Chapter One

Introduction

The fairly recent but rapidly growing endeavor, to collect and comment on samples of what for several years, probably centuries, has been a neglected mode of writing in terms of critical attention – the canon of life-writing by Indian women – has often rendered “usefully problematic” (Swindells, 1) the idea that autobiography is a “naked and transparent presentation of existence” (Swindells, 1). Contemporary scholarship generally uses the term ‘life-narrative’ to refer to a wide range of material which includes autobiographies, biographies, life-histories\footnote{A life history is a life story as told to a second person who writes it down.}, diaries, memoirs, letters and journals. In the present context, however, the scope of the term is limited to narratives in the first person, thereby excluding biographies from the study. Though the given definition of the term ‘life-narrative’ is adequate by way of introduction, it is inevitable that a higher understanding of the concept and practice of life-writing be attained, in order to address the various definitional issues inherent in the term. Most of the questions surrounding the definition are incumbent on the various historical manifestations of the autobiographical subject; this can be best illustrated by tracing the origins of the most popular term for self-referential writing, i. e. autobiography, and distinguishing it from the relatively modern usage ‘life-narrative’.

The word ‘autobiography’ has its roots in the three Greek words *autos, bios* and *graphein* which respectively mean ‘self’, ‘life’ and ‘to write’. The first citation of the word ‘autobiography’ is attributed to Robert Southey, who anglicized the three Greek
words in 1809. However, in Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson makes the claim that “[t]he term autobiography was first coined in the preface to a collection of poems by the eighteenth-century English working class writer Ann Yearsley…” (2). In The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-representation, Robert Folkenflick observes:

[T]he term autobiography and its synonym self-biography, having never been used in earlier periods, appeared in the late eighteenth century in several forms, in isolated instances in the seventies, eighties, and nineties in both England and Germany with no sign that one use influenced another. The two terms not only were invented but reinvented during this period. (5)

Thus the term ‘autobiography’ carries the semantic and historical baggage of referring chiefly to the body of writing produced at a particular historical juncture, the early Modern period in the West with its tradition of the self-interested or self-obsessed individual assessing the stature of his soul or the meaning of being a publicly accomplished figure. Since these concepts of self-interest, self-consciousness and self-awareness were chiefly the products of the eighteenth century Enlightenment movement, the term ‘autobiography’ can also considered to be the product of orthodox Western European Enlightenment tradition. However, Smith and Watson remind that:

…the relatively recent coinage of the term autobiography does not mean that the practice of self-referential writing began only at the end of the eighteenth century. In earlier centuries, terms such as “memoir” (Madame de Staël, Glückel of Hameln) or “the life” (Teresa of Avila) or “the book of my life” (Cardano) or
“confessions” (Augustine, Rousseau) or “essays of myself” (Montaigne) were used to mark the writer’s refraction of self-reference through speculations about history, politics, religion, science, and culture. (2)

The ideas embodied in this term and tradition can be broadly divided into two depending on the relation of the autobiographical subject to its social world. It can either conceptualize the autobiographical act as the testimony of a transcendent self which considers the individual an autonomous entity removed from its social/ideological environment. Or it can be conceptualized as the autobiographical statement of a self which is absolutely integrated into its ideological domain so as to be able to represent the latter to perfection as well as speak on the behalf of the rest of its inhabitants. These ways of appraising the autobiographical genre fails to accommodate any sense of tension, struggle, contestation, or outright conflict between consciousness and environment, between people and their surrounding ideological world. The drive in this autobiographical tradition is towards inscribing a generic norm rather than to differentiate the distinctive characteristics of the different authors included in the tradition. The most prominent character attributed to ‘autobiography’ is, James Olney’s proposition, that “an autobiography is synchronic, born of the vital impulse to order that has always caused man to create” (Swindells, 3). An autobiography, according to him, transcends history in its attempt to construct homology between the “formal organization of the human mind and the formal organization of nature” (Olney, 36). This formulation of the autobiographical tradition is, according to Julia Swindells, dangerous; she observes:

…a dangerous proposition not only in its asocial aspect, whereby the individual appears to bypass society in his relationship to nature, but also because
the issue of transcendence...inevitably raises the question of displacement or usurpation. If history is being transcended, what is standing in its place – what but the Western European autobiographical tradition? But we have already been told that no historical development can be traced through autobiography, so what do we end up with – what but a collection of male selves, speaking synchronically for history, out of the authority of themselves as subjects? (3)

The writers of history, on the other hand, organize the events of which they write according to their own private necessities and the state of their own selves. Historians impose “their own metaphors on the human past” (Olney, 36). Juxtaposing autobiography and history and reading the autobiographical texts in such a manner as to understand how the autobiographical and historical narratives agree/disagree with each other seemed to be a relatively less problematic way of reconstructing the past.

While ‘autobiography’ is still the most widely used and popular term for life-narratives, it is also a term that has been strongly challenged in the wake of the postmodern and postcolonial critique of the autobiographical subject as conceived by the Enlightenment. The advent of Postmodernism thereby raises a set of issues about the tradition of autobiography and the process of its composition, questions of transcendence over history and juxtaposition of historical and life-writing material. Postmodernism serves as an ambiguous overarching terminology for skeptical interpretations of culture, literature, philosophy, and art. However, it is essentially a three-pronged critique of the ideas generated during the Enlightenment which reached its zenith in the Modern period. The first attack is on the Enlightenment notion of the self as a whole, stable and knowable to itself and others. Secondly, Postmodernism critiques ‘grand’ narratives that
claim to describe, explain and predict the world. Third, Postmodernism is skeptical of the view that language can represent the world through direct correspondences between words (signifiers) and the things/concepts (signified) they stand for. All the three postmodern critiques hold great relevance in life-writing pedagogy. It is to relieve the life-narrative from the entrenched hierarchies of the term as the grand narrative of a whole and stable self which has direct correspondence to its reality, contemporary scholars prefer to use the term ‘life-narrative’\(^2\) instead of autobiography.

While the autobiographical tradition claims that the autobiographical act is born out of a mediation between the autobiographer/subject and the ideological habitat in which his consciousness thrives and evolves, the postmodern tradition of life-narratives posits that this process of mediation is ridden with tensions, struggles, contestations and conflicts. The concept of life-narratives also takes into account the extensive practices of self-referential writing not only in the West but elsewhere in the world; the opening up of generic boundaries enables the inclusion of a wide range of practices which were earlier invalidated for scrutiny by the pedagogy. For instance, as the ‘grand’ narrative of a sovereign self which represents an ideal relationship of the individual with his social environment, the autobiography excludes people in a negative position in culture such as women, black people and working-class people. These sections of the population were ostracized from the generic boundaries of the autobiography in lieu of the fact that they cannot and are not equipped to conceal their highly embattled relationship with the society and its norms and mores. By challenging historical, geographical and generic

\(^2\) It is a common mistake to use the terms life-writing and life-narrative interchangeably. However, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life-narratives* observes that life-writing is an umbrella term for all kinds of writing that has as its subject, life. On the other hand, life-narrative refers to self-referential writing alone.
constraints, Postmodernism opens up the site of self-referential writings to questions of embodiment, agency and personal legitimacy.

Both life-narratives and history, as genres, posit an opposing relationship between life (as information/experience) and art (as an expression of subjectivity). Both these genres, by virtue of definition, are about claims of truth and both of them are forms of narrative. However, the similarities end here. As Rimli Bhattacharya succinctly sums up, “a coherent, continuous narrative, with causal and other links, offering ‘epochal truths’, written with objectivity and sufficient analysis” (152) is what is expected from a historical narrative and it helps produce a “generalisable typicality” or in other words a grand narrative of a certain epoch. Ssu-ma Chien from Han China in his *The Historical Records*, as early as 85 BC, noted the significance of life-narratives in the grand narrative of historical scholarship. In his model of universal history, which included 130 densely packed chapters, he had collated data from a lot of genres: annals, chronological tables, subjects such as ritual, music, and economics. The last thirty chapters were exclusively devoted to biographies of ‘important’ men; calling himself the grand historian Ssu-ma Chien also accords equal importance to the narratives about/of commoners and even assassins, depending on the moral worth of their story. Hence it can be claimed without doubt that life-narratives have played an important, if not exclusive, role in the construction of history.

Building history based on life-narratives can be said to be a dialectical process wherein the grand narrative is in opposition to the narrative composed around the life of a man or woman; the construction of history thus succumbs to a foundational dissension. A life-narrative is written about and around a person, at least according to the conventional
generic standards, and privileges the experiential, the particular, and the expression/representation/performance of ‘self’ in everyday life. The coherence of such a narrative lies in representing the subject who experiences in relation to a larger historical frame, or in other words a grand narrative.

While the autobiographical tradition claims that the autobiographical act is born out of mediation between the autobiographer/subject (who is autonomous and absolutely integrated into his environment) and the ideological habitat in which his consciousness thrives and evolves, the postmodern tradition of life-narratives posit that this process of mediation is ridden with tension, struggles, contestations and conflicts. The concept of life-narratives also takes into account the extensive practices of self-referential writing not only in the West but elsewhere in the world; the opening up of generic boundaries enables the inclusion of a wide range of practices which were earlier invalidated for scrutiny by the pedagogy. For example, as the ‘grand’ narrative of a sovereign self which represents an ideal relationship of the individual with his social environment, the autobiography excludes people in a negative position in culture such as women, black people, and working-class people. These sections of the population are ostracized from the generic boundaries of the autobiography in lieu of the fact that they cannot and are not equipped to conceal their highly embattled relationship with the society and its norms and mores. By challenging historical, geographical and generic constraints, Postmodernism opens up the site of self-referential writings to questions of embodiment, agency and personal legitimacy.

Addressing the questions of embodiment, agency and personal legitimacy problematized the need of the individual autobiographer to impose order via subjective
experience. This obligation felt by the autobiographer to ‘ordering’ his experiences was
dangerous not only in its asocial aspect, whereby the individual appears to bypass society
in his relationship to nature, but also because it transcends history. It was further
legitimized by Michel Foucault’s writings; especially his formulations on the concept of
archaeology and technologies of the self. They have firmly established life-narratives as
containing traces of a larger history. Interpreting the life-narrative texts as part and
indicative of a larger history and/or as alternate histories (in some cases) is a rapidly
growing endeavor in the field of the study of life-narratives.

**Embodiment, Agency and Personal Legitimacy**

Following in the footsteps of the earlier generation of scholars who celebrated the
Western European autobiographical tradition, like Georges Gusdorf, Karl Joachim
Weintraub, James Olney and John Paul Eakin, it is easy to fall into the belief that the act
of writing a life-narrative has little to do with the material body. The body is a site of
self-referential knowledge because memory - “both source and authenticator of
autobiographical acts” (Smith and Watson 16) - is embodied. The ability to recover
memories depends upon the material body; a body that perceives and internalizes the
experiences of the external world. The materiality of the body is important in the act of
life-narration not only because the ability to recover memories is dependent on it but also
due to the fact that “our lives in and as bodies profoundly shape our sense of identity”
(Eakin xi). The characteristics of the material body decide the location of the subject with
regard to language, gender, sexuality, class, caste, ethnicity, and other specificities. In
their postmodern analysis of autobiographical subjects, Smith and Watson remark:
Cultural discourses determine which aspects of bodies become meaningful—what parts of the body are ‘there’ for people to see. They determine when the body becomes visible, how it becomes visible, and what that visibility means. And so life narrators are multiply embodied. There is the body as a neurochemical system. There is the anatomical body. There is…the ‘imaginary anatomy’ that ‘reflects social and familial beliefs about the body more than it does the body’s organic nature’…And there is the sociopolitical body, a set of cultural attitudes and discourses encoding the public meanings of bodies that underwrite relationships of power. (38)

These meanings assigned to bodies by respective cultural discourses dictate the kind of stories people can tell. For instance, a person whose material body is located in the nexus of upper class and female gender in the nineteenth century could not, and would not, tell sexual stories about their bodies. Because the public sphere as well as the public discourses of the time kept such bodies in line with myths of the corrupt nature of female sexuality. Hence to speak about sex was to shame and condemn oneself in both the private and public spheres. Also, the narratives of those respectable middle-class women who did indeed confess about the acts of their bodies, were swiftly swept under the carpet of cultural discourse; or they were relegated to different location (usually a lower class status) where unlicensed sexuality was thought to be a prevailing norm.
Women Writing About Their Lives in India

Life- narratives have played a significant role in the growth of women’s history as a well respected and popular field in India. In fact, no other field has demonstrated the symbiotic connection between life-narratives and history better than the study of women and gender. India has a strong tradition of women’s writing which dates back to a long time as *Women’s Writing in India: Volume I and II* edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha indicates. Volume I, published in 1991, covers a large span of time from the 600 B.C. to the early twentieth century. It includes songs by Buddhist nuns and *Sangam* poets, testimonies of medieval rebel poets and court historians, around 60 pieces of writing by writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an account by the first feminist historian Tarabai Shinde3, rare early essay by an ‘untouchable’ woman4, and a selection from the first novel written in English by an Indian woman5. The second volume published two years later anthologizes selections from poetry, fiction, drama and autobiography by 73 writers born after 1905.

Using life-writing material by women for historical, sociological and other theoretical purposes is more or less a twentieth century phenomenon. Feminist scholars, both in India and the West, have written extensively about Indian women since the 1990s. Nupur Chaudhari elaborates in her research paper, analyzing the travel narrative of Krishnobhabini Das for the intellectual foundation of nationalism and feminism in Bengali women:

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3 Tarabai Shinde’s treatise in Marathi titled *Stri Purush Tulana* (A Comparison of Men and Women)
4 Savitribai Phule’s *Letter to Jothiba Phule*
5 Cornelia Sorabji’s *India Calling*
Since the 1990s, both in India and in the West, feminist scholars have written about Indian women. Their works brought Indian women’s history to the center stage of South Asian history and women’s history. To change popular perception about South Asian women both in the Western world and South Asia, these scholars had to emphasize that many of those Indian women were not passive subjects but activists. Even in the subcontinent, only a few works have been published focusing on Indian women’s ideas and concepts since the 1920s. In the West, most of these works concentrated on the writings of Western-educated Indian women, many of whom wrote in English. Only a handful of works have been published in English about women’s writings in regional language literature. (198)

Tanika Sarkar’s *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography* and the essays in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid) can be considered trendsetters in the study of life-narratives from regional languages towards the larger project of contributing to documenting women’s history. While the volumes edited by Tharu and Lalitha are important in this regard, they merely provided footnotes as to how the selections included in the volumes can be used for a historical understanding of literature, feminism and the making of modern India. Tanika Sarkar’s *Words to Win* is not only an English translation of the original text in Bangla, but also a critical reading of it. Rashsundari’s text has great documentary value because it is the first autobiography to be published in the Bangla language and considered to be a parable of the emergence of modern female subjectivity in colonial Bengal. Sarkar’s critical commentary enquires about the specific character of this subjectivity while
looking into the socio-historical conditions out of which this subjectivity originated. The path breaking formulation in Tanika Sarkar’s critique is her observation that “it would be simple-minded to posit a straight connection between female subjectivity and female writing, to assume that the latter reflects the former in some direct, unmediated way”; she presented the idea that “the act of writing itself would have reconstituted her subjectivity in radically new ways” (5).

The collection of essays in the Sangari-Vaid edited *Recasting Women* breaks new ground in the historiography of the nineteenth century Bengal renaissance. While the work is marked out by its Marxist propaganda to deconstruct the favorable history of the Bengali *bhadralok* and the Euro-American neo-colonial scholars who keep the same historiography alive (because it reflects their own elitist and male supremacist values), it has nevertheless had a huge impact on ‘recasting’ Indian femininity and the female subjectivity. *Recasting Women* paved the way for later studies which focused on identity problems amongst feminists. The Indian feminists who were part of this project wanted to extricate themselves and their identity from the legacies they criticized – British colonialism, *bhadralok* elitism, Euro-American neo-colonialism; they insisted that their paradigm for criticizing the historiography of the Bengali renaissance was authentic because their scholarship was derived from what can be christened as indigenous contextuality. In this process of deconstructing and subsequently reconstructing the Indian female subjectivity, the essayists frequently resort to life-narratives to validate their claims; these include celebrated life-narratives from Bengal, Maharashtra, oral narratives, and interviews. Other noted scholars in the field include Uma Chakravarti,

The thesis will seek to theorize the politics and possibilities of women’s self representation in order to argue for a mode of reading that exposes life-writing as a manipulative discourse. The preliminary objective is to revise prevailing strategies of interpreting life-narratives as documents which contain traces of a larger history and/or as source material for alternate histories. The revised strategies will then be applied to analyze select life-writing material by Indian women in order to contemporize feminist theory in the context of the Indian public sphere. The underlying presumption in this interpretation is that the referent(s) possess a contested subjectivity: the public identity or ‘image’ as a participant in the Indian public sphere and the identity unraveled in the life-narrative which may or may not have a one-to-one correspondence with the public identity. Recognition of a given subjectivity as essentially contested implies the recognition of multiple significations of the subjectivity as not only logically possible and humanly likely but as of permanent potential critical value to one’s own interpretation of the subjectivity in question.

As she embarks on a process of reflection, the writer/subject simultaneously juggles with the memories and experiences which rendered her the individual that she is at a given moment. The author engages with identity, embodiment and agency in the act of autobiographical composition. Unlike in fiction, life narrators have to anchor their narratives in their own temporal, geographical and cultural milieu. Hence, while the autobiographer conceives her subjectivity in the act of autobiographical composition, she does so by anchoring the self (conceptualized in the process) in the contemporary cultural
milieu. The autobiography, therefore, becomes a true measure of the cultural influences on the subjective self.

However, the life-narratives would not just be evaluated only for their documentary value. Unlike in historical writing, self-referential writing has to be approached as an intersubjective process that occurs within the writer-reader pact rather than as a true-or-false story. The emphasis of reading the life-writing material thus shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding. While treating the autobiographical text as a performance, it is conceptualized as a historically situated practice of self representation with due attention to the aforementioned process of exchange and understanding. Hence, the text is relegated into a genre by a rhetorical setting and not because of the presence of a set of formal elements. Writers of life-narratives ‘selectively’ engage their lived experience through personal story telling. Located in specific times and places, they are at the same time in dialogue with the personal processes as well as the archives of memory and history. A critique of document of this nature is therefore at the same time political and apolitical.

Whether and when a life-narrative emerges as an authoritative discourse on narrative and reality, has less to do with that text’s presumed accuracy about what really happened than with its apprehended fit into culturally prevalent discourses of truth and identity. Within the volatility generated by this kind of representativeness, the ‘private’ becomes ambivalent and assumes multiple significations as it transforms into autobiographical and subsequently public discourse. The ambivalent subjectivity is envisaged as a product of manipulation prior to or in the act of writing the life. It is this
ambivalent subjectivity that the thesis seeks to scrutinize within the theoretical premises of Richard Schechner, Erving Goffman and Judith Butler.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler observes that the past in anykind of self-referential writing comes across as recollected; in the act of composition, these recollected fragments of the past are reprocessed, assimilated and analyzed. The pieces of reality are sometimes the elements of the author’s community which is to say that the subject’s representation of reality is unconsciously (if there are disclaimers of intentionality) endowed with archetypal or communal meanings and attitudes. Therefore, the little pieces of reality or ‘experience’ are not what differentiate the male and female narratives into separate categories. The difference occurs in the reprocessing, assimilating and analyzing stages at which points the archetypal or communal meanings and attitudes gets (un)consciously integrated into the discourse.

If the practices of giving an account of oneself in India are to be understood in positive terms, there is an urgent need to move away from the model where it is assumed that the normative structures of the society enact its restraining hands on the ‘autobiographical’ impulses within the author. The intersection of autobiography and history provides a useful site for exploring the phenomenon of autobiographers from India almost always concentrating on their public selves in writing. A large number of Indian life-narratives written in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were pre-occupied with the experience of historical change. Using the life of the author at times as a mere pretext and at other times as the pivot, these narratives sought to provide their readers with a slice of history. It may be erroneous to regard the confluence of these two elements as an accidental feature of particular autobiographies. Given the frequency of
such convergence, it should be looked upon as a vital feature of the genre in India and it is inevitable to engage more vigorously with their avowedly public character. In so far as the autobiographical act involves an exhibition of one’s lived life before the gaze of a reading public, paradigms of spectacle and performance may be more relevant to the study of self-narratives than models of authentic expressiveness.

**Performance and Performativity**

Most public figures create and project an image that is befitting to the situation at hand, so that it can protect their reputation. Performances are a means to know and understand experiences which are central to our social, cultural and personal identities. These performances are not to be seen as attempts to manipulate others but as normal and unavoidable; because humans are social, and therefore must co-ordinate their identities and actions with those of others. The dramaturgical model adopts roles, principles and terminology of theatrical performance in order to explain human communication. Scripts or frames are guidelines for interaction based on cultural conventions. They reduce uncertainty about how to behave and define situations. The dramaturgical model of “impression management” (Bell, 148) describes how people shape others’ impressions of them as well as how people convince others to adopt certain, and not other, definitions of a situation. The collation of poststructuralist critique with impression management conceives the internal landscape of an individual as revealed in the life narrative, as a set of stylized acts— that is, performative.

The disparities between the various significations of the same identity can be reconciled within the parameters of this theoretical setup. What an actress does onstage or
onscreen is to pretend to be someone other than her true self. In Performance Studies terms, this is called restored behaviour by Richard Schechner. It points to a certain distance between self and behaviour, analogous to that between an actor and the role the actor plays onstage. Even if an action onstage is identical to that in real life, onstage it is considered to be performed while offstage it is merely done. There is a thin line differentiating an action ‘performed’ and ‘done’ and that is a consciousness of the performance which can easily move from the stage, from ritual, and from other special and clearly defined cultural situations into everyday life. So there are two different concepts of performance, one involving display of skills, but less of particular skills than of a recognized and culturally coded pattern of behaviour. While the proposal, and by extension the thesis, has borrowed the terminology from Richard Schechner in order to introduce the theories of performance; the theoretical basis for the study will be derived from the works of both Schechner and the American sociologist Erving Goffman.

Goffman’s view of the self, which will be one of the primary theoretical premises for the thesis, is fully evolved in the course of three books written by him; The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Behaviour in Public Places and Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. Throughout his work, Goffman speaks of the ‘self’ as a sociological formulation; whereby the nature and constitution of the self is social. The self is also the location of the fundamental sources of social behaviour. This however does not mean that there is an absolute obliteration of the self but the dissemination of the self into and among the diverse practices of speech and behaviour. This leads him to

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6 Richard Schechner is credited with validating and popularizing Performance Studies with academia as an inter-disciplinary initiative.
formulate the self as a multiplicity of acting selves and the subsequent derivations made from this formulation can be condensed into three insights. According to F. C. Waksler,

Three insights of particular importance for a non-deterministic sociology faithful to lived experience emerge from Goffman’s consideration of the self: (1) Individuals use other individuals as sources of varied data on the basis of which to draw inferences and construct action. (2) By varying their own behaviour, individuals can influence the inferences that others are likely to make. (3) By manipulating ‘expressions given off’, taken in everyday life to be routinely unmanipulable, individuals gain even greater control of resources for influencing the inferences made by others. (3)

Consequentially, according to Goffman’s sociology and theory of self, an individual possesses a range of identities which include personal and social, virtual and actual, disclosed and concealed, discredited and discreditable- all of which are available for creation, use and revision. Therefore, the self becomes a series of ongoing actions and not merely a state. The conceptualization of the self as a constellation of ongoing acts, however, robs it of any interior specifications or virtues. Human beings are distinguished by their presence of humanity, but by the strategic deployment of appearances. It is because of this pessimistic view that Goffman’s hold of the human race that it is essential to bring in another influential theorist into this realm.

Judith Butler originally formulated her theory of performativity in the 1990 publication *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, which is one of the influential texts in academic feminism and queer theory. For Butler, performativity
exposes the reigning hegemonic cultural conceptions of identity as fiction; it opens up the potential for subversion/deviation and thereby questions the unity of the subject. Butler undermines the claim that gender identity (and by extension subject identity) is not a manifestation of intrinsic essence but rather the culturally scripted ritualized repetition of norms. The focus of Butler’s inquiries on identity politics is on the individual who exists in abstraction from the structural determinants like material interests or crisis tendencies of the social system; this isolated individual possesses only a symbolic (and incomplete) identity. The point of introducing Erving Goffman into the politics of performativity is to address an inherent contradiction in Butler’s formulations. While proposing that action is subjectless and that all performances are scripted in advance by the machinations of power, she also maintains that the performance of identity is intentional and dramatic. The core chapter on Performance theory envisaged in this thesis will address this theoretical dilemma and conceptualize a solution which will bridge the schism in the discourse on performativity.

Roger J. Porter substantiates, in *Self-same Songs: Autobiographical Performances and Reflections*, that over the last twenty years performance has offered a space for feminist artists to explore the self as subject all over the world; many of the issues raised by performance have analogies in autobiographical writings and much current theoretical writing about feminist autobiographies also illuminates performance art. Women artists had long struggled to negotiate the relationship between woman as the object of artistic representation and the woman artist as agent and author of her own work. Many women artists began to feel that in the merging medium of performance they were able to challenge and work with this complex relationship through bringing their
own live presence into the work. Performance offered a form in which to speak to new voices as well as act in new and authentically female ways.

For example, Durga Khote was a Marathi actor who gained popularity for her strong manly roles on silver screen. Throughout the rest of her life, Khote was, in a way struggling to live up to these expectations of being a strong woman. In *I, Durga Khote*, she explores the relation between self as agent and self as subject – a gap which can allow for the playful assuming of identities whilst still signaling the real life presence of the artist, enabling an artist to invoke many aspects of herself brought into play through her live performance. The notion of performance (the performance being referred to here being the text of life-writing) as directly accessing an artist’s real self continues the project to bring the everyday directly into the pages of the autobiography. However, as writers are always aware, there is always a friction between the two, an edge or boundary over which the everyday is transformed, a space which art seeks to articulate.

At no point in her narrative does she whine or complain about the patriarchal world of cinema. The ‘I’ in the autobiography is multi-faceted and marked by 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. She writes about everything with almost the same degree of passionate attachment or dispassionate distance. Her writing can be enjoyed as a testament of the multiplicity and ambivalence, the determination and confusion of the period she belonged to. Khote’s portrayal of herself as free-willed as well as chained by the opinions of others are to be equally appreciated; on the one hand Khote as a woman

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7 Her life-narrative *I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography* is one of the primary texts selected for study.
capable of acting independently and on the other hand as a woman unable to take harsh decisions putting an end to things that brought her only pain. As a performance therefore the orientation of *I, Durga Khote* is related to women’s personal experience and her collective past. But the paradoxical truth is that even this attempt gets tainted by the multiple politics of gender and class as was operative in the Indian society.

The intention of an autobiographer may indeed be mediated through any number of impersonal systems that slightly modify those intentions but as Roger J. Porter observes in *Self-same Songs: Autobiographical Performances and Reflections*, “…even radical skepticism about a self’s non textual existence does not negate the presence of an intention; it merely relocates intention to another realm” (xiii). The one sure way of making out the intentions behind the act of writing is to examine the intentions that exist ‘outside’ the text via statements in interviews or letters. Since there are few documents of this nature as regards Durga Khote, one is limited to construe the intentions from the act of writing.

Generalizations about how the organization of an individual’s daily life produces or even causes the autobiographical form as the reader/audience perceive it depends on a kind of logic that transcribes lived experience on to textual production and then presumes to read textual effects as experiential cause. As Leigh Gilmore theorizes in *The Limits of Autobiography*, categorically speaking, experience is always thematized instead of being historicized and the thematically defined concept of experience is used to cover up the connectives between ‘identity’ and ‘politics’. This understanding plays a huge role in the ‘reading’ acts of self-representation. In context of the autobiographies selected for study, the term ‘politics’ encompasses primarily gender, class and nationality.
Her non conformity in the public space relegates her into an aberrant private individuality at the cost of effacing the public individual. It is, nonetheless, in these moments of “acting out” (Hart, 1) that “the factitious identity of the subject disappears” (Hart, 1). Catherine Clement speaks of identity as “prosthesis” (qtd. in Hart, 8) or “armor” that one must wear in order to be understood. Identities are necessary if we are to live in reality and feminist identities embrace the monstrous possibilities of ‘performance’ or ‘acting out’. Cutting herself off from reality can be the woman’s way of escaping the inundation in a masculine imaginary that passes of as the symbolic order. However cleverly concealed, the autobiographical texts leak out such moments of repressed agony. The intention must have been the construction of a coherent self which is impervious to the pains inflicted by the forces of Life; an attempt to reconcile with the rapacity of Life. However, the integral self turns out to be an illusion which is revealed to be the emergence of shifting, contentious subjects who speak in a range of discourses. This in turn will lead to the tension(s) in the professed intentions and the political as well as cultural ideologies that gave rise to these tensions.

The observations above point the finger towards the Hindu cultural chauvinism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; though not the exclusive reason Hindu nationalism 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 in the late nineteenth century, wherein liberal reformism was abandoned in favour of a hard and closed nationalistic culture. From the later decades of the nineteenth century this nationalism- which was the construct of upper caste men, had annexed both the caste question and the women’s
question into the sphere of the cultural and the private. This is apparent in the strength of resistance to widow remarriage and other gender issues, which lay in the fact that it represented the adoption of lower caste models for the higher castes. Further, the fear of losing caste was a deterrent against any popular acceptance of reforms. Uma Chakravarti has drawn attention to the branding of Pandita Ramabai as a betrayer of the nation because of her rejection of oppressive patriarchal practices integral to Brahmanical Hinduism. Her conversion to Christianity came to be seen as a betrayal of a nation that was *ipso facto* Hindu. But as Chakravarti rightly notes, Phule or Ramabai, “the so-called betayers, were in fact the ones who were betrayed by the narrow basis of nationalism which was a construct of upper caste men” (342). The “nationalist resolution of the women’s question” (Chatterjee, 87) relegated the women to the private sphere – the middle class, upper caste woman became the symbol of all Indian women and a reconceptualized Hindu culture – but it did not go uncontested.

**The History of Self-referential Writing in India**

The tradition of autobiographical writing, as idealized by the Western Enlightenment, in India cannot boast of a long history like its Western counterpart of the genre. According to Udaya Kumar, “the late emergence of autobiographical writing in India has been viewed at times as a sign of civilizational difference or historical lack: it has been argued that the idea of a reflective individual subject, essential for the development of the genre of self-writing, was alien to Indian culture or unavailable in the country until the colonial encounter” (419). This position has been contested in recent years by anti and post-colonial scholarship, with a growing acknowledgement of figures of individuality in pre-modern and early modern India. Hence, in a critical reading of the Indian
autobiographical tradition, the more pertinent questions would be regarding the nature of autobiographical practice in India. Another important aspect which requires due attention in this regard is whether the politics of representation is any different for the ‘autobiographed’ self in terms of the gender of the subject. Udaya Kumar observes:

Readers schooled in the Western canon are sometimes struck by the indifference that Indian autobiographies --especially those written by male authors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--often display towards the private, interior lives of their protagonists. Most of these self-narratives present themselves as resolutely public utterances.

Arguably, all autobiographies written with a view to publication-- and perhaps even the others-- may be considered public utterances in the larger sense. However, we need to make distinctions: the ‘publicity’ assumed by the majority of Indian self-narratives seems to be different in kind from the exposure effected by personal confessions. Unlike a Rousseau, who justified his autobiographical effort by pointing to his singularity as a person, the Indian autobiographer often highlights the typicality or representativeness of his or her experiences. (419)

This thesis attempts to conduct a wholesome survey of such self-writing ventures while it asks the significant question as to whether individuals from different societies articulate life-narratives and consequently their subjectivity in distinctive ways; does the Indian life-narrative tradition, extending to the current age, have its moorings in an entirely different autobiographical pact?
The survey on the Indian autobiographical tradition starts *in medias res*, splitting the history of the Indian autobiographical tradition into two and three autobiographical texts can be situated in the space of this split: *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi), *An Autobiography* (by Jawaharlal Nehru) and *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (by Nirad C. Chaudhuri). As mentioned earlier, though scholarly interest in life-narratives from India is a fairly recent post-colonial development, this form of writing “[has] been a historically persistent and socially pervasive form of cultural expression in the subcontinent” (Arnold and Blackburn 6). This body of writing would be placed as preceding the afore indicated split and the modern autobiographical ventures greatly influenced by Western and colonial forces would succeed the split. All three of the autobiographies originate from the times of the British Empire in India but from three different perspectives. Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography is a record of his childhood and early adulthood experiences till 1920 when his policy of noncooperation with the British government is passed by the All India Congress Committee. Gandhi remarks that by this point in his life what he did had become so public and part of the narrative of India’s struggle for independence that there is no need for him to write about it. Nehru’s self narrative which has the subtitle *Toward Freedom* is more or less a personal account of the freedom struggle. What is remarkably different about these two autobiographies is the fact that while Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography seems to be an intimately personal account of his life while Nehru’s text is more or less like a chronicle of events, it juxtaposes India’s history with his personal history in such a way that reminds one of Saleem Sinai and *Midnight’s Children*. It is also quite interesting that scholarly interest in life-narratives from India also begins in

In the case of the body of life-writings from before this juncture, the tradition can further be split into two broad categories chronologically: the life-narratives (mostly memoirs and autobiographies) of Indians who belong to the first generation of Western educated natives and the less popular narratives from pre-colonial India. An interesting detail that should draw the attention of the scholar who conducts a literature review of life-writing material from the pre-colonial period is the fact that most of the catalogued and published material available to contemporary scholarship are not in the strictly autobiographical or memoir forms but confessional in tone and semi-autobiographical. Various such pieces written by women, translated from the respective regional languages into English, is anthologized in Women’s Writing in India, Volume I edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha. But the most extensive study of pre modern and/or pre-colonial life-narratives taken up so far is the project “Life Histories” undertaken by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, which later evolved into a volume of essays Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life Narrative edited by David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn.

Autobiography, as it is understood in the West, can be misleading while surveying the Indian context. In their introduction to the collection of articles, Arnold and Blackburn deems it fit to use carita, a term which also encompasses the concepts of “history” and
“legend” in its meaning, for the Indian scenario. They elucidate the existence of life-narratives in the subcontinent from the pre modern times:

Early Pali and Sanskrit narratives told the life story...of Shakyamuni Buddha...Buddha’s life, from Boddhisatva to enlightenment, was also represented visually in the didactic iconography of Buddhist temples from the second century AD onward...Genealogies both orally transmitted and written, and horoscopes (again in both oral and written forms) might be considered part of this wider genre, but the great majority of pre modern life-narratives were hagiographical—oral and written accounts of the lives of deities, kings and cultural heroes, saints, poets, poet-gods and poet-kings...

...told from varying points of view, they are characterized by a tendency to praise their subjects and to place the narrative within a mythic framework...Lives of individual poets and poet-saints were often transmitted as part of a self-conscious and explicitly named tradition (sampradaya)...(7)

The use of the term carita can lead one to think of the interesting phenomenon of the atmacaritra in general and the phenomenon of the prolific output of autobiographies by women in Maharashtra in particular. Now the reference here is not to the extraordinary number of autobiographies written and published in Marathi by women from the early twentieth century of which a few titles include Sangate Eka (by Hansa Wadkar), Mee, Durga Khote (by Durga Khote), Smritichitree (by Laxmibai Tilak), Jina Amucha (by Baby Kamble), Bandh-Anubandh (by Kamal Padhye). The reference to atmacaritra here is to a much older tradition which dates back to as early as 1276: Chakradhar, a
prominent follower of the Mahanubhava sect, is generally acknowledged as the first woman writer of an autobiography in Marathi. According to Gayatri Chatterjee, in her Introduction to the English translation of *Mee, Durga Khote*, Chakradhar’s autobiography in prose was destroyed in a fire and a disciple recomposed it later by collating material from other people’s writings and their collective memory of the earlier work. This practice was later taken up by several followers of the Mahanubhava sect and members of other religious sects like Varkaris. Maharashtra also provides examples of life-writing material by saint-poets, to be more specific saint-poets like Namdev, Tukaram, Janabai and Bahinabai whose works had prominent autobiographical moorings. Bahinabai is in fact popularly considered to be the first woman autobiography-writer in Marathi.

Bahinabai, a seventeenth century poet and philosopher – and a follower of the Varkari sect saint Tukaram – wrote *abangas* (verses sung in praise of the Hindu God Vithoba), of which 473 *abangas* are available to the modern reader; “the first seventy-eight are an *atmanivedan*, an autobiographical account of her soul’s journey through seven previous lives as well as through her present one.” While her guru’s *abangas* travelled far and wide, Bahinabai seems to be aware that it was not to be so in her case:

…she provides the world with bonafides…through her past and present lives. She first draws up a spiritual lineage for Tukaram and the other important saints before him, and then places herself within that lineage. What she lacks in terms of a large following she tries to fill up by dotting her life’s account with the representation of scores of miracles (there is hardly any in Tukaram’s writings—he did not need them). As a Brahmin’s wife desiring to become a disciple of a
lower-caste person, the obstacles before her were monumental ...(Chatterjee xxi)

So when the early twentieth century women of Maharashtra write their autobiographies they are not only following a contemporary ‘Western’ trend but also placing themselves within an old tradition. In a long range of works which deal with Tamil oral and folk history, Stuart Blackburn also talks about the existence of *carita* texts in Tamil.

With the advent of Islam and Christianity a tradition of religious biography “lives as lessons” also began to circulate. These included, at a popular level, the lives of Sufi *pirs* and *ghazis* as well as the accounts of the life of Christ and those of Christian saints and heroes as disseminated by Christian missionaries and their converts. At the level of court culture, the autobiographical memoirs of the Mughal emperors *Babur-nama* and *Akbar-nama* as well as the travel memoirs of Persian travellers who visited and stayed in the Mughal courts for extended periods can be accounted. The encounter with Western ideas and education influenced and supplemented this hagiographical tradition giving rise to the ‘new’ form of biography and autobiography in which greater attention was given to the complexity of character and personal development unlike the former *sampradaya* where though “the subject faces dilemmas and makes decisions...there is little ‘character development’ because, in the end, the course of events is beyond his or her control” (Arnold and Blackburn 7). The changes caused by the infusion of Western ideology and education span over two broad teleological phases in Indian history: the early modern and colonial modern periods. According to historiographical evidence, the early modern is not necessarily a ‘period’ with specific dates marking its beginning and end; it characterizes elements of thought and/or practice that have been identified as belonging
to early modern historical formations. From a global perspective, the most important features of the early modern period were its globalizing character and innovative elements within traditional literary and cultural disciplines that call into question the veracity of older beliefs and practices. In the Indian subcontinent, the period which has the features of an early modern historical order was the time of the Mughal Empire, dated to have begun in 1526, when the last ruler of the Delhi Sultanate- Ibrahim Lodhi- was defeated and killed in the First Battle of Panipat by Babur.

Historical writing, in general, during the early modern period followed the conventions established in the Turko-Afghan and Iranian traditions with their classical sources rooted in Greek culture as well as influenced by the recent political encounter with the Crusades. These conventions were necessitated by the political agendas of the conquerors and framed by the ethical principles of Islamic political tradition. It does mean that the Indo-Persian chroniclers adhered to the same standards blindly; while writing Indian (life) histories they developed their own body of practices chiefly due to the fact that the bulk of the population ruled by the sultan were non-Muslims. The political doctrines inherited from the dogmatic traditions of Islam had to be questioned and re-formulated to suit the sensibilities of an indigenous public sphere. The evolution of the biography/autobiography forms, based on the Enlightenment-generated notion of the self, from the Indo-Persian life-narratives is not a smooth and easy transition.

The change in the content and/or intention of life-narratives from India is the root of the popular misconception that the life narrative approach was more or less absent in India and it is closely related to a question frequently asked by experts in the field of Indian historiography: “was there history writing in India before the British colonial
intervention?” (Chatterjee, 1). Creating a link between historiography and life-narratives is quite useful in the context of the subcontinent. The *caritra* tradition co-existed with *itihasa, purana* and *vamsavali*; these three genres collectively constitute the vernacular history in the Indian milieu. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the most important *itihasas* and they are a kernel of narratives about historical events and characters. But the peculiarity of these Indian *itihasas* is the fact that they are largely indistinguishable from the mythological literature which is referred to by the term *purana*. *Vamsavali*, on the other hand, is the collective term for genealogical chronicles of ruling dynasties and prominent families which most often than not overlap with the hagiographical (*carita*) tradition.

It can be observed that the mythological, historical, political and the personal overlap in Indian historiography preceding the British colonial intervention and this leads to the formulation of what can be called the paradigm of collectivity. It is this same phenomenon that Udayakumar refers to in his essay as “a sign of civilizational difference or historical lack”. He falls into the trap of the paradigm of collectivity when he gives undue importance to the observation: “Even Gandhi, whose autobiography displayed a clear differentiation of himself from others, stated in his Preface that the book was the story not of his life but of his ‘experiments with truth’; his narrative had taken the shape of an autobiography only because his life contained nothing but such experiments.” The paradigm of collectivity in the Indian context weakens the case of Indian historical enquiry (free from the grapples of colonial forces) because by default it questions the existence of life-narratives in pre-colonial/ pre modern India and thereby as part of a
conscious or hidden agenda reinforces the notion of the Occident that the ‘Oriental’ does not possess a developed sense of selfhood.

The nationalist movement was struggling against these kinds of misconceptions that ensured the psychological subjugation of the colonial subject by parading the civilization of the colonial master as axiomatically superior. The Indian intelligentsia was simultaneously attracted and torn by a need to escape from it to one’s own past, one’s culture and roots. These roots had, however, been tarnished by comparisons and questioning induced by the exposure to a more successful cultural order. A success which was measured in terms of a new consciousness of teleology and progress with which India had never kept in step, which produced an intolerable anxiety and desire to break free from that inexorable march of time and return to one’s past. The tremendously agonized quest that began in the nineteenth century for the (re)construction of this authentic past is inexplicably related to conceptualizing a subjectivity and self that is truly differentiated as Indian. The life-narratives chosen in this paper as starting points for the survey on self-referential writings from India are involved in the same tedious and troublesome process of demarcating the Indian self making use of the Western conventions of autobiography. Hence there is a landmark rise in the production and publication of life-writing material in the mould of the Western autobiography from the nineteenth century. Though it is quite fallacious to assume that the content and intention of these life-writing materials are also Western, in the sense that subjectivity formulated in these texts are essentially Indian, each text trying to mediate and assimilate the various deep-rooted changes in the political (development of nation-state in the place of various
princely states, national struggle for independence, Partition) and social (reform movements, communal riots) landscape of the country.

One glorious example of the life-writing material which can said to be encapsulating the changing social landscape is *Kanneerum Kinaavum- My Tears, My Dreams*, by the social reformer from Kerala- V. T. Bhattathiripad. The autobiographical narrative written in the form of interconnected essays invokes the tragic plight of the majority of Brahmin households in Kerala, mired in convention and ignorance. The text maps his transformation from a young boy schooled in his ancestral calling of priesthood to a radical writer and activist, locating his self-awakening in the collective struggle of committed progressive young men and women. *The Nocturnal Court Darbaar-e-Durbaar, The Life of a Prince of Hyderabad* is firsthand account of life in the early twentieth century in the court of the last Nizam of Hyderabad. Taken from the diary of Sidq Jaisi, a poet-courtier, and originally written in Urdu (edited and translated into English by Narendra Luther), recounts the splendour and the decay of court life in vivid detail.

In order to critique the paradigm of collectivity, beginning *in medias res* of the life narrative tradition is quite useful simply because it is the teleological phase when the country witnessed major changes as a consequence of the nationalist movement. It helps to dismantle the false notion that only privileged and/or exceptional people wrote life-narratives in India and facilitates to go back and forth in the timeline so as to corroborate with evidence from history and present that the Indian self, quite contrary to the popular Western notion, was quite developed before British colonial intervention and the contemporary Indian self is not a mere product of the Western model of education but
deeply rooted in the history and culture of the subcontinent. It is an undeniable truth that caste is/was one of the essential attributes of the Indian society and a major section of the Indian population to this day and time places their subjectivity within the framework of caste and religion and more often than not their individual agency and sense of selfhood drown in this politics which leads to the conception of the paradigm of collectivity in South Asian thought and behaviour. A critical survey of the life narrative/history tradition from the subcontinent can help illustrate how a constant interaction and negotiation between collective identity and self-consciousness can be constructive. It also places life-narratives as a point of intervention into the highly complicated caste-class-religion-kinship networks in this land of unity in diversity. As rightly stated by David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn:

Life-narratives in India do not necessarily conform to Western conventions and modes of expression (some do, many don’t), nor should one expect to find the peculiar forms of individualism that emerged in the West replicated in India…One of the appealing possibilities opened up by examining life histories…is not only to show the variety of forms life-narratives can take within a single region, but also to shed fresh light on the way we perceive and analyze Indian society. (3)

The thesis intends to be part of the larger ongoing effort to destabilize the construct of knowledge, truth and reality centered on the equation of ‘human’ is equal to ‘male’; the larger purpose is to evolve a more inclusive conception of reality. Contrary to popular

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8The belief which has been propagated by the colonial and later neo-colonial Euro-American history scholars for decades now.
belief, feminism has deep roots in the intellectual and cultural heritage of the sub-continent. New global developments in the field of feminism and women’s studies assert that feminism is multicultural and diasporic, that the needs of women who live in different countries are not similar and are conditioned by various external factors like familial, societal, marital, economic, cultural influences as well as individual consciousness. There has been various interdisciplinary academic projects tracing the indigenous roots of feminism in India as well as applying the paradigms of third-world post-colonial feminism in the documentation of women’s history and feminist critiques of male dominated historiographical traditions. However, a feminist theory which helps in the resolution of the Indian female’s ‘experience’ and subjectivity in the Indian public sphere is more or less inadequate by account of being Western. Theodor Adorno postulates in *Problems of Moral Philosophy* that “[o]nce the state of human consciousness and the state of social forces of production have abandoned these collective ideas, these ideas acquire repressive and violent qualities.” (17) The feminist theory circulating in the Indian public sphere presently can be considered to be one such set of collective ethos.
Abstract of Chapters

The thesis will have five chapters including an Introduction.

The first chapter *Introduction* will list out the aims and objectives of the work. The objective of the thesis can be divided into two levels. At the first level, the thesis seeks to devise a new strategy of ‘reading’ life-narratives by Indian women within the framework of performance theories. It will then be examined as to how these new ‘readings’ impact the larger project of documenting women’s history. This leads up to the ultimate objective, i.e. to examine whether feminist thought in India is relevant to the times and if not, how to contemporarise the discourse. The chapter will also include a comprehensive literature review of autobiography studies, which will set the larger context for the work.

The relevance of the work can be explained in three different contexts namely contemporary culture, historical, and academic. In the past few years there has been a lot of questions (and answers) regarding the idea of the feminine in the Indian public sphere in the light of unfortunate incidents like maligning female public figures in the media and incidents like the Delhi gang rape of December 2012. While a section of the public sphere has been using the post-Aryan as well as the nationalist ideals of the female as the goddess of the house; another section has been basing their views on the post-modern (largely western) ideas of feminism. It is in this context that this thesis will engage with the feminist discourse in India at the meeting point of the cultural, historical and academic. While examining the correspondence and adequacy of the academic discourse on feminism in tackling the issues faced by women in the contemporary scenario, this
thesis will also investigate into the (alternate) historiographies of the traditional
perceptions on the same issue. There will also be a brief description of the Research
Methodology employed, i.e. the application of performance theory to interpreting of the
select life-narratives. The chapter will end with the thesis plan outlining the subsequent
division of chapters demonstrating how the argument fits together to ensure a smooth
progress from the primary to the secondary objective of the thesis.

It will also be explained as to how the study of life-narratives has contributed to
the documentation of women’s history in India and in general. This chapter will also set
the context as to why addressing new theoretical approaches to autobiography studies
post-Lejeune is important and consequently explicate the evolution of the term life-
narratives as theoretically and thematically suitable for life-writings from the Indian
subcontinent. After the terminology has been adequately explained and the
historiographical relevance of life-writing material established, the chapter will include
an extensive survey of the published life-writing material by women from India, broadly
dividing them into four groups of narratives written before 1857, between 1857 and 1920,
1925 to 1950 and the ones written after 1950.

An attempt will also be made to elucidate how as a genre, literary or non-literary
is debatable and irrelevant in the context, life-narrative is considered as an important site
of engagement as well as an agency for contextualizing identity politics. The latter has a
crucial role in determining the characteristics of a public sphere. Contemporary
theoretical developments in the study of life-narratives has revealed that the subject of the
life-writing is politicized and more or less fully mediated by discourse and thereby
implicating the subject of the life-narrative in the public sphere. The purpose of this paper
is to understand the politics of self representation, especially the representation of the female self, in the discursive shaping of modern femininity in the Indian public sphere and vice versa.

The second chapter titled *Framing Life-Narratives as Performance* will elaborate the theoretical framework which was mentioned in the Introductory chapter. This chapter will explain how the theories of Erving Goffman, Judith Butler and Hannah Arendt can be used as a tool to critique the presentation of self in the everyday lives narrated in these life-writing materials. A new ‘reading’ strategy thus devised is expected to throw light on the performance aspect of the self in everyday life consequently leading to the presentation of identity. The basis of such a theoretical leap is the treatment of the subject of the life-narrative and its author as two different subjectivities between whom some process of mediation happens. The latter process is what will be expostulated with the concepts of pre-discursive space and performativity as envisaged by Judith Butler. This will establish the conceptualization of the life-narrative as a performance. Erving Goffman in his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* analyses the structures of social encounters from the perspective of the dramatic performance. Since it has already been established that the text is a performance, the social interactions of the subject and author of the narrative can be analyzed with the same principles.

The third and fourth chapters will apply the new ‘reading’ strategy on select autobiographical texts and codify the observations thereby made. The texts chosen for the purpose are Durga Khote’s *I: Durga Khote, An Autobiography* Devaki Nilayamgode’s *Antharjanam: Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman*. While the research will be open-ended in the sense that it will delimit the application of performance theory and the exegesis to
the selected texts alone, these texts have been chosen because of the importance given to
the everyday life. This does not mean that the vast array of life-writing material available
will be overlooked since such an omission will compromise the scope and relevance of
the study to a great extent. The codifications made in the previous chapter will be
analyzed and it will be determined whether or not feminist thought in India is up to speed
and if not, how can we use the life-narratives and the new thoughts on performing
identity to ‘contemporarize’ feminist thought in India, to be presented as a separate
chapter at the end.
Works Cited


