order to relate her tale. How her story was that of many others, and how she handled a scandal through such rhetorical strategies will be discussed.

The insistent references to religious conflict that constitute an important lament in Peero's *Kafis* will be examined in the context of her own life and the period she inhabited. At the same time a wider bhakti and sufi legacy that formed a central frame for her sect and her own life will be studied, especially as they yielded the cultural materials that Peero used to mould a self. The fabrication of a 'life-story' when speaking from the periphery of caste and gender identities opens up questions of subjectivities of the marginalized. A life written through allusion and allegory, also speaks of the manner in which pre-modern cultures presented the self and organized meaning and experiences of life.

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3. *Tawa'if*, Urdu Poetry and Self-Fashioning: Rethinking Women's History and Vernacular Modernity

Mahalaqa Bai 'Chanda' of Hyderabad (c.1767- c.1824) and Malka Jan or Memsahib Tawa'if of Benares (1860s-1890s? exact dates unknown) were two famous tawa'if (courtesans) who were talented singers and Urdu poets. Women became courtesans by learning the arts of music, dance and poetry and successful and wealthy amongst them displayed their celebrity status through various acts of self-fashioning. These ranged from building tanks or tombs, to participation in melas and urs, and writing Urdu poetry. Although both Mahalaqa Bai and Malka Jan were famous tawa'ifs, a comparison of their life-histories reveals the complex history of these women performers, the continuities and discontinuities in their use of strategies of self-fashioning. The former was a tawa'if who wrote exquisite poetry, was a patron of architects, musicians, dancers and calligraphers in the court of Hyderabad which was establishing itself as a powerful princely state. The latter was of a woman of Eurasian origins who lived in Benares separated from her husband, converted to Islam, learnt music, dance and poetry and then moved to the cosmopolitan street of Bow Bazar in Calcutta. Later called the Memsahib Tawa'if Benarsi, Malka Jan was also the mother of the famous gramophone singer, Gauhar Jan (c.1873-c.1931)

Although Mahalaqa Bai and Malka Jan both wrote poetry in Urdu, a comparison of their divans provides an interesting insight into the changing status of the tawa'if as a courtesan and a woman poet. In this paper I propose to study the styles of their poetry, the production and circulation of their divans to understand how these women negotiated their status as performers and entertainers in their respective settings. At the broader level, I hope to understand how to locate women performers and their compositions within larger debates of women and their role in shaping the worlds of vernacular modernity. In the absence of memoirs and autobiography, can we read their poetry and songs as autobiographical? Through the complex nature of historical evidence such as tazkiras (biographical dictionaries) and divans I will argue that the relationship between women performers and self-representation forces us to rethink issues within women's history and debates of vernacular modernity.

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4. Masculine Modes of Female Subjectivities: The Case of Jahan Ara Begum (1614-1681), Mughal India

The primary objective of this paper is to analyze the physical and ideological ‘translations’ of Jahan Ara Begum’s (1614-1681) Sufi affiliations as functions of the princess’ patronage and piety in seventeenth century Mughal India. The research considers Jahan Ara Begum’s representations through the ‘masculine modes’ of her major commissions, her two biographical Sufi treatises (*Munis al-arvah* [1638] and *Risalah-i-Sahibiyah* [1640]) in which she records her passionate Sufi devotion and experience within the Qadriyah order and her self-assigned ascension and rank as a Sufi master or *pir*. The analysis maintains that these unprecedented female self-representations are sanctioned, influenced and guided by her strong affiliations to Sufism and particular Sufi saints and her supportive relationship with her emperor father, Shah Jahan (r.1628-1658). The study also considers how Jahan Ara’s mystical affinities may have enjoined the unmarried princess to fully participate in the socio-religious public landscape not as a veiled spectator but as an active contributor who was not only the first Mughal woman who commissioned a congregation mosque but also the only Sufi center of learning dedicated to her pīr Mullah Shah Badakhshi in Srinagar, Kashmir.

As Jahan Ara Begum’s commissions and literary contributions are considered alongside her father’s, emperor Shah Jahan, these Mughal ‘enunciations’, emerge as forms of communication through a topos of symbols that ‘gendered’ the Mughal landscape and further, participated in the ‘staging’ for the performance of ‘optical politics’ as a direct function of imperial patronage. The highly politicized and ‘staged’ religiosity of royal women thereby sustained the sovereign and the historical memory of the patrilineal line. Jahan Ara Begum fully participated in these patterns of political patriarchy and her father’s imperial vision by constructing her ‘stage’ through her Sūfi affiliations, prodigious patronage, and literary prowess. The princess’ contributions fully conformed to the Mughal dictates imposed on her gender and enabled her to assert her spiritual and imperial authority as an agent of her own representation.

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5. The Importance of Being “Elusive”: A Reading of Kailashbashini Debi’s *Gatajuger Janaika Grihabadhur Diary*

The reformist movements in nineteenth century Bengal and the preoccupation with the “women’s question” facilitated the emergence of women as writers even though their percentage was miniscule. Autobiography was a genre that they often turned to, sometimes of their own accord – writing diaries – and at other times they were encouraged to write /record/dictate their thoughts about their selves and their times with the express intention of publication, depending on their level of education or the lack thereof. But majority of these autobiographies, either proclaimed to be talking of the times in general or chose to be known by generic terms rather than particular ones. So, one finds a number of autobiographies called *Sekele Katha* – Story of the Past, *Gotojuger Janaika Grihabadhur Diary* – The Diary of a Housewife from the Previous Century, *Purbakatha* – Story of Earlier Times, most of which were published in the early years of the twentieth century.

In this paper, I have chosen to read a relatively lesser known autobiography – Kailashbashini Debi’s *Gotojuger Janaika Grihabadhur Diary* – which was published posthumously, to explore the tensions engendered by the choice of the genre and the space available to women to express/construct their personas in the public domain of print, as reflected in the politics of naming. The reading is not only concerned with the individual act of a woman writing her “self”, but also with its being determined by the ideas of the possible reception of such a text even when it is not being written with the explicit idea of publication, as is the case here.

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6. Silenced Voices and Forgotten Struggles: Bangalore Nagaratnamma’s Self-Representation and her Defence of Women Artists Rights (1910-1952)

Indian courtesans, formerly active in the royal courts and temples of the Sub-continent, only recently attracted the attention of scholars of *gender studies* and activists of *women rights*. Till the beginning of the 1980’, this topic was in fact a subject ‘taboo’ in both the academic and artistic fields which, at various degrees, all suffered by the general moralistic attitude (both in Colonial and Post-Colonial India) toward women behaviour, freedom and agency. Thanks to the pioneering works of some Indian and Western women historians and anthropologists (Amrit Srinivasan 1983, Frederique Appfel Marglin 1985 and Saskia Kersenboom 1987), followed by other scholars (S. Tharu & K. Lalitha 1993, Janaki Nair 1994, Kunal M. Parker 1998, Kalpana & Vasantha Kannabiran 2003, Kay K. Jordan 2003, Davesh Sonej 2004, Tiziana Leucci 2005, V. Sriram 2007, etc.), the researches in this field have since then produced a number of remarkable publications. Thus, the artistic and socio-religious institutions of Indian courtesans started to be studied without the deforming filters of puritanical judgements which reduced and marginalized their community to a mere ‘sub-category’ of the larger ‘prostitution’ phenomena (S. Banerjee

2000). In this paper I will focus on the life of a South Indian courtesan, Bangalore Nagaratnamma (1878-1952), her self-representation and her battles for the defence of women rights in the first half of the 20th century Southern India. Her combats started with the re-edition in the year 1910 of the 18th century Telugu work composed by another courtesan, Muddupalani, attached to the Maratha court at Tanjavur. Though Nagaratnamma herself did not write a proper ‘auto-biography’, still she made sounding her voice in the introduction of Muddupalani’s work. There she speaks about herself and her community and let Muddupalani auto-biographical information be for the first time printed. In fact till then they had been intentionally occulted in the previous editions. Even her true identity, as a woman writer and a courtesan, had also been erased at the point that people believed that Muddupalani was indeed a man. Both Nagaratnamma’s and Muddupalani’s life and self-representation dialogue constantly in the re-edition of the latest one’s work. Contextualising historically and politically Nagaratnamma’s various combats for the defence not only of the rights of the women of her own artistic community, but also for the rights of any other woman to literacy, which till then in India was mainly the courtesans’ prerogative. In this sense her actions can be considered as truly ‘feminist’ ones. Due to the stigma and the prejudices attached to her community, Nagaratnamma’s combats have so far not been valorised as much as those of Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886-1968). I will therefore show how M. Reddy’s claims were finally much more conformed to the puritanical morality and nationalistic agenda of the time than those of Nagaratnamma. By re-casting the same old patriarchal duties and values as ‘modern’ ones, imposed legally to all women (K. Sangari & S. Vaid 1989, Thanika Sarkar 2001), Reddy reframed in such a pattern her abolitionist campaign of the devadâsî system. I will then corroborate my argument with the voices of those temple and court artists I met and with whom I have studied literature, dance and music (Kadur Venkatalakshamma, T.K. Pattammal, etc.) during my 12 years in South India (from 1987 till 1998) and in my later field-works in 2001, 2005/6, 2007 and 2008. The results of these researches have been extensively analysed in my Ph.D. thesis in Social Anthropology & Ethnology submitted at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, which will be published soon.

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7. Islamic Feminism and the Emergence of New Subjectivities among Muslim Women in India

As elsewhere in the so-called Muslim world, many active “lay” Muslims in India are currently engaging in fresh interpretations of the Islamic tradition. Like other contemporary reform movements within Islam, these efforts can be seen as an answer to the perceived crises of religious authority and political representation. The debates on burning questions, such as the status of Muslim women, education or representation, have arguably led to the emergence of a new translocal public sphere in recent years. Within this new public sphere, Muslim women have an increasingly audible voice.

This holds especially true with regard to the new Muslim women's rights movement in India which came to life in the aftermath of the heated controversy over religion-based personal laws in the 1980s. Much more than in its initial phase, however, this emancipatory movement seems to draw a lot of inspiration from the translocal discourse of Islamic feminism, which gained momentum in the 1990s. Muslim women's rights activists in India increasingly argue that Muslim women have been denied the equal rights guaranteed to them in the Quran by prevailing patriarchic traditions of interpretation. Accordingly, they encourage Muslim women to read the Quran for themselves and to demand their rights. By increasingly going public with their claims, by establishing local as well as translocal networks of organisations, and by openly questioning the knowledge production of established religious authorities, these new Islamic actors meet strong opposition from influential Ulema, but also from within the "Muslim community" or local communities. Furthermore, Muslim women's rights activists who base their claims on their religion are confronted with mistrust on the part of many secular feminists who seriously doubt the compatibility of the normative sources of Islam with the principle of gender equality and thus tend to regard Islamic feminism as a "compromise with patriarchy".

In my paper, I would like to shed some light on the emergence of new subjectivities among Indian Muslim women in the last two decades or, more precisely, in the aftermath of the notorious Shah Bano case. I will argue that to a significant extent and somewhat unexpectedly, these new subjectivities have been generated in the course of the controversy on Muslim Personal Law and that it is the global discourse of Islamic feminism which seems to play a crucial and increasingly important role in this process. Against the backdrop of a rapid medialisation of Indian society, I will discuss some of the new ways and practices believing Muslim women have developed to enter the discourse on "their" rights which has long been dominated by other self-appointed advocates of "Muslim women's rights" and thereby link the emergence of new subjectivities to the question of Muslim women's agency.

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