Chapter Three

An Actress’ Life Performed

*I, Durga Khote* is the first hand account of the life and times of a leading actress of Hindi and Marathi cinema – Durgabai Khote. Catapulted into the patriarchal film industry by the vagaries of a disastrous marriage and premature widowhood, Durga Khote’s life-narrative reveals her grit in the face of tragedy, her determination to be independent, and her constant desire to learn. However, it is fascinating to observe the shifting identity of the female performer in the narrative in the various realms of her life namely the stage, the public sphere (or social life) and the private sphere (or personal circle). The aim of this thesis, as mentioned in the Introduction as well as the previous chapter, is to theorize the politics and possibilities of women’s self representation and to argue for a mode of reading that exposes self-representation as a manipulative discourse. This exposition will adopt performance studies as its theoretical framework wherein the possibilities of re-viewing and contemporizing feminism from an everyday perspective, will be explored. In this chapter, the practice of autobiographical composition will be re-viewed as ‘performed’ by a female subject, with special emphasis given to her career as an actress/performer hailing from a traditional background. By keeping this life narrative as the point of reference, a poststructuralist enquiry will be conducted as to whether the Indian woman manipulates her identity in the public sphere and if so, what derivations and conclusions can be made with regard to the larger picture of feminism in India.

When the autobiography of an actor is re-viewed it is more or less presumed that the referent assumes more than one identity or a contested subjectivity. In Durga Khote’s
case, the conflict is between her public identity (or image) as a woman who broke conventions to earn a living as an actress and her narrative identity which, strictly speaking, does not have a one-to-one correspondence with the public identity. The thesis recognizes Durga Khote’s subjectivity as essentially contested, implying that multiple ‘performances’ of the subjectivity as not only logically possible but also of permanent potential critical value to one’s own interpretation of the subject in question.

_I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography_, translated from Marathi into English by Shanta Gokhale, is a simultaneously spirited and subdued account of the life of a leading Marathi and Hindi cinema actor. Durgabai Khote acted in nearly 200 Marathi films in a career that spanned around five decades. She was also the first actress to start her own film production company – Durga Khote Productions. The life-narrative, which runs to 190 pages, is a simple yet vivid and nuanced account of her life from childhood till the time of her retreat to the Jhirad farm. The narrative starts at the Laud family home in Kandewadi where the actress had spent her entire childhood and her early adulthood till she was married to Vishwanath Khote at the age of 18. It is interesting to observe the ‘mixed’ upbringing that Durga had in her family home. She grew up in a traditional and conservative joint family system where custom stipulated that women in the family use the front gate only on special occasions and the smell of incense from religious rituals hung in the air all around the year. Her parents, especially her mother, made sure that Durga (also known as Banu) and her two sisters Indu and Shalu as well their brother Manohar, were not only given profuse love and attention but also received the best education that money could afford. Manjulabaay, their mother, came from the Sukhthankar family, where she had a completely Westernized upbringing. So while her
children memorized *slokas* from the *Gita* and Saint Ramadas keeping with the traditions of the Laud household, they also learnt Shakespeare, Tennyson and Wordsworth as well. In fact, Banu studied at the Cathedral School and later after matriculation joined St. Xavier’s College.

The life-narrative accounts her school and college life at the same time giving glimpses of her rebellious self, when inspired by the new surge in the political agitation for freedom, she decides to drop out of school and join the Movement. She also admits, rather smugly, that she used to behave like a snob during those days as she was quite proud of her academic and extra-curricular achievements. One year after college she is married to the only son of the Khote household. From this point, her life take a different course as she struggles to adjust to the silent and alien Khote house after spending seventeen happy years in the bustling Kandewadi home of the Lauds. By the time she became the mother of two boys, Bakul and Harin, the fortunes of the Khotes had started plummeting owing to the heedlessness of her husband, Vishwanath Khote. In the 1920s the family was left fending for a means to livelihood. As Durga Khote rightly observes in her autobiography, there were only two options open for women to earn a livelihood in those days – teaching and nursing. While she was trudging on, finding an income from private tuitions, she is offered the role in *Farebi Jaal*.

Unlike the twentieth century female professionals in the film industry, it can be noted that in Khote’s time more often than not, they were driven to this profession by dire necessity and she is no exception. This does not mean that her passion and enthusiasm for the arts, especially Marathi theatre, can be overlooked. A whole chapter is devoted to the childhood memories of the Marathi stage from the year 1910 to 1926. The account about
Gandharva Natak Mandali and its lead Narayanrao ‘Bal Gandharva’ is very rich in
details. Though Farebi Jaal brought her much notoriety, Durga Khote’s career took a
turn for the best on her association with Prabhat Films. The autobiography then becomes
a narrative of her life as an actor – the experiences on the shooting locations, the pain of
separation from her boys, the accolades and accomplishments that the Prabhat movies
bought her, the visits to the foreign countries, her production ventures and so on. It is also
interspersed with personal narratives: the earlier indifference of her husband, his death,
Bakul’s education, worries about Harin’s unstable character, her second and short-lived
marriage to Rashid, Harin’s untimely death and finally her retreat to Jhirad farm.

While engaged in the act of writing the life-narrative, Durga Khote confronts
primarily two significations of her subjectivity. One is the self that others see: the socio-
historical person with achievements, personal appearance, and social relationships. There
are ‘real’ and ‘external’ attributes of a person living in the world. But there is also the self
experienced only by that person, the self felt from inside that the writer can never get
‘outside’ of. It is this ‘private’ self that the narrator of a life-narrative claims to represent
in her composition. This thesis intends to frame this ‘private’ self as a performance and
studying this performance is expected to elicit results that will shed some light on shaping
a contemporary ‘everyday’ Indian feminism. While treating the life-narrative as a
performance, it is also understood that this practice of self-representation is historically
situated with due attention given to the processes of communicative exchange and
understanding.

Born and brought up in a traditional Marathi family, Khote became “the first
actress from a respectable family to act in films” (Khote xvii). With her entry into the
world of films and later theatre, Khote becomes a difficult or marginal case in the history of conventional procedure. She rewrites the cliché that a woman seen alone in public is a ‘bad’ woman. The complexities develop when the autobiographical persona in *I, Durga Khote* is juxtaposed with her reel and social persona (which was earlier referred to as the public persona of the actress). This juxtaposition leads to the observation that there is a lack of one-to-one correspondence between the private self (autobiographical self) and the public self; exploring this anomaly within the framework of performance theory reveals the manipulative discourse of femininity in the Indian public sphere. What an actress does onscreen/onstage is to pretend to be someone other than herself, this “restored behavior” is not important in itself; it is useful in the analysis as it points to a “quality of performance not involved with the display of skills” (Carlson, 15) but rather with a certain distance between self and behavior, analogous to that between an actor and the role she performs onstage/onscreen. There are two different concepts of performance, as discussed in the core theory chapter, one involving the display of skills, the other also involving a display of skills, but less of particular skills than of a recognized and culturally coded pattern of behavior. In the case of a life-narrative like that of the yesteryear Bengali theatre artist Binodini Dasi, it is an introspection of the first kind of performance. Binodini was praised not simply for acting well in some abstract way, but for ‘bringing alive’ the characters. The attention, in the life-narrative, is drawn to what is in fact happening, the event, the miracle is the fine-attuned and sublime recreation of figure and world for historical audience. *My Story* is in part an elaboration of what went into this feat. In the case of Durga Khote’s autobiography, this aspect of performance, involving the display of certain skills, is rather overlooked.
Learning about Shanta Gokhale’s translation of Khote’s autobiography, friends and scholars were pleased. But they also raised many questions. For example, P. K. Nair immediately asked, ‘Is there anything in her book to explain the tremendous dignity and strength exuded by the characters she plays? She is so regal and manly!’ Whenever Durga Khote is mentioned, an image of the actress comes to mind – particularly to those who have seen her early films like *Amarjyoti*—proud and erect, wielding a sword, wearing the *nauvari*. (Khote, xvii)

The attention is therefore drawn to the performance of culturally coded patterns of behavior. Khote’s dilemma as an artist who had achieved popularity with audiences and attention from the art world is one which is current in much scholarship on self-referential writing – how an artist or writer who works with herself as subject matter manages to confirm her legitimacy and coherence as a speaker while exploring the complexities and fragmentation of her experiences.

Over the last two decades, performance has offered a space for feminist artists to explore the self as subject; many of the issues raised by performance have analogies in autobiographical writings and much current theoretical writing about feminist autobiographies also illuminates performance art. When feminist artists in the 1970s began to make performance art, they not only broke the frame of visual representation but also addressed the history of woman as a speaking, acting subject in public, invoking a wide and complex history of women as public performers: actresses, prostitutes, preachers, litigants, comedians, dancers. The history of the public behavior and conduct of women is clearly linked to questions of performance. In the history of theatre, questions around the public appearance of a woman as herself, rather than in a role, are
revealing. In nineteenth century theatre, for instance, the impropriety of a woman appearing onstage outside a character role, as in equestrian spectacle or as a vaudeville dancer, was much discussed. In acting as herself, a woman crossed those boundaries of conduct which always cast her in a prescribed role.

Durga Khote or her contemporaries like Leela Chitnis and Hansa Wadkar were part of this long tradition which denied them agency; their self always masked absolutely by their onstage performance. Durga Khote, for instance, played manly, regal and strong characters onstage. But that was not a choice for her, the situations demanded it. She made her debut in a notorious movie *Farebi Jaal*; in a very small role. The movie turned out to be an irremediable disaster with worthless in content and in production values. Mr. Bhavnani’s shrewd business tactic took full advantage of Durga Khote’s family legacy – both the Laud and Khote legacies. While Khote shamefully admits that the orthodox Maharashtrian community tore her to pieces for acting in the blasphemous movie, it is interesting that there is no mention of how the other female character and the actress who played it were received by the public sphere. Her family, however, stood by her during these times of ‘humiliation’ and ‘shame’. Throughout the rest of her life Khote was struggling to live up to this declaration of being a strong woman; her life-narrative is a livid account of this heavy burden she shouldered. In fact, one of the notable features of *I, Durga Khote* is that, at no point in her autobiographical account does she whine or complain about the uphill struggle of carving a niche for herself in the patriarchal world of Indian cinema. The female subject as presented in the life-narrative is multifaceted and wrought with all the contradictions and paradoxes contained in Khote’s rich and elite background; it chronicles the many pleasures and pains she went through as a woman
going out to earn a living for herself and her family. Rather than teetering on the edge of poverty, Khote was more afraid of the baggage that came with her illustrious family lineage. And her entire life could be considered as a performance framed and scripted by this underlying fear of damaging this glorious history. This fear is not close captioned in her life-narrative but should rather be salvaged as a subtext which sheds light on the inclusions and omissions in her autobiography. In his preface “Remembering My Mother” to Durga Khote’s autobiography, Bakul Khote makes this observation:

Despite her strong sense of being an independent, liberated, almost rebellious woman, Mother was deeply rooted in the Laud and Khote families’ traditions regarding rituals and religious ritual and spiritual issues, and she stood by that tradition as strongly as her social independence in her secular life. She was now a Hindu widow, with only one path ahead – withdraw from public life and confine oneself to the family in a widow’s white weeds. This is exactly what she did, forsaking extraordinary achievements in her career and her public acclaim. Her view of widowhood was further compounded by the distress of the collapse of her venture into feature film production, Nataraj Films. (ix)

While it is ambiguous as to how Durga Khote’s view of widowhood can be compounded with the failure of her soiree in film production, Bakul Khote’s remarks not only clash with the subjectivity constructed in the life-narrative by his mother, but also generates multiple significations of the same identity in itself. It is direct contradiction to what Durga Khote observes about herself in her autobiography; for instance, in the chapter discussing her sons’ marriages she makes this proud remembrance:
One thing was clear that there was no question of the boys’ marriage being ‘arranged, given the unconventional lives they had led for the last ten years. Their ideas too were independent. It was remarkable that Bakul was asking me at all while considering marriage. I had moved far away from traditional customs in my own life. (124)

Durga Khote’s life-narrative projects the story of a woman who made the best out of a bad situation, the latter being the male-dominated world of Marathi and Hindi cinema. However, there is no easy way to execute this strategy but to frame a performance wherein she confines herself to her private sphere where no one confronts her with a ‘why’ or a ‘how’. Her non-conformity of being an actress from a traditionally conservative family, relegates her into an aberrant private individuality at the cost of effacing the public individual at most times, in her autobiography. Here Khote’s public identity as a bold and ‘manly’ woman performs as a prosthesis or armor that she must wear in order to gain acceptance, recognition and sometimes agency in a male-dominated industry. The life-narrative surreptitiously leaks out such moments where the careful reader can detect a twinge of repressed agony. In Chapter 29 Khote remarks:

“I was once asked, ‘Have you been happy in life?’ In response I would say somewhat circuitously, ‘I have not been unhappy…’” But if I were to add up and subtract all my desires, ambitions, and errors, the remainder would be satisfactory. The greater part of life has been a one-way thing. The hectic pace at which I have lived for the last fifty years has left me with very little time to find stability or build close relationships. Home, family life, blood relations, friends, schoolmates, everything passed me by. I tailored my life around my work, the
frame being set by my shooting dates. Relationships have to be nurtured, feelings cherished. I could never do that. It is hardly fair then that, in the last days of my life, I should expect my people to organize their lives around mine. Everybody has his own life to live. How can I expect people to take time out to think of me, show me love? Why should they? I made many plans but I could not carry them all out the way I had intended. I made mistakes. I was not always reasonable in my actions. There is a saying in Marathi, ‘Too much of anything turns to mud’. It applies to many aspects of my life.

The authorial intention, it may be presumed, must have been the construction of a ‘coherent’ self which unlike the ‘real’ self is impervious to the pains inflicted by the forces of Life; there is an attempt to reconcile herself to the rapacity of Life. However, the integral self turns out to be an illusion beneath which, critical scrutiny will reveal, the emergence of shifting, contentious subjects who speak in a range of discourses. This in turn will lead to the ‘tensions’ in the professed intentions and the political and cultural ideologies that gave rise to these ‘tensions’ and consequently the formation of a contested subjectivity. Such arguments and assessments point the finger towards the Hindu cultural chauvinism; it does not mean that Hindu nationalism is the exclusive reason but it is definitely the strongest ideological underpinning that has reformed the way Indians looked at women for decades to come. There was a fundamental transformation in the structures of political-cultural sensibility that occurred in the late nineteenth century and as Tanika Sarkar points out in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* – these developments relate to the abandonment of liberal reformism in favor of Hindu cultural nationalism. In the
1870s the public sphere registered a broadening of liberal commitments which later dissolved at the emergence of a hard and closed nationalistic culture.

Maharashtra has been particularly fortunate in possessing a lively tradition of scholarship. Woven out of both local and international strands, it has spanned diverse issues of intellectual enquiry. These issues range from the mainstream religious tradition and the divergent sects of folk religion, to the moulding of religious identities in confrontation with the British colonial rule and the post-Independence political tensions; from the upsurge of Maratha power and the assertion of the Maratha identity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the nineteenth century social and political reform efforts and the twentieth century political protest movements; they also span creative artistic expressions in different media. Some of these themes, emerging out of a combination of regional specificities, wield a powerful influence on the Maharashtrian psyche and consciously or unconsciously mould current and future socio-cultural developments. One of the key themes that hold together this kind of scholarship on Maharashtra is religion in its manifold representations and it can be safely assumed that the Maharashtrian psyche, especially the female psyche, was tempered by it. This is not surprising because in India religion has always played a vital role in the formulation and (re)formation of the public sphere. Religion has supplied a strong input in the creation of Maharashtra’s cultural identity which has been equally firmly rooted in history and legend. Maharashtrian identity coalesced in the seventeenth century, as a blend of diverse elements: political (in the sense of ‘Maratha’ power), regional (in the sense of being a ‘Maharashtrian’), and religious (or Hindu). It has another important dimension in that it has provided the ideological impulse to political action for over three centuries. It has
endured through the reign of the successive Chhatrapatis after Shivaji, and of their hereditary Brahmin prime ministers, the Peshwas, whose dynastic rule from Pune became legendary, through the British colonial rule, with its multi-pronged impact. This impact encapsulates the introduction of Western style education, a secular legal system, and new principles of administration, and the resultant socio-religious reform movements which was comparable in depth and scope to the much explored Bengal Renaissance.

The reform movement had two dimensions: caste inequalities, addressed mostly by non-Brahmins foremost among whom was Jotirao Phule; and gender injustices addressed mainly by the Brahmin reformers both by virtue of their public leadership based on multiple hegemony, and because of the greater rigidity and oppressiveness of Brahmin customs. A scrutiny of the ways in which the efforts of the male reformers impinged on the lives of women, and the ways in which women’s participation in the reform movement was encouraged, acknowledged or ‘invisibilized’ – is gradually leading to a reconstruction of the social history of this vibrant period in Maharashtra’s history. Meera Kosambi in *Life After Widowhood: Two Radical Reformist Options in Maharashtra*, examines another facet of social change as it impinged upon women’s lives in the nineteenth century. The equation of widowhood with instant marital and social death was firmly entrenched in upper caste Maharashtrian society which accepted women only in their wife-mother role, and which allowed no legitimate social space for widows.

The social awakening, which sought to give widows a new lease of life, did so within the broadly patriarchal societal framework by opening up two quite divergent and radical new options. One was the path of remarriage, which was restricted to child widows and which led them back into mainstream society to fulfill the traditional wife-
mother role. The second path, feasible for women widowed in adulthood, was that of the newly available Western education and a socially useful career. This created an altogether new niche for them (and for women in general) in the semi-public sphere. The rare success stories included those of Anandibai Karve who remarried Maharshi D. K. Karve (the founder of SNDT Women’s University) and her sister Parvatibai Athavale who was a life-long teacher in Karve’s residential school for women. The lives and experiences of the two widowed sisters, analyzed on the basis of their Marathi autobiographies, reveal the tensions and contradictions inherent in a society in transition.

The production of culture in the form of literature, the theatre and the performing arts, continued, simultaneously with these developments, revealing their own urban-rural biases as well as caste biases. Cultural forms sometimes served only as a light entertainment, and at others, wielded considerable influence in shaping public opinion. Dance, drama and music, each displayed both continuity and innovations of varying intensity, operating at various levels. Maharashtra has largely favored music and drama over dance (which has been relegated to the ‘non-elite’ categories of expression). This eagle’s eye view of the Maratha cultural and political history serves as a background against which the subjectivity of a female performer, who remained in the profession of acting even after widowhood in a society firmly rooted in tradition and orthodox religion, can be ‘framed’. Accessing the ‘interiority’ of the actress through a close and sensitive reading of the life-narrative illustrates the influence of all these cultural forces on the identity of the female performer, and that too a widowed female performer. The wisest assumption is that these same socio-cultural factors obliged the actress to redefine her ‘self’. While all the glory and accomplishments associated with her career are dwelt upon
in all detail and clarity, problematic areas are conveniently sidelined. The most significant example of this is Durga Khote’s public debacle with Bal Gandharva. The latter is said to have declared in a public meeting: “When women from respectable families enter professional theatre, they are likely to go astray” (Khote, xxvii). Such problem areas of her life as an actress are kept hidden. In fact, these ‘silences’ speak more eloquently and loudly about the scripted performance of autobiographical composition. However, the irony is that the same Bal Gandharva is projected as the ideal of female beauty by Durga Khote in her “Memories of the Marathi Stage: 1910-26” chapter; she remarks:

Narayanrao’s body had a softness that made it perfect for female roles. His movements were so graceful and attractive that even the most beautiful women of the time attempted to model themselves on him. There was not a trace of theatricality or affectation in the way Narayanrao carried himself. His movements were absolutely natural…

…the beauty of his hands and gestures lay beyond description. You couldn’t help but notice them, whether they were Bhamini’s hands wielding a rapier; Rukmini’s holding the garland for her chosen bridegroom’s neck; Sindhu’s turning the thick peg of the grindstone; Draupadi’s hand held out to Krishna in tearful supplication, or even a courtesan’s seductively offering paan. From shoulder to wrist his arms glowed with a soft luster, almost like ivory in their fairness…His fingers were the epitome of natural grace when they twisted and untwisted the end of a sari in maidenly coyness…
People have argued that men playing women amounts to dishonouring women. But one thing is indubitably true, that there was nothing even remotely perverse or unnatural in the way Narayanrao played his heroines. In deportment, costume, jewellery and every other detail, his female characters were imbued with the grace and dignity of women from upper-class families. (43-45)

She goes on to remember the heydays of the Gandharva Natak Mandali and Bal Gandharva, and how posterity would always look back at how Narayanrao portrayed the roles of Bhamini, Revati or Sindhu as ideals worth emulation. But unfortunately with the changing times, Durga Khote notes a drastic change in this stalwart’s acting style. She makes this mention in her anecdote of the Marathi stage:

Gone were his modest deportment and chaste gestures. They had been replaced now by a charade of vulgar mannerisms. He would stand on tiptoe, jump about, move his neck coyly this way and that, giggle frivolously, and stress the wrong words to pervert the meanings of lines. Such tricks brought his acting down to a vulgar level. The pity of it is that the next generation of actors not only emulated all these tricks, but also made their own contributions to the repertoire…This was what the audience applauded. (46)

This sentiment permeates the life-narrative at different levels. Her autobiography often comes across as a lament for the socio-cultural decay that she sense around her. More often than not, we find the protagonist of this self-referential writing sighing over the ‘good ol’times’ while claiming to be rid of the shackles of traditionalism and conservatism.
While the female subject is undeniably transfixed by the socio-cultural as well as religious factors defining the public sphere of Maharashtra, it is something that an academician reads as subtext. The text is exclusively about the female subject and a chronicling of the plethora of life events that shaped her subjectivity, with no direct references to any of the major socio-cultural, religious or political incidents of her time. This is in stark contrast to an autobiography like Jina Amucha by Baby Kamble, a Dalit woman belonging to Mahar caste. Widely acknowledged as the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in any Indian language, it was translated from Marathi into English as The Prisons We Broke, by Maya Pandit. In this life-narrative, situated as she is in the matrix of a debilitating and oppressive caste system, Kamble does not have the luxury of keeping her life-narrative strictly personal. Because for her, her subjectivity as a woman, is impossible and incomplete without recounting Brahmanical hegemony and patriarchal domination. The difference in the tone of this narrative from that of Durga Khote can be evidenced from two passages from the different texts. Both these passages talk about the restrictions imposed on the women of the household. Khote remembers:

...goddess Manginbaay kept a vigil over the back gate...[s]he was the guardian deity of the Laud women. They were expected to use the back gate for their daily comings and goings...Custom stipulated that they use the front gate only on special occasions. (7)

The first chapter of I, Durga Khote is full of such reminiscences of the Laud household. However, Durga Khote glosses over the patriarchal set-up of the household choosing even to sidestep the plight of widows in that household in a breezy manner. Her focus is more on emphasizing the different upbringing she received from her parents, especially
her mother, in spite of being in such a conservative setup. Baby Kamble’s narrative also begins in a similar manner with accounts of her childhood. However, right from the beginning of her narrative, she is aggressively and painfully aware of the heavy presence of patriarchy surrounding her:

In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this ‘honour’ became the talk of the town – a byword among the relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. (5)

The only instance when any such anguish percolates through Durga Khote’s narrative is when she talking about her life after marriage and before her career as an actress – the time she spent exclusively as the daughter-in-law of the Khote family in their large and silent homestead with very conservative and strict in-laws. A similar contrast can be seen in the way both these women talk about marriage; for Khote it is a personal tragedy:

I had spent all my life from childhood in an open, joyous environment. I found the atmosphere in the Khote house utterly alien…The house was exclusively Kaki’s domain…She was unfeeling and egoistic and extremely self-willed…She herself never went out because of the poor state of her health, and she did not approve of her daughter-in-law ‘gadding around here and there’… [Mr. Khote] used to spend most of his time at the Hindu Gymkhana. We met by ourselves only after dinner in our own room. I used to ask him many questions,
but never got satisfactory answers. I was keen to discuss our life together, our future, his business. Not only did he not respond, he did not think it necessary even to discuss such matters for himself…

…The next two or three years were literally like a prison sentence for me. I cannot recall a single moment of happiness. (28-29)

However, Kamble’s account of a marriage has a more social aspect to it:

We are very protective of the kumkum on our foreheads. For the sake of the kumkum mark, we lay our lives at the feet of our husbands. We believe that if a woman has her husband she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing for her. It’s another thing that these masters of kumkum generally bestow upon us nothing but grief and suffering. (41)

Even when she is talking about child marriage, she still maintains that intense socio-cultural awareness; an entire chapter is devoted to this social malaise. There is no ‘I’ in this account but a feeling of sisterhood that permeates the entire autobiographical act. It is an later interview with the translator that she actually talks about her marriage and how she was married off at the age of thirteen. A poignant passage from Baby Kamble’s The Prisons We Broke on child marriage:

The poor girl had to endure the abuses of everybody in the household, including her haughty sisters-in-law and her lousy brothers-in-law…The Mahar daughters-in-law experienced one comfort, however. There were no pots to clean and no clothes to wash, because there were not even enough rags to wear. (95)
The variation in the tone of narration in both the texts considered here is a clear indication of the deep rooted class-caste system that more or less defines the identity of not only the men but also the women. Underscoring this matrix of the class and caste as well as its role in defining identity is very important in this context; while attempting to interpret the life-narrative by an upper class and caste woman like Durga Khote, it is important to factor in this juxtaposition as it has played a huge role in framing her narrative performance. In *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, the author points out that the “[i]mportant questions relating to the origins of the genre of dalit life narratives, its political significance, as well as its limitations and the challenges it poses to the genre of bourgeois autobiography” (11) have already been raised in academic and other debates. In fact, it is still an argumentative issue as to whether the Dalit life-narrative be called an *atma charitra* (or autobiography)? Sharmila Rege goes on to ask the vital question: “Are dalit life [-] narratives a moral source for political movements or reminders of a hateful past?” However, in the present context of analyzing an ‘autobiography’ by a Brahmin woman, the question that should be asked is whether the autobiographical act becomes any less important because of his dominantly asocial nature. By focusing on the story of her ‘I’, Durga Khote stays true not only to the Western Enlightenment notion of an autobiography but also to the long standing Marathi tradition of the *atma charitra*. By interpreting this *atma charitra* as a performance, the tradition-bound text is opened up to new levels of investigation wherein the narrator might not be judged hastily for her upper class status. This kind of objectivity becomes crucial in the larger picture of funneling the observations from the interpretation of the life-narrative as a performance into the project
of assimilating and formulating an everyday Indian feminism or feminist subjectivity for that matter.

As noted by numerous scholars like Tanika Sarkar and Uma Chakravarti, by the end of the nineteenth century, the women’s question was relegated to the ‘private’ sphere which was, most often than not, just a euphemism for being keeping the women within the four walls of the home. The upper class women, and later the middle class as well, became iconographic of the reconceptualized Hindu culture. Sharmila Rege observes that Marathi women defiantly contested the relegation of the women’s question to the private, through journalistic writings; she enlists numerous examples from multiple publications in support of this observation. However, the nature of these writings is problematic in their understanding of femininity and the women’s right to access certain public spaces; this kind of paranoia later transferred to the performance spaces as well. Sharmila Rege posits an example from a 1933 journalistic piece by Arundhati Apte:

…[W]hile the trend of women competing with men in these arenas was in the interests of the nation, that of women competing with men in the mills was dangerous. Small workspaces, long hours of work, illiteracy and ‘low castes’ were seen as causes of immorality in such workplaces. (48)

So while articulating a critique of the Brahmanical caste and gender norms, they are also complicit with the same. Since most of these early feminists were upper class and middle class women, academia often relegates them into the category of elite women; these women “invented and appropriated different symbols of fractured modernity, exercising the power to nominate and represent modern Marathi women” (49). No other oeuvre of
writing can illustrate this fact better than the spate of autobiographies written and
published in Marathi by women in the early twentieth century. The first full-scale
autobiography to be written in Marathi was Ramabai Ranade’s *Amchya Ayushatil Kahi
Athvani* (*The Memories of our Life Together*) published in 1910. According to estimates
made by Bhalerao in 1986 and Patel in 2002, more than thirty five autobiographies have
been published in the sixty years following that. Sharmila Rege mentions that the critical
discourse on this oeuvre of life-writing focused on one important piece of life-narrative –
Laxmibai Tilak’s *Smritichitre* (*Sketches from Memory*); the latter was noticed for “its
articulation of pain in a genre that was impersonal and attempted to maintain a distance
from emotion” (49). This overwhelming attention accorded to *Smritichitre* was in lieu of
the fact that till then there was no space for women to write about pain, in the strictest
personal sense of the term, in the Maharashtrian public sphere. A brief review of the
autobiographies written by upper and middle class Marathi women brings forth a
common theme which is a life-narrative which is centered around an ‘other’; this ‘other’
usually tended to be a famous husband, to be specific the narrative would mostly be about
the joys and pains of having a reformist husband. The problem with the life-narrative
centering on the ‘other’ is that it steals focus from a larger issue – the Brahmin
patriarchy. Here again Sharmila Rege’s research extends further and makes this
observation:

> The post-World War period is marked by the writings of middle class
upper caste women who attempt to carve out a space for themselves in the public
arenas of education, music, cinema and dance. An extraordinary number of
autobiographies in the period 1976-2000 are narratives of women artists and
wives of famous men. Reviews of these contemporary autobiographies have
drawn attention to the predominance of expressions of marital discord over the
earlier stress on perfect companionship and the near total absence of direct
involvement in political and social issues. (50)

Durga Khote’s life-narrative is undoubtedly part of this larger tradition. However, strictly
speaking, her autobiography belongs to the category mentioned in the beginning of the
quoted text. Even though it can be argued that Khote is not exactly a middle class
woman, her narrative definitely fulfills all other criteria. And as many historians and
historiographers like Pandian and Bhalerao have pointed out, all these life-narratives
were untouched and unmarked by caste. In the case of I, Durga Khote, there is scope for
skepticism as to whether the author was even with addressing the women’s question. As
evidenced by her peer Hansa Wadker’s autobiography, it is beyond doubt that a female
actor faced multi-faceted issues on account of her gender in the male-dominated cinema
industry of Maharashtra. So the question arises as to whether Durga Khote’s account of
her life and times can really be treated as a truthful historical document in the gargantuan
task of recording women’s history in India.

Hansa Wadker was a popular actress of the same era and cultural world as that of
Durga Khote; she, however, follows a very different path in her life-narrative Sangte Aika
(1970). The book’s title, borrowed from her very successful film, makes a direct appeal
to her readers: (I am) telling (you); (you) listen! At the age of seven Wadker was sent to
work in films and earn for the family and later her husband exploited and harassed her for
the earnings. Her narrative contains graphically detailed accounts of the deprivation and
abuse, sometimes even physical, at the hands of her husband and others. Wadker’s text is
similar to *Mee, Durga Khote* in that it is as much about her personal life as about her profession; it is different in that it includes accounts of her amorous relationships and also of abuses (including sexual) by men who supported her in her work but took advantage of her. From a performance perspective of analyzing her life-narrative, it is easy to understand why, at the end of it all, Wadker did not feel any hesitation in writing about ‘that’ part of her life and profession. In the light of this understanding, Khote’s hesitation about divulging the details of her personal life reveals the contrapuntal ways in which both these women performed their femininity in the public sphere (off-screen/off-stage).

At the time of publication, Hansa Wadker’s publisher suppressed many names, for the men she discussed in the book were well-known, and some still living. It is interesting how concerns about ‘realism’ and moralist stances become two sides of the same coin. When *Sangte Aika* was published, the reviews accorded to it were of an ambiguous nature. While some reviewers saw the autobiographical discourse of the actress as a window to the patriarchal world of cinema, people uncomfortable with Wadker’s life-writing raised the objection that there is no evidence to corroborate all that she has said actually did happen. They wanted to know what the men she wrote about thought: such books were one-sided narratives and the ignorance of the story on the ‘other side’ was questioned. Hence there is more at work than simple authorial benevolence. Subtle revelation (a common feature of *My Story, My Life as an Actress* and *I, Durga Khote*) and in particular the use of a naïve childlike narrator, positions the reader in some ways ‘above’ the narrator, and therefore alongside the author. In this way, the author is also able to connect with the reader, perhaps even gaining the fruits of critical readership and interpretation, while maintaining the position as named author.
While the question raised about the credibility of this life-narrative as a historical document still dangles in the air, it can be used for another purpose – to understand the class and caste politics in the Indian public sphere especially with regard to the feminist subject. Studying Durga Khote’s life-narrative in this regard, it is important to take into account, her stature as a performer. The politics and possibilities of the evolution of a feminist subject can be better understood by a comparative analysis of two life-narratives – I, Durga Khote and the Bengali theatre artist Binodini Dasi’s My Story and My Life as an Actress. The similarity between these two life-narratives is that both are ‘framed’ by the stature of their authors as performers. However, their caste and class background as well the public sphere in which they thrived were very different; Binodini Dasi hailed from a background of prostitution while Durga Khote’s lineage is traditional and upper class.

Unlike Durga Khote’s life writing material, which is an exclusively censored account of the private life of a female performer, Binodini Dasi’s self-referential writing Amar Katha (My Story, 1912) and her incomplete account of her career Amar Abhinetri Jiban (My Life as an Actress, 1924/25) have been used sometimes as material for social history and more frequently, as footnotes to theatre history. Binodini Dasi was one of the first South Asian female theatre artists to write a life-narrative; her professional life as an actress comprises exactly twelve years in the long seventy eight years of her life. Her writing life (in terms of publication) spanned at least three decades. According to Rimli Bhattacharya,

Even to a reader who is unaware of the many histories which produced it, My Story reads like a palimpsest. It comprises in fact discontinuous, multiple texts
written at different times, published in pieces and rewritten and edited by the
author herself in their various reincarnations. (18-19)

Hence a project of constructing her life in the chronological order from her
autobiographical account is highly problematic.

The first section of My Story, which includes the Preface, Dedication and Letters to
Mahashoy (her mentor Girish Ghosh) were not written at the same time, or even in any
linear chronology. The letters, evidently part of an actual exchange between Binodini and
her guru, spans the time period from her childhood to her days as an amateur on the
Bengali stage. It is a bedona gatha – a story of personal pain, completed almost
immediately after the death of her protector. In the Preface Binodini writes:

These are only the shadows of an unfortunate woman’s heartache. There is
nothing in this world for me but everlasting despair and the fears of a heart filled
with sorrow… There is no one in this world before whom I can lay bare my pain,
for the world sees me as a sinner – a fallen woman… But He has not given me
anyone to whom I may recount my sorrows and who may comfort me. For I am a
social outcast – a despicable prostitute. Why should people feel compassion for
me? Before whom shall I make known the anguish of my heart? I have therefore
put pen to paper… Perhaps the learned and distinguished pundits, know the means
of expressing the pain that crushes every atom of my being and runs wild within
me. But I know too well that this uneducated, ignorant, lowly woman has not
been able to achieve anything. (50)
Written in mixed registers, *My Story* combines “often stilted and uneven literary bangle with complex and evocative sentences, interspersed with the sudden vivid flashes of dramatic incidents” (Bhattacharya, 20).

*My Life as an Actress* appeared in serialized form, thirteen years after *My Story*, in another magazine and it appears to be more ‘of a piece’. In its final version, the autobiography is made up of seven sections. It is possible to read the first and the last sections as ‘frames’ to the story of her life as an actress. In his prefatory essay to *My Story*, Girish Ghosh faults it for being too personal, for containing too many details about her self, and for being a bitter social critique. He says that it is not professional enough and wishes it were more concerned about details of her performances. It is possible that Binodini also had her guru’s criticism in mind when she wrote *My Life as an Actress*. While *My Story* is characterized by a conscious resistance to a split between her personal and professional life, the second narrative is characterized by a conscious desire to “recall and record an age gone, and is addressed specifically to young(er) actresses” (Bhattacharya, 20). Binodini observes:

> There was no showing off when acting in those days. No airs of having done something special, of having dressed up specially for a show. It was all very natural, part of an everyday domestic routine. One went on stage and performed one’s role. Our teacher had specifically instructed us never to look at the audience while acting; one had to pretend ad if there was no audience in front of us. We had to carry on with our business amongst ourselves. There was no need at all to keep an eye on who was watching or ponder over what they would think or say about our acting. I realized with time that this kind of teaching was intended to
make us concentrate totally on our acting. It was necessary that we forget
everything else and did to the best of our ability whatever each one of us had to.

(133)

Even though it is composed in colloquial Bangla, it has a more controlled narrative and
remains intransigent to the lure of reminiscences. To dwell on these texts also reminds of
the phenomena of bhadravilaha writing and atmacaritra as well as the fact that there
was a prolific output of autobiographies by women in both Bengal and Maharashtra. In a
way, while writing their life-narratives Binodini Dasi and Durga Khote were following a
contemporary trend as well as an old tradition.
Works Cited


