Chapter Five

The Feminist Subject in India

In *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Chris Weedon provides a definition of patriarchy, which will be used here as an axial point for the discussion on feminism and the feminist subject in Indian life-narratives:

> The term ‘patriarchal’ refers to power relations in which women’s interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take on many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on social meaning given to biological sexual difference. (Qtd. Hodgson-Wright, 1)

Whatever the temporal or cultural specificity, feminism has always been about any attempt to contend with the many manifestations of patriarchy. Between these two definitions of patriarchy and feminism, a wide range of issues and debates are covered. However, there has been certain level of apprehension and ambiguity surrounding the term feminism, in the Indian context; this ambivalence is sometimes perceived among those who have been active participants in various movements for the welfare of women. Within the academic circle in India, scholars have mainly raised contention with the Western origin of the term as well as the context. Scholars like Kamla Bhasin, Mary E. John, Nighat Said Khan, Maitrayee Chaudhari and Nirupama Menon have been and are still wrestling with the relevance and appropriateness in the Indian context. In her essay
“Feminism: Indian Ethos and Indian Conviction”, Suma Chitnis makes this observation after attending a session Gender Roles at the World Congress of Sociology at Toronto in 1974:

As I listened to the angry tirade against their patriarchal social order, launched by the American and European feminists at that meeting, I was deeply conscious of the fact that the situation of Indian women, in many ways worse than that of the situation of American and European women did not arouse me similarly. Puzzled by my own placidity, and called upon to respond to these colleagues from the vantage point of my own experience, I made an effort to examine some of their issue with reference to the Indian context. As I did so I discovered that although the deprivations, exploitations and oppressions suffered by women are almost identical in the two societies there are basic differences in the value systems and historical circumstances in which they are pitched. (8-9)

Unlike the many –isms, like capitalism, Marxism, socialism, which the world has been familiar with, feminism does not derive its conceptual base from a single theoretical formulation. Scholars, over the years, have consolidated the historical circumstances of the emergence of feminism into different phases.

Early Feminism, the first stage in the long history of the contention with patriarchy, operated with extremely different parameters than modern-day feminism that there are scholars who wonder whether it can actually be called feminism. Roughly speaking, the term Early Feminism refers to activities that were feminist in nature during the 1500-1700 period of time. In America as well as Europe, in this time frame, both men
and women lacked many basic human rights. While the socio-economic status of an upper class woman was definitely better than that of a lower class man, the former’s standing in relation to a man of her class was quite inferior. For most aristocratic women, marriage was the only means by which they achieve some form of economic security. The financial arrangement of marriage was in such a way that all the wife’s property, which she brought with her before marriage and what she received after marriage, went to the husband. The latter provided the wife with a ‘jointure’ as long they were together; this was the only right accorded to the woman in a marriage. Even though child-bearing was one of the primary duties of the woman in a marriage, she did not even have any legal rights over the children. The condition of the lower class women were less documented and debated in the times, but from the meager accounts that can be put together, their plight was much worse.

Operating in such a socio-cultural matrix, the early feminists had to primarily focus on changing attitudes rather than conditions. Most of these ‘politically incorrect’ attitudes stemmed from religious texts and institutions. The earliest feminists were the humanist Renaissance philosophers who advocated the education of women but with the addendum that their education should be restricted to the private sphere of their homes. Women started to speak for themselves, especially against the negative sinful and inferior image attributed to them from Aristotelian philosophy to the Genesis, by the latter half of the sixteenth century. While most of these writers grappled with their rights within the institution of marriage, there were a few who complained about this irrevocable destiny as compromising their intellectual development. The latter group put forward the examples of women like Queen Elizabeth I to establish that women were in no way...
inferior to men in any avenue of life. Stephanie Hodgson-Wright sums up the effect of Early Feminism on the later phases:

The ‘feminism’ of the period 1550-1700 fought its battles in cultural and social arenas. However, the change in attitudes that they helped to shape was crucial in laying the foundations for more radical changes in the centuries to come. It is hard to imagine how the suffragettes could have argued that women should have the vote, because of their naturally moralistic, civilizing influence, without the precedents set by [these] women writers. (13-14)

Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* is not exactly a path breaking text by contemporary standards of feminism; keeping Virtue, Reason and Knowledge as the cornerstones of her rhetoric, she issued a rallying cry to the middle-class women, especially mothers. She never spoke about the emergence of women into the public sphere leaving the domestic or sought for any political rights like the right to vote. Her aim was to recast women as beings whose moral and intellectual stature was equal to that of men. Wollstonecraft is mainly preoccupied with the concept of femininity, disseminated mainly through the misdirected education of young girls who then grow up to be passive adults who lead a life of drudgery inside their familial duties. Valerie Sanders makes comprehensive observations of Wollstonecraft’s work:

…the reader who expects the *Vindication* to announce a programme of sweeping practical reforms will be disappointed. The book essentially calls for a revolution in manners. It does, however, make a case for state-run, co-educational day schools, so that girls and boys might both benefit from being taught alongside
one another. Wollstonecraft’s hope was that much of what was false and
damaging about the relationship of men and women would thus be eradicated at
an early stage. (16)

However, it was up to the later feminists to create an action-oriented feminist programme
wherein they could demand for civic and political rights. It is also noteworthy, and
somewhat unfortunate, that Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
and its influence was mitigated by the publication of her husband’s life narrative, which
was primarily dedicated to her memory. Knowledge of the author’s ‘immoral’ personal
life turned away even the few middle class readers of the *Vindication*. Then came an era
of conduct books and manuals, which sometimes even quoted Wollstonecraft’s nefarious
example, that gained popularity with the Victorian audience. Hannah Moore’s writings
on female education, Mrs. Sarah Ellis’ *Women of England* (1839), *The Mothers of
England* (1842) and *The Daughters of England* (1843) , the writings of Mrs. John
Sandford and Sarah Lewis’ *Woman’s Mission* (1848) were frequently used in the
finishing schools to teach the upper class and middle class women about that correct mix
of patriotism and domesticity required for a peaceful and successful family life.

This phase also witnesses the conceptual separation of the private and the public
spheres; “the idea that the man exposed himself to the temptations of the market-place,
while the woman stayed at home and preserved a place of purity and peace for her
family” (Sanders, 16). Later feminists have questioned the actual existence of two
separate spheres mainly because a large section of the population, namely the working
class, were going out of their homes – irrespective of gender – to fend for their families.
It is also important to look at male writers whose rhetoric was more or less feminist in
nature. William Thompson, in his *Appeal of the One-Half of the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men*, published in 1825, acknowledges for the first time that even upper-class women who are generally considered fortunate and secure suffer within their domestic spheres. He also made a distinction between three categories of women and the problems they face: wives, adult daughters living with their fathers, and women who are neither living with their fathers nor husbands. In the 1860s, writers like John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill take up the ‘woman’s question’. While the arguments put forward by these two writers are polemically opposite, it went a long way in bringing the problems faced by women into the public sphere. Although Mill does make observations which can be considered preceding that of Judith Butler, when he maintains that the true nature of women can never be truly known given the artificial conditions in which modern society was living. His observation points towards a manipulative discourse in the formulation of a feminist subject long before Butler’s *Gender Trouble*.

John Stuart Mill attributes most of the artificiality in the conceptualization of femininity to the unequal standing of men and women as far as the legal system was concerned. Many works of the time period explore this legal undermining of women, the most famous example being that of Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*. The Caroline Norton case in 1839 highlighted the predicament of married women in the face of the consolidation of their legal rights into those of their husband’s rights. Activism by women like Norton and Barbara Leigh-Smith Bodichon resulted in the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 which allowed limited legal rights to married women independent of their husbands. This Act, which was the result of tedious struggle by a number of women
activists especially the Langham Place Circle, were followed by eighteen others by 1882, all aimed at the protection of the property of married women. These Acts more or less established equal access to both husband and wife to divorce; earlier a husband merely had to prove adultery to be granted divorce from a wife but the latter had to prove bigamy or incest against the former. The change in attitude towards the economic independence of women, that Mary Wollstonecraft sought to bring about, was finally brought about at least in certain sections of the population in England. The notion of a ‘lady’ and the redundancy she was subjected to was de-constructed and women started to looking for options other than marriage.

The first wave feminist developments in America can be considered to be an offshoot of the anti-slavery activism. Pondering over the rights of the black slaves led many to consider the issue of women’s rights; however, this does not imply that all anti-slavery activities were saves. The discourse on the abolition of slavery based on the principle of equality definitely had its impact in the way American women were treated by the society, specifically the male section of it. Valerie Sanders summarizes the difference in her chapter on “First Wave Feminism” in Sarah Gamble’s anthology:

The most significant difference between Britain and America, in terms of first wave feminist development, however, was that in America, different state legislatures passed reform measures independently of the central government. Hence the women of Wyoming and Utah had the vote in 1869 and 1870 respectively, whereas the women in the northern states remained unenfranchised until 1920. Once activated, American feminist campaigns proceeded at different rates around the country towards reforms similar to those in Britain. (21)
The 1800s illustrated that women, at least from certain sections of the population, could mobilize themselves effectively to campaign for rights that had a direct and personal impact. In most capitalist economies the order in which these reform movements proceeded were more or less identical: laws governing marriage, divorce, custody of the women’s property and child custodial rights were usually the beginning. The possibility of a life independent of marriage and martial responsibilities opened up other avenues of possibilities like that of employment opportunities. The initial career opportunities open to women were an extension of their roles as nurturers and caregivers: teaching/governessing and nursing. Women then realized that the education imparted to them as young girls were inadequate if to equip them for these professions. The call for better education and opening up other employment opportunities gained momentum. Interestingly the campaign for suffrage was the last one in the First Wave Feminism.

The various campaigns for reforms to address women’s issues generated a new discourse about the roles of men and women in the two separate domains of the public and the private. There were women who strongly opposed the enfranchisement of their own sex, either because they believed that women were apolitical and thereby did not have an understanding of the political process, or because they felt that women’s interests were already being taken care of by men. Reverting back to Valerie Sanders again:

The remains of a ‘separate spheres’ philosophy therefore persisted well into the twentieth century: a deep-rooted belief remaining that most ‘normal’ women lived quiet lives at home with husbands and children. As it was, the outbreak of war in 1914 both put a stop to the militant suffrage campaign, and released women into new areas of work, especially nursing, to support the war
effort. By the time the war was over, women’s participation in public events had come about by historical accident, and the new challenge was to educate them for active and responsible citizenship. Developments slowed down again until the next major outbreak of feminism in the 1970s. (23)

The First Wave of Feminism, or the beginnings of modern feminism, has a lot of ambivalent figures in its evolution. On the one hand, the changes in attitudes and some of the iconic social and legal reforms for women’s benefit, happened during this phase in the feminist movement. However, the proponents of these changes like Caroline Norton or Florence Nightingale were very careful to distance themselves from any radical changes in their lifestyles and unconventional behaviours. The same hesitancy some women feel in the present day and age in being called a ‘feminist’ is present in a greater intensity in these women. That does not, in any way, reduce their contributions in bringing women out of the domestic spheres and into the public sphere as active participants.

It is at this critical juncture in the survey of Western feminism that delineation into Indian feminism can be made; women in India faced problems that were identical to that of Western women, however, the fervor and tone of the feminist rhetoric is quite different in the Indian subcontinent. This, on the other hand, has made a deep-seated impact on the evolution of the feminist subject in India throughout the ages into the twenty first century. As noticed by many feminist academicians, the average Indian woman reacts with a certain sense of disapproval to the anger-infused rhetoric of Western feminism. The Indian feminist subject is the product of a culture which has conditioned them that the various phases of their life cycle is secure under the guardianship of male
protectors. Manu Smriti fervently advocates that women are unsafe in the outside world without the protection of the male members of their family; the Laws of Manu entrust the guardianship of a young girl to her father, that of a young woman to the husband and that of an old woman to the son. Given this context, it is nearly impossible for the average Indian woman to perceive the male members as the principal and sometimes ‘evil’ oppressors in a patriarchal society. The Indian feminist subject thereby views the Western feminist emphasis on personal freedom as well as the right to choice, with a certain sense of ambiguity and confusion.

Just like it is possible to understand the placidity of the average Indian woman to the feminist rhetoric emanating from the West, it is also possible to understand the vehemence of Western feminism. Most Western societies – Europe, America, Britain – espoused the concept of equality as early as the latter half of the eighteenth century. In fact, the egalitarian ideals were in vogue from the time of their struggle for the formation of nation-states. Given the duration of this discourse, it is understandable that Western feminist discourse tend to go down the road of anger and bitterness. Even though the assertions of equality and fraternity were a part of public discourse from the last three or four decades of the eighteenth century, Western society still refuses to accept women as equals. An analysis of the Western popular culture gives an insightful foray into the deep-rooted stereotypical representations as well as the crass commodification and objectification of women.

While the ‘women’s question’ in Western feminism was engendered by the notions of equality championed by thinkers like Rousseau and Locke, the situation is different in the Indian subcontinent. Till the introduction of western education and
western liberal thinking, Indians were estranged from the idea of equality. In the chapter titled “Indian Ethos and Indian Convictions” in the volume on *Feminism in India* edited by Maitrayee Chaudhuri, Suma Chitnis makes these observations:

Indian society was always hierarchical. The several hierarchies within the family (of age, sex, ordinal position, affinal and consanguinal kinship relationships) or within the community (particularly caste, but also lineage, learning, wealth, occupation and relationship with the ruling power) have been maintained and integrated by means of a complex combination of custom, functionality and religious belief. The harshness and oppressiveness of all these hierarchies is somewhat relieved by a strong sense of deference to superiors, a sense of mutuality, a series of behavioral codes which bend superiors to fulfil their obligations to inferiors and, above all, by a philosophy of self-denial, and the cultural emphasis on sublimating the ego. (11)

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* illustrate these principles with numerous examples. While Western education, as it was implemented by the British colonizers, made the Indians familiar to the notion of equality as an operational factor in the public sphere, it did not become truly functional till the country attained independence. Women in India were granted political and social equality in the public sphere with the formation of the nation-state. Unlike in the Western context, where women had to wage a long struggle for their political, legal and social rights even after nation formation, Indian women enjoyed these rights along with their male counterparts with the implementation of the Indian Constitution.
This does not, however, mean that the progress from a society which oppressed their women to that of a nation-state which granted women equal political and legal rights was not smooth. The roughest ride can be considered to be the reform movement which took shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a result of the introduction of western education and consequently western ideas like liberalism in the Indian public sphere. It opened the eyes of some western educated Indians to the injustices and inequalities that prevailed in the form of customs and traditions in their country. The reform movement, spearheaded by men, recognized that the women were at the receiving end of much of these practices and sought to emancipate them from the oppressive and rigorous mores and customs. Scholars like Suma Chitnis, Uma Chakravarti and Tanika Sarkar acknowledge the role played by these early Indian reformers and credit them with the removal of practices like widow burning, child marriage and the disfiguration of widows from the Indian public sphere long before the nation-state as we know it now was formed. These reformers also understood that in order for women’s emancipation to be complete they needed to be educated and given legal rights equal to those of men.

Academicians who perceive Indian feminist subjects from the colonial times as passive receptors of oppression and comment on the placidity of the Indian feminist movement, often forget the attitude of the colonial rulers of India when Indian reformers were focusing their efforts on releasing the Indian women from oppressive customs. Chitnis sums up the gist of this attitude:

The British…were unwilling to interfere with Indian custom for the simple reason that they feared that tampering with tradition would make them unpopular
and destabilize their rule. Thus, as rulers, concerned about the stability of their empire in India, they were willing to put aside their liberal values and moral convictions, and to allow their subjects to continue with inhuman practices against women. It was only because of the dogged persistence of their western-educated Indian subjects that they were compelled to move. (13)

In fact, some reformers even detached themselves from the nationalist struggle for Indian Independence because it compromised some of the efforts undertaken by them. The ‘new’ woman of the Indian public sphere can be conceived as a product of primarily three social forces:

- The colonizers, specifically the British, who introduced western education and thereby western ideas in the Indian public sphere. It should noted that the colonizers introduced English education with the purpose equipping Indians for menial clerical jobs in the British administrative system in India; the intellectual reformation among the educated Indians was merely an accidental by-product.

- The Indian reformers who were a product of the western education; liberal western ideas persuaded them to perceive their culture in a different light.

- The nationalist movement, who redefined the role of the Indian women, as part of their resistance movement against the British. The new image of the Indian woman, as conceived by them, found its culmination in the Bharat Mata figure.

The conflict of ideas generated between the reformers and the nationalist propaganda can be observed in the Indian public sphere to this day as a conflict between the traditional and the modern. The nationalist leaders insisted on the separation of the two spheres
which relegated women to the domestic sphere; they were entrusted with the guardianship of the Indian cultural values within their homes while the men ventured out and exposed themselves to the modern ideas and values for the general welfare and progress of the country.

This does not mean that the nationalist movement for Indian independence relegated women to the sidelines; in fact, the entry of Gandhi into the arena of the freedom struggle brought women into the mainstream. Gandhi’s policy of *ahimsa* or non-violence emphasized on the importance of *stree shakti* or women power. *Ahimsa* as a principal philosophy in the resistance movement against the British focused on building the moral power of the populace. In his path to moral power, Gandhi advocated the eradication of evils from the Indian society like the caste-based discrimination against the lower castes, the towering presence of superstition and the unequal treatment meted out to women. However, he gave a new dimension to the concept of the ‘new’ Indian woman when he placed *stree shakti* at the heart of *ahimsa*. *Stree shakti* was characterized as “pure and gentle” (Chitnis, 15) yet “firm and tenacious” (Chitnis, 15). The post-independence feminist subject was thus a subjectivity entrusted with the guardianship of indigenous cultural values against the encroachment of western/modern ideals and values; the feminist subject’s resistance was more or less along the same lines as that of *stree shakti*. The thesis seeks to understand as to whether this feminist subject lives on in the post colonial as well as the present times.

In order to understand as to whether the Indian feminist subject, as conceptualized at the peak of the nationalist movement still retains its characteristic features, it is important to analyze the reason as to why the ‘new’ Indian woman empowered with *stree*
shakthi gained such popularity among the masses. Both Tanika Sarkar and Suma Chitnis attribute the feminine presence in the Hindu pantheon of gods, as the reason for this popularity. The concept of a forceful yet subtle feminist subject gained easy credence with the population because “the Hindu religion carried a highly positive concept of the feminine principle” (Chitnis, 16). The presence of various female deities like Durga, Saraswati and Parvati coupled with the fact that each of these deities project a particular aspect of femininity and use it to their advantage is representative of this underlying feminine principle. There is also the concept of the Purusha and Prakriti in the Hindu philosophy wherein the Prakriti is a predominantly feminine power and the one is incomplete without the other. This idea of incompleteness also finds its reflection in the concept of Ardhanareeshwara, a deity which is one part woman, worshipped in some parts of India. However, most of these feminine principles also stress on the incompleteness of the feminine without the masculine and vice versa. Most of the religious traditions and rites are centered around this principle of coming together and consequently results in the marginalizing of widows, single men, single women and most of the times widowers from the conduct of rituals. Widows and unmarried women were particularly harassed and threatened with ostracization, as they were perceived as anomalies or in more common parlance as ‘bad luck’.

As mentioned in the earlier chapters, life-narratives have not only played a crucial role in providing a site of engagement for identity politics but also contributed to the growth of women’s history as a recognized field in India. Somewhere along the trajectory of identity politics and women’s history lays the conceptualization of the Indian feminist subject. The narrating ‘I’ of the life-narrative is a politicized subject mediated by the
discourse, in the sense of the term used by Foucault in his works, which thereby implicates the ‘I’ in the public sphere. Jurgen Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, envisaged the public sphere as mediating between the private sphere and the “Sphere of Public Authority” (Habermas, 30). The private sphere comprised of “the civil society in the narrower sense- the realm of commodity exchange and of social labor” (30). The “Sphere of Public Authority” dealt with the State or the realm of the Police, and the ruling class. Straddling the aforementioned ‘spheres’ the public sphere is “a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest, and where possible, to reach a common judgment” (Hauser, 86). This thesis used the performance frame to analyze the politics of self-representation in two life-narratives of the post-colonial times in order to gain a better understanding of the shaping of the Indian feminist subject. During this investigation special emphasis is given towards grasping the performative nature of life-narratives, as opposed to the popular notion of these narratives as discourses of truth and fact, to gauge an idea about the specific nature of the Indian public sphere that conditioned the feminist subject as it was discursively shaped by the various social and political forces in the public sphere.

An examination of the last ten years of publishing successes in India point to the fact that life-narratives are as popular as fiction, and in some instances more so. The slew of self-referential writings published however does not strictly adhere to the Western ‘classical’ notions of ‘autobiography’ furnished by Rousseau and Gibbon towards the end of the eighteenth century. In India, Zubaan, Kali for Women and Oxford University Press have taken a keen interest in such publication and some of the narratives they have
chosen to be published reveal authors who are not even aware that they are working within the constraints of a genre. While earlier there was a trend of male and female writers narrating their story, the recent publications focus on ‘common’ men and women who just wanted to tell their story sometimes with the agenda of making their mark in the public sphere and sometimes just to record the proceedings of a bygone era like in the case of Devaki Nilayamgode’s *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman*. Litterateurs like Lalithambika Antharjanam who were aware of the limits of language and the slipperiness of experience went only as far as writing a ‘prologue’ to her autobiography (her memoir is titled *Atmakathakku Oru Aamugham*, translated into English as *A Preface to Autobiography*). Most of the narratives were in simple language without much attention to the difficulties of comprehending and recreating life experiences; the narratives were a string of incidents put together randomly as it occurred to the autobiographer or in a chronological order. This is quite evident in both the life-narratives chosen in this thesis for close examination, *Antharjanam* and *I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography*.

While theorizing on women writing their lives in India, it becomes important to consider the question as to why they were writing. Whether or not they meant their life-narratives to be historical documents, the performance aspect of the writing as explained in the second chapter of the thesis mandates that the social environment played a huge role in the final product of the narrative. If modern theorizations in the field of autobiography studies are to be believed, the final product of the life-narrative, more specifically the subjectivity that eventually emerges from the mediation between the ‘I’ who is giving an account of herself and her interaction with the social environment which
is the causal medium of this narrating ‘I’. The thesis aims to extract the feminist ‘angle’ of this subjectivity with the complete understanding that this part of the narrating ‘I’’s subjecting may not be a conscious projection. This disclaimer is intended to liberate the life-narrative and its reading from the semantic baggage, and sometimes in the Indian context the theoretical derision, of being labeled with a ‘feminist’ agenda. Because, most often than not, such premature labeling can often cloud the reader response and even the treatment of the text as a historical document. So while explicating on the feminist subject as shaped by the life-narrative, the thesis seeks to refrain from labeling the narrating ‘I’ or the text from a specific ideological domain.

Contemporary scholars in the field of the study of life-narratives are still debating as to whether the self giving an account of his or her life is liable to furnish evidences to concretize the grand narrative of history. However, in this thesis since the life-narrative is ‘framed’ as a performance, and because ‘framing’ any event as a performance requires precedence and a certain sense of tradition, it is relevant in this theoretical framework to understand the place of each life-narrative in the social matrix which generates the text and of which it is part. A contrapuntal reading of the self-referential writing and history will reveal co-ordinates where the two narratives meet and where they diverge; this is definitely a less problematic methodology of reconstructing the past. Framing, however, does not merely look at the point of agreements and disagreements. By ‘framing’ a life-narrative, the latter is treated ‘as’ a performance and comprehending the performative aspect of the text can be a tool used to go deeper into analyzing the life-narrative as a slippery entity which is the site of contesting subjectivities and identities as well as the convergence point of various indices of the social matrix.
Both Durga Khote and Devaki Nilayamgode engage in the act of performing their life in the form of an autobiography, in the time after Indian independence and the formation of the nation-state. The nature of the Indian public sphere before and after the nation-state formation is quite different; consequently, the notion of gender roles, the conceptualization of femininity and the feminist subject have also undergone some paradigmatic shifts. The earlier part of this chapter has traced the evolution of feminism during the Indian independence movement and how it influenced the formation of an ‘acceptable’ idea of femininity in the Indian public sphere. This exercise was important due to the fact that even though the two life-narratives under the scanner here, were actually written in the post-independence era, the social indices and discursive influences on the subjectivity/subjectivities of the two narratives have their roots in the pre-independence era as well. While Nilayamgode openly acknowledges and describes the social matrix of the pre-independence public sphere in which she grew up as an upper caste woman, Durga Khote merely skims the surface. At this critical juncture of the discourse analysis of the evolution of the feminist subject, it is important to look at the developments in the public sphere post-independence as well. Chitnis provides the sum and substance of the Indian reality as far as the women’s question was concerned at the beginning of the post-independence era:

Inspired by reformers and encouraged by what Gandhi put before them from the Hindu religion, women had come out in large numbers to participate in the struggle for freedom. By the time the country obtained independence in 1947, they had already established themselves as equals in political life. Both as a tribute to the equality of their participation, and asa
reaffirmation of Gandhi’s commitment to equality of the sexes, the Indian Constitution explicitly and categorically granted sex equality…the constitution declares that women, together with the former untouchable castes and tribals living in remote areas, are to be recognized as ‘weaker sections’ of the population, and to be specifically assisted to function as equals. (16)

This promise of the Indian Constitution ensured that the Western feminist rhetoric on the negligence suffered by women in the hands of society and the more specifically the government and its policies, does not make much sense to Indian women. The legal safeguards and political equality does not translate into the fact that the women’s question has been resolved in an adequate manner in the Indian public sphere. India fares poorly in many indicators that various international agencies have set up as parameters to quantitatively and qualitatively analyze women’s welfare in various countries. A highly skewed sex ratio indicates that a general section of the Indian population, especially in the rural parts of the country, still prefer the male child to the female child. This attitude manifests itself in the high incidence of female foeticide and infanticide. As adults, women are subjected to the inequality in the provision for higher education and also face discrimination in the workplace as well as a low representation in a census of the total workforce of the country. Even in the truly ‘modern’ urban corporate workforce, the ‘glass ceiling’ is not a myth but a harsh reality for most women who are as educated and qualified as their male counterparts. These facts point towards the fact that feminism is not irrelevant to Indian woman but highly significant if the society has to move forward from the rut it has been in since for a long time. In terms of availing the legal safeguards and political rights granted by the constitution, Indian women face a lot of hurdles; one of
the main hurdles is the lack of awareness about the plethora of rights and opportunities that the system guarantees to women. This lack of awareness can stem from a range of factors – the male members of the family willfully keeping the women of their families in the dark, both male and female members of the family or community being ignorant about their legally ensured provisions, a visibly hostile bureaucratic system which prevents even the legally and politically aware citizens from availing their rights.

Feminist activists have pointed out the political apathy of the average Indian woman and blame this indifference for the inadequate access to legal and political rights. Average Indian women, even the educated ones, still seem to adhere to the separation of the two spheres, in their unwillingness to enter the political arena and engage in discourse. The hesitancy of political parties in this context is illustrated by the fact that the thirty three percent women’s reservation is still a solid political reality. In the essay titled “Sexuality, Caste, Governmentality: Contests Over ‘Gender’ in India”, Nivedita Menon reiterates:

Reservations for women have been implemented at local-level institutions for over a decade, and even longer in some states. Studies in several states have confirmed that the entrenched power of the dominant castes has been strengthened by women’s reservations...This is why the idea of reservations for an undifferentiated category of ‘women’ in Parliament has been uniformly denounced by politicians and writers speaking for ‘backward castes’ and Dalits, attacking it as an upper-caste ploy to stem the rising tide of lower castes in politics...It is notable that the political parties and women’s organizations that support the existing legislation do not accept this proposal, claiming it is merely
an attempt to derail the bill…The demand for affirmative action of this sort is not based after all, on the biological identity of women, but on the fact that people who live the lives of ‘women’ have a specific socio-economic and cultural location that disempowers them…women of ‘lower’ castes would experience this oppression differently from those of upper castes. So the opposition to the proposal 9an acceptance of which could lead to the dissolving of the impasse that has lasted for over a decade), from those who wish to see the legislation passed, can only be understood as discomfort with precisely the entry of these caste groups into Parliament. (96)

The women who do enter politics turn out to be the daughters and wives of seasoned, established politicians mostly from the upper castes. For example, Sonia Gandhi who has played a key role in Indian politics over the last two decades has an identity that is closely linked to the legacy of the Nehru family, the daughter in law of Indira Gandhi and the wife of Rajiv Gandhi. Moreover, in the current context of globalization, women who work in the private sector as well as the unorganized sector, face a wide range of problems which are often overlooked by the victims themselves because seeking a redressal – legal or otherwise – night clash with their familial obligations.

As earlier mentioned Gandhi’s introduction of the concept of stree shakti was accepted unanimously at the climax of the Indian struggle for independence because of its roots in the Hindu religion. While there is always the question as to how he packaged it appealingly for the women of other, less ‘feminine’ religions, it has to be sidestepped for the present so as to address discourse that constituted these factors in the post-independence era. Almost all the rituals and customs of the Hindu religion are centered
on reaffirming the patriarchal deeply into the devotee’s psyche. Girls are conditioned from a young age to believe in the supremacy and revered status of the male members of the family – especially the father and later the husband. Scriptures and oral narratives romanticize the legend of the *pativrata* – the concept of the woman who is absolutely devoted to her husband and his family – so that every Indian woman still holds the concept dear, even the highly educated ones. While the Indian film industry may have taken baby steps in the direction of progressive film making, the other influential popular culture medium, that of daily soaps is redundant with the stories of *pativratas* who go to any length to protect the husband and his family. This value system stands as a huge stumbling block in raising the status of women and making a change in the direction of equality. Suma Chitnis has a word of advice and caution for the feminists in this regard:

...although Indian tradition has for the major part encouraged the subservience of women, applauded their self-effacement, and thus promoted their subjection, it contains several elements that can be developed towards establishing equality for women and towards a new assertion of the full dignity of their personhood...feminists could work towards building new attitudes among women by highlighting the spiritedness, the intelligence and the resourcefulness of figures like Sita and Savitri. There are several other points at which they can usefully draw from tradition. But, in order to do so they must give conscious and careful thought to how folklore, folksongs, epics and age-old models of virtuous womanhood can be bent to speak for the new value system. Feminists tend to turn away from traditional images, and in the process snap vital links for communication with the masses. (21)
The use of life-narratives to document women’s history in India has been an acknowledged enterprise; keeping what Chitnis has cautioned in mind, it seems like life-narratives would be an appropriate vantage point from which the feminist subject can be conceptualized and studied.

The Indian feminist subject cannot relate to the rhetoric of oppression and the male as oppressors, like her western counterparts. In our context, the oppression is not merely on the basis of gender; the myriad hierarchies in the Indian social matrix ensure that an exclusively sex-based oppression discourse which the feminists seek to dismantle, seem like a futile exercise to the average Indian woman. A strong public figure like Durga Khote shies away from the highly political feminist discourse and seeks to focus solely on the personal; it is the task of the reader to discern the feminist subject from the personal discourse. Unlike the strongly feminist and political life-narratives by women like Nalini Jameela’s *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*, Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*, Sampat Pal’s *Warrior in a Pink Sari*, Sister Jesme’s *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun* or Hansa Wadker’s *I Speak/You Listen – I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography* is a narrative of sorrow rather than one of resisting oppression. Quoting Suma Chitnis again:

Sorrow is real, it is the substance of their life, and they know it intimately. But they know it as hunger, poverty, ill-health, disease, the death of their infant children, the free use of their bodies by powerful landlords to whom they are bonded in labor, bound as labourers, or tenants, or by contractors or employers for whom they work. They know it as the impotence of their husbands, fathers, brothers or sons to help them when this happens. They know it as the ruthlessness
of custom, the burden of tradition, the unrelenting demands of ritual. They know it as the beating of a drunken husband or father, or as anger unleashed without reason as the brute force of men. Feminists must make a special effort to indicate how sorrow, as the mass of women experience it, is compounded by oppression.

(22)

Binodini Dasi’s *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress*, Kamala Das’ *My Story*, Popati Hiranandani’s *The Pages of My Life*, Kanan Devi’s *My Homage to All*, Prabha Khaitan’s *A Woman’s Life*, Devaki Nilayamgode’s *Antharjanam* are such narratives of sorrow. The life-narratives chosen for study here are ‘sorrow’ narratives and the noteworthy fact is that both of them are written by upper-caste women. Their bodies might have been free from the bondage that lower caste women were subjected to but as evidenced in Nilayamgode’s memoirs, they too lived a life of deprivation in a sense. While studying the representations of women’s subjectivity in colonial India, Anindita Ghosh observes that women in India were always conceptualized as unresisting, passive subjects of the ‘grand’ discourses. During the British rule, women served as mute objects who unquestioningly accepted and endorsed a discourse which reinforced her subordination. During the nationalist movement, women served as agency-less sites of nationalist constructions of cultural authenticity and its preservation. Here, they served as the objects of manipulation in the hands of Indian men who faced humiliation in the public sphere.

In Ghosh’s collection of essays titled *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia*, she refutes the conceptualization of the Indian feminist subject in the colonial era as passive and unresisting. Ghosh uses the methodology of
Contesting Power in the field of women’s history. In the latter, the editors Haynes and Prakash points out that:

Rather than insist that one form of resistance is more significant than the other, these essays establish the ‘everydayness’ of struggle in yet another sense: by placing all forms of resistance within the ordinary life of power…the authors study the ways in which the social relations of daily existence are enmeshed in, and transfigured by, resistance, both extraordinary and ‘everyday’…Social structure, rather than being a monolithic, autonomous entity, unchallenged except during dramatic instances of revolt, appears more commonly as a constellation of contradictory and contestatory processes. (2-3)

By any account, women in India have always been at a subordinate position to their male counterparts. By virtue of definition, the feminist subject contends with the patriarchal conventions which force her into a subordinate position. The contention with patriarchal power structures need not always be militant or radical, like Behind the Veil illustrates the resistance can take on an ‘everydayness’ which might not be too obvious in the public sphere. In Amar Jiban, Rashsundari Debi gives an account of how she learned to read and write, out of her burning curiosity to read Chaitanya Bhagavat, which was an act of transgression in that historical context. Devaki Nilayamgode similarly recounts her won and her sisters’ attempts to read novels, which was a taboo for the upper-caste women. While these acts of learning to read and write are not as radical as bra-burning, these women are asserting their subjectivity in the face of a social matrix which denied them these rights.
As far as identity politics is concerned, gender has always been a crucial site of power struggle – power equations are constantly reconfigured and reshaped as part of an eternal negotiation between the group which is perceived as dominant and the dominated in the prevailing social matrix. Dramatic confrontations of the feminist subject with her dominator and the radical shifts which follow such confrontations are merely visible anomalies in this continuum of negotiations. By an extension of this logic, the real feminist subject resides in the ‘everyday’ even though it appears to be in a position of lower visibility. ‘Framing’ life-narratives as performance, in an attempt to understand the performative nature of the self, reveals the existence of this ‘everyday’ Indian feminist subject.