



## AN EXPLORATION OF INDIVIDUAL SELFHOOD IN INDIAN WOMAN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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### ABSTRACT

This research article explores how literary theory of Autobiography, feminist theories, and concepts proposed by the feminist autobiography critic can help in looking at Indian Muslim Woman's expression of the self in her autobiography. The rationale for this particular area of study is that although there has been an increasing interest in women's narratives of self generally in Western literary and critical theory, there is an almost complete lack of any theorization of Indian Muslim woman's autobiographical texts specifically. I hope that this research will make a contribution towards filling this gap.

The article explores into the construction of selfhood and identity in Mehrunnisa Khan's autobiography *An Extraordinary Life: Princess Mehrunnisa of Rampur* (2006). The Researcher adopts the analytical approach by examining the construction of selfhood and identity in the autobiography of Princess Mehrunnisa Khan, by explicitly drawing upon the theoretical formulations of Susan Stanford Friedman. Autobiographical writing by Indian Muslim woman is used to suggest a new approach to interpreting both the self in society and the relationship between narrated self and context. And the article concludes that a sense of selfhood as 'individual' or a 'relational self' is not determined by the gender of a person but by various determinants like, the socio-economic, psychological conditions in which he or she lives, from whom he or she draw inspirations and also the political power one held.

Keywords: Autobiography, feminist theories, Psychoanalysis, Individualism.

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### INTRODUCTION

According to the Oxford English dictionary, the term 'autobiography' generally means "an account of a person's life written by that person".<sup>1</sup> In Greek, *autos* signifies "self," *bios* "life," and *graphe* "writing."<sup>2</sup> Taken together in this order, the words denote "self life writing," a brief definition of autobiography. In autobiography the emphasis is on the author's developing self. The subject hood of

'self' is the main focus in every autobiography. A particular kind of socio-cultural environment helps a person to assert oneself.

Although women have written autobiographically for many centuries and published autobiographies throughout the ages that have been widely read, advertised by the book clubs, and taught in university courses, the criticism of women's autobiography as a genre is barely three

and half decades old.<sup>3</sup> Women's autobiographical writing, was often not taken seriously as a focus of study before the seventies and was also not deemed appropriately "complex" for academic dissertations, criticism, or the literary canon. Academic and popular historians alike regarded it as at best a mine of biographical information and salty citations and deemed it too windy and unreliable, since life stories "stretch" the truth to be worthy of critical investigation.<sup>4</sup> Those who took autobiography seriously, critics of autobiography such as Georg Misch, Georges Gusdorf and William Spengemann, restricted their focus to the lives of great men like St. Augustine, Rousseau, Franklin, Goethe, Carlyle, Henry Adams and more or less ignored autobiographical writing by women. This implicitly reflected they represented their ideological position that women cannot write and writing is primarily a male activity.

With the loosening of the hold of New Criticism on literary scholarship, several critics began reading autobiographies as literary texts, rather than documentary histories. But the typologies, accounts, and theories of autobiography continued to ignore, dismiss, erase, and misidentify women's autobiographical texts. Such male bias and eurocentric attitude is found in the works of critics like George Gusdorf, William Spengemann, John Sturrock and Roy Pascal to name a few.

George Gusdorf's seminal essay "*Conditions and limits of Autobiography*," has circumscribed autobiography by drawing a limit at the borders of Western Culture because according to Gusdorf "Autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man; a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own".<sup>5</sup>

According to Gusdorf autobiography is the literary consequence of the rise of individualism as an ideology. George Gusdorf postulated "individualistic concept of the autobiographical self" which women cannot have.

However, Feminist autobiographical critic like Susan Stanford Freidman have argued against the "individualistic concept of the autobiographical self" postulated by noted critic George Gusdorf. Susan Stanford argues that historically, predicated on the self as a privileged, "isolated being," individualism discarded women and minorities' life writing from the genre for their interest in collective identities, "The cultural categories MAN, WHITE, CHRISTIAN, and HETEROSEXUAL in Western societies, for example, are as significant for a man of the dominant group as they are for a woman at the margins of culture. Isolated individualism is an illusion. It is also the privilege of power. A white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex. He can think of himself as an "individual."<sup>6</sup>

Friedman argues that "Women and minorities, are reminded at every turn in the great hall of mirrors of their sex and color, have no such luxury [...] The emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition of autobiography is thus a reflection of privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history the illusion of individualism."<sup>7</sup>

Stanford Friedman challenged the notion of individual man as described by Georges Gusdorf in his essay "*Conditions and limits of Autobiography*". I have explicitly drawn on this theory of Stanford Friedman in analyzing the autobiography of Mehrunnisa Khan.

#### **Synopsis of Mehrunnisa Khan's autobiography:**

Mehrunnisa Khan is the daughter of the last ruling Nawab of Rampur, Nawab Raza Ali Khan and his third wife, Talat Zamani Begam. She was born in 1933 in Rampur. And at present she lives in U.S. Maryland Potomac teaching Hindi and Urdu. She is a Shia Muslim.

The autobiography of Mehrunnisa Khan *An Extraordinary Life: Princess Mehrunnisa of Rampur* (2006)<sup>8</sup> is an account of Mehrunnisa's childhood, her education, her marriage, her struggle to get a divorce and custody of her children.

The autobiography gives us a glimpse of the private world of Zenana in the Royal palace and the treatment of its women. Being a Princess, Mehrunnisa touches upon topics like the grand

splendor of the erstwhile princes, the stories of the royal dynasties of Rampur, the political and social activities of her own State, about the Partition of India and the merger of the Princely states into India after Independence. The autobiography also gives an account of her second marriage to Group Captain Rahim Khan of the Pakistan Air force, her migration to Pakistan to start a new life with Rahim Khan, the birth of her kids daughter Mariam and son Abid, her travels as a wife of captain to various countries like Spain, Paris and America.

The autobiography of Mehrunnisa also discusses at length a series of deaths in her family, her father, her younger brother Saleem and also the court-martial of her husband. Rahim goes into depression and eventually dies due to kidney failure, her son Abid becomes a drug addict and dies in an accident in America. The autobiography covers the period of her life till the time she is writing it. The autobiography of Mehrunnisa Khan was published in 2006.

#### **An Analysis of Mehrunnisa's Autobiography:**

The autobiography of Mehrunnisa *An Extraordinary Life: Princess Mehrunnisa of Rampur* starts with a description of Mehrunnisa's Grandfather and Father. Mehrunnisa talks about polygamy which was practiced by her grandfather and father. She describes about her grandfather "My paternal grandfather, Nawab Hamid Ali Khan of Rampur, was considered to be quite eccentric...he liked women and had numerous wives. Under our Shia religion, men were allowed to marry more than one wife. The Sunnis could only have four wives"(p.34). Mehrunnisa recalls that "Even though my grandfather, the old Nawab, had died his wives had survived him .... I can remember as many as ten or twelve surviving wives" (p.18).

Then she describes about her own father Nawab Raza Ali Khan who had three wives, "Nawab Raza Ali Khan was a progressive ruler, and a lover of attractive women" (p.11). "The Nawab already had two wives when he decided to take a third" (p.12). She describes how his father married her mother who was his third wife "My father, the young Nawab, saw the older sister, my aunt, and wanted to marry her. People weren't happy to give up their daughters to the palace because women were

simply put away behind the four walls....But my aunt was betrothed to someone else, and the Nawab decided to marry the beautiful 14-year-old younger sister instead" (p.9). "The young women who would become his third wife and my mother" (p.11). This description of Mehrunnisa's grandfather and father in her autobiography does not directly attack the issue of polygamy practiced by the Nawabs but bring to the notice of readers her frankness in speaking out how women was seen only as a source of attraction and of sexual pleasures by the Nawabs in the Royal palace.

Mehrunnisa had a very pleasant childhood and she also received a western education as being a child of the Royal family which she recalls "Everything was vibrant and beautiful. There was nothing ugly around me, Vivid colors formed the backdrop of my childhood....It was part of my growing up" (p.28).

The problem begins in her life when her stepmother arranges for her marriage with Syed Ali Naqi in 1954. Mehrunnisa was not ready for this marriage. When she refuses to get married her mother pressurize her by saying that "Do this for my sake' or we'll both be out on the streets"(p.92). "This is what your father wants for you. I have to go along with this and you have to go along with me, or we're going to have to leave the household" (p.92). It was not as if her mother thought the match was brilliant one. In fact, she wasn't that happy with the arrangement but she was under pressure. Mehrunnisa says "my mother sat in on the marriage negotiations silently. I never saw her speak in front of my father in public" (p.94). "I rebelled, right there and then, but my mother's pressure was stronger. Finally I had her in mind, not myself, when I agreed to the marriage" (p.93). Mehrunnisa had known that the social and familial forces would never accept her protest but this knowledge also was supplemented by her consciousness of her own loneliness and inability. Elaine Showalter's comment is relevant as it points out the dividing self-consciousness of women, created by external forces "We are both, the daughters of male tradition, of our teachers, our professors, our dissertation advisers and our publishers; a tradition which asks us to be rational, marginal, and graceful; and sisters in a new women's

movement which engenders another kind of awareness and commitment, which demands that we renounce the pseudo-success of token womanhood, and the ironic masks of academic debate".<sup>9</sup> Showalter speaks of the dilemma of modern women. And we can see this dilemma of modern women in Mehrunnisa.

When Mehrunnisa's mother informs her that "the family had arranged her marriage" (p.91) . She reacts to it by saying "I told her I wasn't going to get married since I hadn't seen the man and I didn't want to. My rebellious nature, suppressed during my childhood in my father's beautiful palaces and throughout my years of study, could no longer be held in check. I knew my own mind and my view on my future were not the same as those of my parents" (p.91). These views of Mehrunnisa shows an individual sense of herself as an independent individual.

Mehrunnisa says that "Traditionally, once an Indian woman is married, she is supposed to put her husband before herself; this concept has been passed from mother to daughter, down the generations, and reinforced by mother-in-law" (P.101). " My husband continued to question me about my dowry. I refused to write cheques for him, and that's when trouble started" (p.101). Mehrunnisa assert her identity by saying "I was certainly not the passive woman most Indian men expected their brides to be, and very soon our marriage turned into a battle field, both mentally and physically" (p.102).

However, it turned out to be a miserable marriage between two incompatible people as her husband kept asking for keys to her dowry box, which Mehrunnisa admits in her autobiography "we were not compatible. One thing was clear; there was no affection or communication in the marriage. Whenever my husband had outbursts, I would withdraw into my own shell. The more he shouted about my dowry, the more I withdrew; and I never gave him any of my money" (p.102). Mehrunnisa's husband expected her to subordinate herself to his life but she was a rebel and did not surrendered to his will. She rebelled against conventional social inhibitions imposed upon women.

Every time there was a quarrel between them, Mehrunnisa would go back to her father in Rampur and let her family know what was happening. Mehrunnisa recalls how father used to send her back "Each time I returned to my family, I was gently but firmly sent back to my husband. ...They would say, 'there's no place for you here in our home. Return to your husband's house" (p.103). Mehrunnisa says even though it was possible for a woman to take divorce "there was a definite stigma attached to a being divorced women in India. The idea that a woman should stand by her husband, no matter how unhappy the marriage was, stemmed from the fact that a woman often found it difficult to be accepted by society after a divorce" (p.103). In Indian families, the daughters are kept at a distance purposefully and are left on the mercy of their husbands and in-laws after marriage. Before marriage, they are not expected to question and after marriage they are not expected to complain to their parents. Mehrunnisa defied the socio-moral codes of conduct. She had her personal set of codes emerging from impulses and urges of her existence as a woman. She realizes that marriage is not just sex but also togetherness and respect for each other.

After the birth of two children, a girl Zeba, and a boy Zain, she rebelled and left her husband, upsetting her father. Mehrunnisa had the courage to face the fact that there was a distance between her and her husband. So she decided to take a divorce and live separately and independently. But her father ostracizes her in every possible way to make her return to her husband which Mehrunnisa recalls "within a month, when it was time for our meals, the servants came to me and told me there was no food. When the children got sick, I was told there was no doctor. When I wanted to go out somewhere, I was told there was no car. Pressure was thus gradually put on me to return to my husband" (p.104). Mehrunnisa's main critique was targeted at 'family' which is even today known as "a repressive and oppressive institution"<sup>10</sup>, especially for women. Mehrunnisa's oppressors are her own family members her husband who want to economical subjugate her and her father who

always pressurizes her to continue with the oppressive husband.

Mehrunnisa's autobiography raises a vital feminist issue, it is the dilemma that women face when wanting to rebel against the very source of their oppression, only to find out that the first people they are estranged from are family members, those supposedly closest to them. Her Autobiography, in this sense, raises the issue of how far women can actually define a female identity within a tradition that suppresses it.

Mehrunnisa decides to leave her father's house and file a divorce case and custody of her two kids in a Delhi court. Mehrunnisa recalls, "I took my children and left Rampur for Delhi, and never looked back. I was financially secure. I had the money from my dowry" (p.105). A great number of her father's friends helped her to boost her morale at that time. They ensured her any administrative task which needed doing was done. After a bitter two year long divorce case she gets a divorce as well as custody of her children. It may be noted here that two factors which enable Mehrunnisa to assert are education and economic independence. She comes to us as a modern woman, being both educated and having economic independence from her dowry. The very fact that she is able to break the patriarchal mode in the 1950s is in itself a great achievement.

Mehrunnisa was happy that finally she got her freedom which she yearned for. In a metaphorical eloquence, Mehrunnisa celebrates her freedom saying "I admit that the divorce had given my father a hard time, but it was truly wonderful to be free and on my own. I began to enjoy life and my new found freedom" (p.108). "I was free, I had custody of my children and money in the bank. The world was my oyster, and it was the world I wanted to see" (p.109). The response of Mehrunnisa to her marriage reflects the changing attitude of a Muslim woman, a change that was quite radical considering the times she was living in. If marriage provided comfort and happiness it was welcome, but if it didn't work then woman learned to move on. She found emotional and intellectual satisfaction in doing things that pleased her and helped her to discover herself, eventually gaining recognition and appreciation from society. This is the change that

Mehrunnisa's autobiography articulates. Now, Mehrunnisa was a new self, determined not to live a loveless, miserable life of a timid oppressive woman. Due to the growing enlightenment and the women's emancipation, the man-woman relationship has been deeply affected. In India too, the family has been under social change during the last few decades. The new relationship between husband and wife has emerged. A new woman has come out who refuses to submit to her husband in a servile manner. Mehrunnisa is one among this new women depicted in the autobiography. Marriage causes in many women's lives an endless rift and love-hate relationship with their husbands. "For women," comments Spacks, "adulthood, marriage or spinsterhood implied relative loss of self. Unlike men, they looked back fondly to the relative freedom".<sup>11</sup> Mehrunnisa however, sustained her self-hood despite all her suffering and isolation, throughout the domestic life.

After Mehrunnisa's divorce her younger sister who had married on the same day as her, was also facing a marital break-up. Mehrunnisa recalls "after my divorce, two of my sisters mustered up the courage to opt out of their own unhappy marriages" (p.110). Rising against an oppressive marriage Mehrunnisa succeeded in forging her own identity thus setting a precedent for her sister to follow her.

Later Mehrunnisa, flew to London in 1962 where her younger brother lived. That's where she met Rahim Khan who wooed her to marry him. Pakistani Law was changed to accommodate the unprecedented marriage between a Pakistani and an Indian. To marry Rahim Khan, Mehrunnisa gave up her country, her substantial inheritance, the custody of her two children, and her mother. She started a new life in Pakistan after getting married to Rahim. She describe him as a loving, caring husband "Rahim was loving, took care of me and was very fond of our children"(p.136).

The most striking feature of this autobiography is Mehrunnisa strongly rejects the relationship between husband and wife as that of a master and slave. And demands equality, love, care and trust as the essence of a marital relationship. when we look at Mehrunnisa's life she strongly fought against the hierarchical relationship between

her and her husband during her first marriage. Whereas in the second marriage she leaves her children, her parents, her country and her financial assets in India to marry Rahim Khan who was a Pakistani just because he treated her with respect and equality and he was a loving, caring husband for her.

Written at the age of 75 years, the book bears testimony to the awakening of an Indian Muslim woman over a century. The autobiography concludes with a deep sense of fulfillment Mehrunnisa writes "I do not believe that character shapes destiny. My life shaped my character; I had no character until I had to face certain adversities. Life requires courage and bravery. Sometimes a person is born with these traits, but usually it is through the circumstances and pressures of life that they are born. I thank the Lord for the wonderful life that I've had" (p.174).

Mehrunnisa's autobiography is convincing example of Susan Stanford's theory of the female autobiographical self. Susan Stanford's in her essay 'Women's Autobiographical Selves, Theory and Practice' argues that self, self-creation and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities and many nonwestern peoples.<sup>12</sup> In Stanford's view women have 'dual consciousness', the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription. Mehrunnisa's autobiography is the story of an exceptionally rebellious individual, very different from her, stepmother, mother, sisters and other women of her times. And still she is very much a part of women's tradition. Her experience of deprivation, discrimination, etc. is rooted in her consciousness of being a member of women's subculture. In this context her individual self is an extension of the collective self.

Mehrunnisa's autobiography is an achievement for she emerges from the shells of her 'feminine self' and reaches an individual one. She could finally achieve self-sufficiency and independent identity.

#### Conclusion

Looking at the autobiography written by the royal Lady Mehrunnisa Khan I conclude that a sense of selfhood as 'individual' or a 'relational self'

is not determined by the gender of a person but by various determinants like, the socio-economic, psychological conditions in which he or she lives, from whom he or she draw inspirations and also the political power one held because when we look at the life of Mehrunnisa she is able to assert her identity and an individual self, as she had a privilege of power which Susan Stanford Freidman has pointed out that "an Individual Self is a privilege of power which men can have" and women have a relational self which is in contrast to men. As Mehrunnisa Khan held a privilege position of being a daughter of the ruler, she had an individual sense of her selfhood. Therefore I conclude that individual sense of self is not determined by the gender of a person which critics like Gusdorf, and Freud have supported but by various determinants in which power is one.

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