

Narrating The Self: Analysing ‘Silence’ In Three Women’s Autobiographies

Dr.Leena Chandorkar, Associate Professor, Department of English, MES’ Abasaheb Garware College, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune

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Abstract:

The paper analyses the concept of silence in women’s autobiographies with special reference to three autobiographies written in Marathi. The three autobiographies are *Smriti Chitre* by Laxmibai Tilak (1934), *Mee Durga Khote* by Durga Khote (1982) and *Bandh-anubandh* by Kamal Padhye (1993). Studied chronologically the autobiographies trace the growing confidence of women in breaking the silence, which is parallel to the growing influence of women in the economy. The careful separation of the Private and Public lives by these women point to the area where they place their idea of Self. All three women were active in the public life, yet all three place their identity firmly in the private zone. Relationships matter more than the accolades they gained in the public sphere. This makes these women’s self-writing remarkably different from men’s autobiographies which focus mainly on their public selves. The paper discusses how writing an autobiography is more difficult for women because it is ‘a mirror gazed at in public.’ The women expose close kinship ties using stylistic devices like humour and allegory. They are mostly silent about their achievements in public life, heeding perhaps the unwritten social convention of silence regarding a woman’s professional success. In a traditional society like India, the roles of daughter, daughter-in-law, wife and mother are supposed to overshadow all other roles and the three autobiographers are mindful of that. However, a chronological study of the three Marathi autobiographies show that they all make the silences speak but in differing ways. The ever-shortening gap in the description of their Public and Private lives points to the changing role of women and their readiness to become creative sign makers in a world which is on the threshold of a new era.

Keywords: Women, silence, Private and Public lives, social

All autobiographies break the silence. The silences persist, but a closer examination can make the silences speak. A study of women's autobiographies over the years reveals a change in the extent of silence, a growing confidence parallel to women's ever-increasing influence in the economy. As women write autobiographies in growing numbers, they demonstrate that they are not merely over-determined products but also creative sign-makers in the economies of the century.

What Sidonie Smith says about Blacks in America and their entry into the world of autobiography-writing can hold of women's autobiography-writing as well:

*“Without a written language, Blacks appeared deficient in memory, mature wisdom, vision and critically, history...fixed in their essential racial difference, they were denied metaphysical selfhood and relegated instead as the system's beasts of burden. To write the Self in history thus served as an oppositional gesture at once humanizing and individualizing them.”*¹

Narrating the Self has always been a difficult proposition for women. Examining three women's autobiographies written in Marathi will bring this out more clearly. The autobiographies chosen are *Smriti Chitre* by Laxmibai Tilak, *Mee Durga Khote* by Durga Khote, and *Bandh-Anubandh* by Kamal Padhye.

Laxmibai Tilak's Marathi autobiography, *Smriti Chitre (Memory Pictures)*, is essential mainly because it broke the silence women in a patriarchal society are programmed to observe. The autobiography of the Marathi actress, Hansa Wadkar, is titled *Sangtye Aika (I'm Telling! Listen!)*. Sunita Deshpande, in her autobiography, *Aahe Manohar Tari...(Though it is Charming...)*, has conveyed the importance of documenting history from a woman's viewpoint beautifully:

*“The wives of saints in the olden times were illiterate. They did not write their autobiographies. And their silence has gone a long way in maintaining the façade of the beauty of our culture!”*²

It is mainly through Laxmibai Tilak's autobiography that we get a sense of Reverend Tilak as a theologian and philosopher and of Laxmibai Tilak's involvement in exploring their ideas and putting them into practice. At the same time, she does not hide the faults of her husband or other male relatives. But she conveys them in such a tongue-in-cheek manner and through so much humor that even this seeming transgression does not offend. For example, in the chapter titled 'Christi Dharmakade Vaatchaal' ('Moving Towards Christianity'), Laxmibai Tilak narrates how on being caught telling a lie by his wife, Rev Tilak lost his temper and beat her to his heart's content. This valuable bit of private information about Rev Tilak, this revelation about his domestic violence, his quick spirit, and his straightforward telling of lies would never have come to light had Laxmibai Tilak not mentioned it in *Smriti Chitre*. Though this information is given diplomatically, it does form chinks in the impeccable persona of Rev Tilak. But this incident is narrated in such a matter-of-fact way that it gives the impression that she took

wife-beating for granted and as acceptable behavior by her husband. And maybe, in the social atmosphere of that time, wife-beating was common amongst couples.

It is also possible that this understated treatment and humor was a deliberate stylistic device. The use of humor in this autobiography is the only way that Laxmibai Tilak could narrate painful incidents honestly while at the same time circumventing the stricture of silence imposed upon women.

But even while Laxmibai Tilak wrote *Smriti Chitre*, a narrative with a subliminal feminist message, she did it covertly. She was mindful of the cultural injunction of silence for women. *SmritiChitre* is written ostensibly as a memoir of her life with her husband. She projects herself as his creation. He is the sculptor, she says. She calls herself her husband's faithful follower. She makes it clear that though hers was a struggle for independence, she would never have been able to reach where she did without the help of her husband. The early feminists needed the use of their 'masters', in this case, the husband, to rise above their situation. In that sense, their struggle was not so much against patriarchy as against the unjust social system that denied women their due.

At the other end of the spectrum in Marathi's autobiography is *Bandh-Anubandh*, published four decades after *Smriti Chitre*. The author boldly states in the Introduction that her aim in writing *Bandh-Anubandh* is to expose the hypocritical silence of the middle-class Indian woman. Hers is a confessed feminist approach. Women's autobiography in Marathi has progressed in maturity. The silence is broken willfully and defiantly. Kinship ties revered so highly in Indian society were exposed as ineffective by Laxmibai Tilak. But it was done delicately. Kamal Padhye exposes the hollowness of these ties in a harsher light. In this process, she does not spare herself too. Kamal Padhye boldly throws herself open for attack by telling her life and intimate relationships as a subject for discussion.

The autobiography with a clear distinction of the public/private theme is *MeeDurga Khote*. Durga Khote makes a clear separation between her public and private selves. Textually too, she splits her autobiography between her public and personal lives. She describes her public life from the standpoint of her private life.

DurgaKhote has written her autobiography from a purely personal point of view. Her roles as daughter, wife, and mother overshadow everything else in the narration. Her illustrious and lengthy career in the film industry is almost sidetracked.

All these three autobiographers—LaxmibaiTilak, DurgaKhote, and Kamal Padhye—were active in the public sphere, much more involved than the average Indian woman. Yet they chose to be discreetly silent about their achievements and focused instead on their personal lives.

Kamal Padhye was a tireless social worker who labored tirelessly for the Tibetan refugees in Delhi, who won a seat in the Mumbai Municipal elections on a Praja Samajwadi ticket, who later carried out extensive social work for the benefit of tribals and Dalits, who worked shoulder to

shoulder with her husband when they were in financial difficulties and helped pay the debt for the house they lived in, who was, in short, an equal partner in the Padhye marriage in all respects. In *Bandh-Anubandh*, however, all this activism is explained in terms of how it affected her private life. Her public life is almost sidelined, and she concentrates heavily instead on descriptions of her marital life, the shattering effect that her son's death had on her, and Padhye.

Smriti Chitre can be read as one woman's search for autonomy. It belongs to what Elaine Showalter calls the 'feminine' phase of autobiographical women's writing in Marathi, in which the 'female subculture' is secret, ritualized, and characterized by internalization and self-censorship. Women, united by the physical facts of the female life cycle (menstruation, childbirth, pregnancy) but unable to express them openly, developed a covert symbolic language to explore the range of female expression. Laxmibai Tilak, too in *Smriti Chitre*, does not speak out openly against her male relatives. Several factors prevent her from breaking the taboo of uncensored self-revelation—her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention, etc.

Writing an autobiography is an act of assertion that was denied to women. Laxmibai Tilak realizes this and tries to sublimate the boldness of an 'I'-centered narrative by projecting herself as her husband's creation. She heeds the cultural injunction against unremitting self-assertion in women. Rhetorically she tries to maintain a posture of 'feminine' self-effacement. She gives credit for all she achieved in life, her social service, and the literary accomplishment that came her way to her husband. In this way, she attributes her success in various fields to an external agency, to something outside herself:

*“Whatever I am, I am because of Tilak. Tilak decided his aims, and I followed them blindly. Tilak composed poems, and I sang them. Tilak begged, and I held the begging bowl. The sparks that flew between us were because I could not bear the tremendous speed of his progress.”*³

With characteristic generosity, Laxmibai Tilak gives her husband his due credit. She likens herself only to a faithful follower. And while it is undeniable that Tilak it was the one who nurtured the talents of Laxmibai, it is also unquestionable that he would not have been able to achieve this had Laxmibai not possessed an inner spark, a genuine intelligence of her own. But as Sidonie Smith says in her essay, 'Resisting the Gaze of Embodiment':

*“The only script for women's life insisted that work discover and pursue them like the conventional romantic lover.”*⁴

The above statement by Sidonie Smith is also in Durga Khote's autobiography. Durga Khote talks about her entry into films as something that happened purely by chance. As one looks at the narrative pattern, structure, tone, and language of *Mee Durga Khote*, one sense confusion in the mind of its author as to where to place her sense of Self. Durga Khote accepts

that her public persona gave her the publicity, fame, money, and self-evident right to pen her autobiography. At the same time, like most women, she locates happiness in personal relationships. Instead of emphasizing her achievements, she highlights the hidden costs of her public fame. The narration of *Mee Durga Khote* shifts intermittently from a confident assertion of achievement to a retreat from it. Even the 'I' in the title, *I Durga Khote*, speaks of a person with a strong self-image. Several women autobiography writers have discussed the difficulty of saying 'I'. Durga Khote has revealed her willingness to speak to the public about herself with the bold use of 'I' in the title. Yet, somewhere along the way, the autobiography fails to take the reader into confidence. The intimate nature of the 'I' mode is sublimated by the partial silence on and partial revelation of memories by Durga Khote.

Durga Khote accepted the patriarchal status quo and initially worked under her father's direction. Like Laxmibai Tilak, who attributes her success in the literary world to her husband, Durga Khote attributes her success in the film world to the initiative taken by her father. Thus she functions within the patriarchal framework. Only later, as we continue reading *Mee Durga Khote*, one sees the growing confidence of Durga Khote as a woman of the world, as a professional, and as the de-facto head of her family. The references to her father lessen and then gradually disappear. We are not even given a description or circumstances of his death. Mention of her husband is always in sarcastic tones, which emphasizes his failure as a breadwinner and life partner:

*"I could not understand how and where to restrict the rudderless lifestyle of Mr. Khote...his bad habits and addictions were growing. He would go to the office as and when he wished. The company of loafers and hangers-on was increasing. He showed no concern for the house, children, or finances. His was an irresponsible existence."*⁵

Mee Durga Khote aptly exemplifies the observation made by Patricia Meyer Spacks in *Selves in Hiding*. After analyzing several autobiographies of women of high achievement, Spacks has come to this conclusion:

*"In writing of themselves, these women of public accomplishment implicitly stress uncertainties of the personal, denying rather than glorifying ambition, evading rather than enlarging private selves. They use autobiography, paradoxically, partly as a mode of self-denial. Though they have functioned successfully in outer spheres, their accounts of this activity emphasize its hidden costs more than its rewards and drawback—as women have traditionally done—from making large claims of importance. Even as they tell of unusual accomplishments, they finally hide from self-assertion. Their strategies of narration reflect both a female dilemma and a female solution to it."*⁶

Durga Khote is keen to portray herself as a woman who never pursued success for her own sake and to show that the success that she got was not by design but by destiny. When

talking about the time in 1961 when she was nominated for the post of the President of the 43rd Marathi Natya Parishad held in Delhi, she is pretty modest. She says,

“The Presidentship of the MNP has a very prestigious tradition. Political leaders, respected writers, journalists, musicians, and actors have graced this post. I did not have that stature. But some people have greatness thrust upon them. My situation was somewhat like that.” 7

Durga Khote calls her professional success a 'gift from god'. She is, however, not as satisfied with her personal life. In a brilliant and insightful chapter titled appropriately 'Shoonya Jeevan' (Empty Life), she looks back on her personal life with regret and sorrow.

Here one senses in Durga Khote her confusion about where to place her sense of Self. This is the dilemma faced by many public women. Patricia Meyer Spacks, while reviewing the autobiography of Golda Meyer, the former premier of Israel, has this to say: *“What feels certain is her self-blame. She thinks about how much better life might have proved had she been different. Proclaiming her confidence in her public Self, she betrays her conviction of an absolute dichotomy between public and private and reveals serious doubt about the Self-responsible for intimate relationships.”* 8

Actually, after reading *Mee Durga Khote*, the reader is left wondering about the suppressions in the text rather than the revelations. Durga Khote is sketchy about her professional life—her experiences as a director, her gradual transference from pivotal roles to character roles, and her critical assessment of her growth as an actor. She claims to be more involved with her private life, but in her autobiography, she is even more selective about revealing this sphere. Durga Khote's silences are even more eloquent than her declarations. As Spacks says:

“The act of autobiography sometimes inadvertently uncovers at least some aspects of personality and experience which normally remain hidden.” 9

Hidden from the surface of the text but suggested very subtly is Durga Khote's regret at placing her sense of identity and idea of Self so totally in relationships rather than in her career. She wonders tentatively whether it is better to remain distant rather than get entangled wholly and emotionally in relationships.

In an eventful life, Durga Khote played many different roles. She earned respect and success in most of these roles. Yet, at the end of her autobiography, she dismisses it as a by-product of her circumstances.

A 'good' Indian woman would prioritize her family over everything else, especially her professional success. Heeding this unwritten social injunction, Durga Khote, a winner of the Padmashree, the former President of the Marathi Natya Parishad, a respected actor of the Hindi/Marathi screen, the revered boss of Durga Khote Productions, chooses to end her autobiography thus:

"Today, in my seventy-seventh year, when I turn back to look at my life, I feel that whatever problems came my way were solved due to God's grace. The only focus of my life was my children. They are both well settled down. It was for them that I jumped into the vortex of society early in life. And now, due to God's blessings, I can enjoy the fruit of my labor by seeing them happy. This is my true satisfaction!" 10

This preoccupation of all three autobiographers with their private roles may be because in a traditional society like India, for a woman, 'Anatomy is Destiny'. In an orthodox community where family values and communal profit are valorized over the individual good, women become the touchstone of public morality.

In a traditional society where men and women are slotted into specific roles, trying to get out of these roles is achievement enough. If we look at the three Marathi autobiographies, we see a slow but definite change in society's perception of the Self. For Laxmibai Tilak, gaining an education and control over her life was a great triumph of the spirit. For Durga Khote, who got control over her life because of her financial independence at an early age, proving that she was still functioning within the parameters of society despite the traditional role chalked out for her was the primary purpose of her autobiography. For Kamal Padhye, who was active both inside and outside the house, being an exception to the norm was not enough. In her autobiography, one senses her unhappiness with traditional models and the social parameters that limit a woman's potential.

Thus a chronological study of the three Marathi autobiographies shows that they all make the silences speak differently. The ever-shortening gap in the description of their Public and Private lives points to women's changing role and readiness to become creative sign-makers in a world on the threshold of a new era.

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