

Gendered Selfhood and Agency in Indian Women Autobiographers of the Nationalist Period: Patriarchal Constraints and Subversive Narratives in Maharashtra

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the construction of gendered selfhood and agency in autobiographies written by Indian women from Maharashtra during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing on primary texts by Ramabai Ranade, Parvatibai Athavale, Yashodabai Joshi, Lakshmbai Tilak, Savitribai Phule, Muktabai, and others, it analyses how these women negotiated patriarchal structures of companionate marriage, family honour, caste purity, and controlled education within the broader nationalist reform agenda. Through feminist textual analysis, the study reveals both the reconstitution of patriarchy and the subtle strategies of resistance that allowed women to inscribe subversive identities. The findings demonstrate that while these autobiographies often appear to affirm traditional feminine roles of pativrata dharma and self-sacrifice, they simultaneously encode palimpsestic and subterranean selves that challenge dominant discourses of nationalism, caste, and gender. The paper contributes to postcolonial gender studies by highlighting the complex interplay of consent, dissent, relational selfhood, and self-narration in colonial Maharashtra, offering fresh insights into how women balanced collective national duty with personal assertions of dignity and autonomy.

KEYWORDS: Gendered Selfhood, Female Agency, Patriarchal Reconstitution, Nationalist Autobiography, Maharashtra Women Writers

1. The Nationalist Context and the Rise of Women's Autobiographical Writing

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Maharashtra marked a period of intense social reform and nationalist awakening. The region, once the stronghold of the Peshwas, witnessed the convergence of colonial modernity, missionary activity, and indigenous reform movements that together reshaped gender norms. Women began writing autobiographies in increasing numbers as print culture expanded and education became a contested site of reform. These texts emerged not in isolation but against the backdrop of intertwined discourses of patriarchy, nationalism, and caste. Upper-caste Brahmin women, in particular, found themselves positioned as symbols of cultural

purity while simultaneously being subjected to new expectations of companionate marriage and educated motherhood.

The nationalist movement both enabled and constrained women's voices. Leaders like Gandhi invoked feminine virtues of sacrifice and self-renunciation, drawing on figures such as Sita and Savitri, yet offered little space for questioning traditional gender roles once independence was achieved. Meanwhile, organisations such as the All India Women's Conference provided platforms for women to articulate demands for voting rights and legal protections. Autobiographical writing became a crucial medium through which women could navigate these tensions. Unlike men's autobiographies, which often celebrated public achievements and individual heroism, women's narratives frequently adopted relational and self-deprecating modes, presenting their stories as contributions to social reform rather than assertions of individual selfhood.

Print media and social reform movements played a pivotal role in encouraging women to document their lives. The rise of Marathi periodicals and the efforts of male reformers created an environment where women could justify writing as a service to other women and the nation. However, this justification also served as a protective strategy against accusations of egoism or transgression. The autobiographies thus reflect a careful balancing act: they affirm the nationalist project while quietly recording the personal costs of living within patriarchal and caste-bound structures. This section establishes the historical and cultural context that made women's autobiographical writing both possible and perilous in nationalist Maharashtra.

The proliferation of such texts coincided with broader shifts in Indian society, including the growth of education for women and the influence of Victorian ideals transmitted through missionary and colonial channels. Yet Maharashtra's unique Brahminical orthodoxy imposed additional layers of constraint. Women writers from this region often internalised and reproduced elements of pativrata dharma even as they sought limited forms of agency through education and companionate relationships. Their narratives thus serve as rich sites for examining how gender identities were simultaneously reinforced and subtly contested during a period of cultural nationalism.

Social reform in Maharashtra originated from native male reformers who sought to eradicate practices such as Sati, child marriage, and bans on widow remarriage. These efforts were intertwined with the nationalist struggle against British rule. Women joined the movement in large numbers during the Gandhian phase, participating in picketing, speeches, and processions. Yet the nationalist leadership often postponed women's issues until after independence, assuming women would return to traditional roles as mothers and wives. This postponement created a complex terrain for women autobiographers, who had to balance loyalty to the nation with their own aspirations for greater autonomy.

The rise of print culture was instrumental. Marathi periodicals provided spaces for women to publish personal reflections and advice to other women. Male reformers encouraged women to write, framing their autobiographies as moral lessons for society. This encouragement, however, came with expectations of modesty and self-effacement. Women writers thus developed sophisticated narrative strategies to assert agency while appearing to conform to patriarchal norms. The autobiographies of this period therefore represent a significant literary and historical phenomenon that illuminates the gendered dimensions of Indian nationalism in Maharashtra.

Geraldine Forbes describes the early feminists as “caged tigers” who fought for voting rights, legal protections, and independent lives while confronting backward traditions. Nationalism and feminism became interwoven, with women leaders establishing industrial centres, widow homes, and schools. Yet these efforts primarily benefited women of their own class, leaving rural and lower-caste women largely unaddressed. The autobiographies capture this class dimension, showing how upper-caste women internalised reformist ideals while quietly recording the emotional and social costs.

2. Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Selfhood in Colonial India

Feminist and postcolonial theory provides essential frameworks for understanding these autobiographical texts. Uma Chakravarti's analysis of Brahminism in nineteenth-century Maharashtra highlights how upper-caste women were positioned as guardians of caste purity through strict regulation of their sexuality and behaviour. Partha Chatterjee's work on the "woman's question" reveals how nationalism resolved the tension between colonial modernity and indigenous tradition by confining women to the inner, spiritual domain of the home. Within this framework, the "new woman" was expected to embody both modern education and traditional feminine virtues of modesty, sacrifice, and domesticity.

Poststructuralist and postmodern approaches, as discussed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, emphasise the performative and relational nature of autobiographical selfhood. Indian women autobiographers rarely presented a unified, autonomous self; instead, their narratives foregrounded relational identities tied to family, community, and nation. This relationality contrasts sharply with Western models of autobiography that privilege individual achievement and introspection. Feminist critics such as Domna Stanton and Felicity Nussbaum have shown how women's life-writing often resists totalising ideologies by exposing contradictions and ambivalences within dominant discourses.

The concept of "palimpsestic" identities, drawn from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, proves particularly useful. Women's autobiographies frequently contain surface narratives that conform to patriarchal expectations while concealing deeper, more subversive meanings. Meenakshi Mukherjee's observations on Marathi women's autobiographies further underscore the tendency to downplay individual agency in favour of collective or familial concerns. These theoretical perspectives illuminate how Maharashtra's women autobiographers negotiated multiple and

sometimes contradictory subject positions within the overlapping discourses of patriarchy, caste, nationalism, and missionary influence.

Additional theoretical insights come from the work of Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid on multiple patriarchies and the recasting of the new woman. Their analysis shows how reform movements adapted patriarchal structures to suit nationalist needs without fundamentally altering power relations. The autobiographies reflect these adaptations, with women internalising and sometimes subtly challenging the ideals of pativrata dharma and companionate marriage.

The theoretical lens also draws on the work of Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, who document a long tradition of women's writing in India, from Bhakti poets to nineteenth-century reformers. This tradition provided models of relational selfhood and collective resistance that women autobiographers could draw upon. The combination of these perspectives allows for a nuanced reading that respects the historical specificity of the texts while revealing their enduring relevance for contemporary gender studies.

3. Feminist Textual Analysis as Research Methodology

This study employs feminist textual analysis to examine selected autobiographies as sites of gendered meaning-making. The methodology involves close reading of primary texts alongside historical and theoretical scholarship to uncover both explicit and implicit constructions of selfhood. Primary sources include the memoirs of Ramabai Ranade, Parvatibai Athavale, Yashodabai Joshi, Lakshmi Bai Tilak, Savitribai Phule, Muktabai, and other representative voices from Maharashtra. These texts are analysed for narrative strategies, rhetorical devices, and thematic patterns that reveal how women negotiated patriarchal constraints.

The approach is comparative and contextual, situating individual narratives within the broader socio-political milieu of nationalist Maharashtra. Feminist theory guides the interpretation, with particular attention to relational selfhood, subversive silences, and palimpsestic layering. Secondary sources from scholars such as Chakravarti, Kosambi, Forbes, and Tharu and Lalitha provide historical depth and theoretical grounding. The methodology acknowledges the limitations of the corpus, including the predominance of upper-caste voices and the scarcity of material from Muslim women, while focusing on the rich body of available Maharashtra-specific texts.

Ethical considerations include respectful engagement with the authors' voices and avoidance of anachronistic interpretations. The analysis privileges the texts' own terms while drawing out the political and cultural implications of their narrative choices. This feminist textual method allows for a nuanced understanding of how women both reproduced and resisted the ideological formations of their time.

The methodology also incorporates discourse analysis to trace how patriarchal, nationalist, and caste discourses intersect in the texts. By examining language, structure, and rhetorical strategies, the study reveals how women negotiated multiple and sometimes contradictory subject positions. This approach ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the historical and cultural specificities of Maharashtra while contributing to broader debates in postcolonial gender studies.

4. Patriarchal Structures in Marriage, Family, and Education

The autobiographies vividly illustrate the patriarchal structures that shaped women's lives in nationalist Maharashtra. Companionate marriage emerged as a reformist ideal that promised greater emotional intimacy while reinforcing women's primary roles as wives and mothers. Ramabai Ranade's memoir exemplifies this tension: she presents herself as a devoted student of her husband, yet her narrative subtly records the emotional labour and self-suppression required to maintain domestic harmony. Family honour and caste purity further constrained women's agency, with education often framed as preparation for enlightened motherhood rather than personal fulfilment.

Education itself became a double-edged sword. While it offered access to new ideas and limited public visibility, it was carefully monitored to ensure conformity with traditional feminine virtues. Women writers frequently justified their education as service to the nation or family, thereby mitigating suspicions of transgression. The family remained the primary site of patriarchal control, with mothers-in-law and other senior women often enforcing norms on younger brides. Autobiographies reveal how these structures produced complex emotional responses, ranging from quiet acceptance to veiled critique.

Caste dynamics compounded gender constraints. Upper-caste women internalised Brahminical ideals of purity and self-sacrifice, while lower-caste women faced additional layers of marginalisation. The narratives highlight how patriarchal structures adapted to colonial modernity without fundamentally altering power relations within the family and community.

The discourse of pativrata dharma remained central, with women expected to embody selfless devotion to husband and family. Yet the autobiographies show how women negotiated these ideals, sometimes through relational framing that affirmed family honour while asserting personal dignity. Education was promoted as a means to produce better wives and mothers, but it also opened doors to new ideas that subtly challenged traditional roles. The tension between these expectations and women's lived experiences forms a central theme in the texts.

5. Agency, Resistance, and Subversive Self-Narration

Despite pervasive constraints, the autobiographies reveal multiple forms of agency and resistance. Women employed strategies of self-deprecation, relational framing, and selective silence to inscribe subversive selves within seemingly compliant narratives. Lakshmibai Tilak, for instance, used humour to critique caste and gender norms while maintaining an outward posture of devotion.

Ramabai Ranade's text, often read as hagiographic, contains counter-narratives that affirm her own capabilities and quietly challenge the absolute authority of the husband.

Low-caste women such as Savitribai Phule and Muktabai articulated more direct resistance, using missionary-influenced discourses to critique Brahminical oppression. Their writings demonstrate a collective rather than individual sense of selfhood, positioning education and English language acquisition as tools for community upliftment. Subversive self-narration often took the form of palimpsestic layering, where surface conformity concealed deeper assertions of dignity and autonomy.

These strategies were not overt rebellion but careful negotiations that allowed women to claim limited forms of agency without endangering family honour or social standing. The autobiographies thus function as political acts of self-assertion within the constraints of their historical moment.

The use of relational self-presentation allowed women to embed their agency within family and community narratives, making their assertions more palatable to contemporary readers. Selective silence on certain topics and emphasis on others further enabled subtle critique. These narrative techniques reveal a sophisticated understanding of the power dynamics at play and demonstrate women's capacity for strategic self-representation.

6. Reassessing Gender Dynamics in Nationalist Autobiographies

Re-reading these texts through a feminist lens reveals the limitations of viewing them solely as conservative or compliant. The autobiographies both supported and undermined the nationalist reform agenda by exposing its internal contradictions. Women positioned themselves as active participants in nation-building while recording the personal costs of living within reconstituted patriarchies. Their narratives challenge simplistic dichotomies between tradition and modernity, revealing instead a complex terrain of negotiation and compromise.

The study underscores the enduring relevance of these early autobiographical voices for contemporary gender studies. They offer insights into the formation of middle-class Indian femininity and the ways in which colonial legacies continue to shape women's self-perception. Future research could extend the analysis to comparative regional studies or explore the afterlives of these narratives in later feminist writing. Ultimately, these autobiographies enrich our understanding of how women in nationalist Maharashtra forged meaningful selves amid powerful ideological forces.

The reassessment highlights the polyphonic nature of the texts, where multiple voices and perspectives coexist. This complexity challenges monolithic readings of women's roles in nationalism and opens new avenues for understanding gender dynamics in colonial and postcolonial contexts. The narratives demonstrate that women's agency was not absent but expressed through subtle and strategic means that merit continued scholarly attention.

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