

Monika Browarczyk. 2019. *Narrating Lives, Narrating Selves. Women's Autobiographies in Hindi*. Krakow: Ksiegarnia Akademicka. 298 pages. ISBN 978-83-8138-079-9.

In recent years, more and more scholarly attention has been given to the physical appearance of the book, with authors, editors, publishers and graphic designers working in tandem to come up with a packaging that would not only attract the prospective reader but also visually embody the concepts put forward in the text. The cover of Monika Browarczyk's book, *Narrating Lives, Narrating Selves. Women's Autobiographies in Hindi*, likewise provides a visual, shorthand image of how the author views a woman authored piece of life writing in general and the Hindi one in particular: a palimpsest of co-existing multiple texts peeping from under each other, simultaneously revealing and obscuring the woman-author busy penning it, all in an attempt to present a coherent, self-acceptable portrait of the self.

I have been working with the author of this book for some years, as we are both part of the only existing research network on South Asian autobiography. Therefore, I have seen the research process that is behind this volume, and I can state that *Narrating Lives, Narrating Selves* is based on a solid methodological ground and it is the result of an ongoing rich and fruitful debate between the author and the best scholars in the field. Browarczyk's book is probably the very first book in any language, including Hindi and English, that comprehensively analyses the contemporary life-writings by women writing in Hindi. The four authors who are the focus of this study, namely Kausalya Baisantri, Maitreyi Pushpa, Prabaha Khaitan and Chandrakiran Sonarexa, have published their autobiographies in the 1990's (which seems to have seen a sudden spur in the growth of the genre in Hindi) and hence Browarczyk, in four chapters devoted to their selected autobiographical texts, devotes maximum space to discussing them and their work. To this end she uses a number of methods, with the greatest emphasis on the concept of the self-in-performance and the making of the 'narrative self.'

However, the autobiographies in question serve only as a starting point to a wider analysis, which is reflected in the structure of the main body of the book. Following the short "Acknowledgements" and "A Note on Transcription, Title Annotation, and Quotations" there is an extensive, over 60 pages long introduction, "Critical Mass of Womanhood. Theory of Autobiography and Practice of Autobiographical Narratives in South Asia" (13-78), which provides the reader with a historical background to the study and practice of autobiography, both in the Western as well as South Asian context, placing Hindi autobiographical writings in a larger frame of reference. This is followed by four chapters, each addressing the selected texts of one specific writer, and placing the text/s and the writer

in the attendant social and literary milieu. The conclusions are given in a short section titled “Womanbeingness is Foreignness” (267-270). The book is appended by an extensive bibliography under two general headings, Primary Sources and Secondary Sources (271-294), with the latter further subdivided as “Life Writings by Women in Hindi,” “Life Writings from South Asia,” and “General References;” it closes with an Index (295-298). Further, there are copious footnotes for the dedicated scholar, including transcriptions from the Hindi originals quoted in the text in English translation, which are of greatest interest to a student of Hindi literature.

The four writers shortlisted for the detailed scrutiny are an interesting lot. Kausalya Baisantri, the protagonist of the first chapter, “A Double Curse. A Tale of a Dalit Woman by Kausalya Baisantri” (79-130), is a Marathi-speaking Dalit woman from a Mahar community, a conscientious and self-aware follower of Ambedkar, and a one-time writer – her autobiography is the only literary text published by her, with Hindi being her language of choice. The narrative is presented in a simple language and follows chronological time frame. The self-professed aim here is to give witness to a Dalit life which allows Browarczyk to introduce the subject of Dalit social disfranchisement and the attempt of Dalit life writing to provide a voice for the community. The second chapter, “Mrs Sharma Turns Writer. Maitreyi Pushpa’s ‘Novelised’ Autobiography vs. ‘Classical Autobiography’” (131-167), on the other hand, has as its main character a prolific Hindi writer, incidentally a Brahmin - and thus on the other end of the social spectrum than Baisantri - whose two volumes of autobiography take a novelistic approach in presenting her life. This provides Browarczyk with an opportunity to discuss different genres of life writings setting a novelized account of life against a straightforward autobiography. Prabha Khaitan, whose writings are the subject of the subsequent chapter, “A Woman Called Prabha Khaitan. An Autobiography of the Self as the Other” (169-221), is, to start with, a Marwari girl from a traditional background who followed her university education with a PhD in philosophy where she studied the French existentialists; a feminist writer with many books to her credit; a woman who made unorthodox life choices and spoke of them in her writings, which take the reader into the by-lanes of the feminist writing in Hindi and make inroads into the bastions of patriarchy and the male writing. As Khaitan’s autobiography *Anyā se Ananya*, has been translated into English as *A Life Apart*, albeit in a much abridged form, Browarczyk takes a look at the politics of translation and publishing practices where the length of the book and its striping of the overtly exotic/Oriental/Indian flourishes (for example, the narrative style with its invocation of Goddess/s etc.) is deemed necessary to make the reading easier for a general/non-Indian anglophone reader. The last chapter, “A Caged Mynah in Search of a Room of Her Own. Chandrakiran Sonarexa’s Autobiographic Epic of Every Day” (223-266),

presents yet another Brahmin writer, whose working life at local radio station and literary career were greatly circumscribed by her husband's opposition to her creative activities.

The analyses of the autobiographical outputs of the four writers, set against social circumstances in which these writers lived and worked, provide a sample and a template for further examinations of life writings in South Asian context, both those that have appeared prior to this period, as well as following it, including the most recent. Browarczyk, highlighting the liminal positioning of women, including women writers, in Indian society, and the intersectionality of the subjectivity thus produced, created a seminal study that would be of interest not only to scholars of South Asia, but to all those who are interested in life writings authored by women, gender studies, and literary criticism.

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