



SELF-REPRESENTATION IN WOMEN'S SELF-WRITING: A CRITICAL STUDY OF *MEMOIRS OF AN INDIAN WOMAN*

Ms Kahor Raleng, Dr Thokchom Sunanda Devi

Research Scholar, Research Supervisor, Associate Professor & Head
Department of English,
St Joseph University, Dimapur, India.

Abstract

Women write themselves based on the gender norms imposed upon their sex and the societal restrictions and standards practiced by the society at large. This paper aims to study how Shudha Mazumdar writes herself in the backdrop of a conservative society that she lived in and upon which she based her writing. The Self presented in women's writing is significantly different from that of a man as women identify themselves with a male figure in their life: be that of a father, husband, brother or son. Women depend on another relationship to write themselves and generally do not represent themselves as an autonomous identity but an identity in relation to another. The concept of relational identity needs to be explored further in order to understand how relationships influence identity and life-writing of woman autobiographers. Identity, particularly in women, is based on the kind of relationship she has with her family members, especially the mother. Her relationships with her family and loved ones permits her to explore her identity and define herself.

Keywords: Self-representation, identity, gender, autobiography, relational identity

The concept of self-representation in women's autobiographical writings has been under study to determine the way a woman views her identity and represents herself through her writing, particularly in autobiography. Leigh Gilmore writes in *Autobiographics* that "To question whether or not there is a self behind the autobiographical representation of self...challenges the founding notion of identity on which autobiography depends" (Gilmore 18-19). The subject of an autobiography is the 'self' and thus, the narration revolves around the 'self' of the writer. Autobiography is the representation of self of the writer; the identity as represented by the writer for his/her readers. According to Gilmore, the subject in autobiography is the self and that the subject is constructed through the act of representation. Gilmore further states that women's self-representation has been silenced because "it has not been interpreted/named/authorized as such" (42). Gilmore is of the opinion that women have not been able to represent their true selves and thus have been silenced. Women represent their 'self' in autobiography based on an erroneous assumption of representation as a woman.

The concept of relationality in female identity was propounded by Nancy Chodorow, a psychoanalyst. Chodorow writes in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* that "feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does. That is, in psychoanalytic terms, women are less individuated than men and have more flexible ego boundaries" (Chodorow 44). Chodorow states that girls, unlike boys, "identifies anticipatorily" with the mother which limits her to undergo the process of individuation and separation.

Relationality in the representation of self in autobiography is a concept postulated by Mary G Mason in her essay *The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers*. The notion drew light to female subjectivity in autobiography and further theorized the female autobiographer as a subject matter. Mary G Mason opines in *The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers* that female identity is dependent on the identification of the other which allows women to write themselves. Mason is of the view that the "self-discovery" of

identity in females leads to the acknowledgment of “the real presence and the recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some “other”” (Mason 22). Mason attest that women need to identify another person in order to explore her identity: it may be her father, mother or husband. Through the identification of a relation and her relationship with the “other”, a woman defines herself. According to Mary G. Mason female identity is based on her relationships with others and thus her representation of self contrasts with the male representation of self. Mason states that “this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems...to enable women to write openly about themselves” (22).

In this paper, the researchers will try to analyze how Mazumdar represents the ‘self’ in her autobiography *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, edited by Geraldine Forbes and published in 1989. It will explore how her identity is represented through the varied multifaceted relationships she had with her family members and close ones. The paper also aims to examine the concepts of self-representation and relational identity with reference to in Shudha Mazumdar’s memoir. The theory of relational identity, as propounded by Mary G Mason and Nancy Chodorow will be explored in order to understand how the identity of Shudha Mazumdar is shaped and represented in her autobiography *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*.

Mazumdar was born on 22 March, 1899 and grew up in the early decades of 20th century colonial India. In her autobiography, which she published in 1989 as an elderly lady, she recollects her childhood and the life she led up until her marriage and early motherhood. Her autobiography is a representation of a childhood that she led as a Bengali girl in colonial India and as the wife of a Government servant under the British administration. In the narration of her life story, Mazumdar employs the technique of story-telling of her family members which inadvertently reveals her identity as a Bengali girl with a Westernized father and an orthodox Hindu mother. Mazumdar does not specifically write about herself per se, but gives a detailed account of the lifestyle and beliefs of her mother, father, husband and family members. In the memoir, Mazumdar recollects the life of her loved ones to a great extent, in particular, her mother, father and husband, which ultimately reveals the life led by Mazumdar. Through the stories of her loved ones, Mazumdar builds up her identity for the readers. In order to understand who Mazumdar is, the readers need to recognise the part played especially by her mother and father in her upbringing and the role her husband played in the formation of her identity as a wife and mother.

Mazumdar writes that her father was westernized in his thinking and lifestyle whereas her mother was an orthodox Brahmin wife, who lived her life under the shadow of her father. Regardless of her father’s broad views on life, her mother never strayed away from her duties or beliefs as a Brahmin woman. In describing her mother and father, we see contradictory views in Mazumdar as well. Due to the western education she received as a child, Mazumdar exhibits a certain level of modern outlook on life and appears to oppose some aspects of her mother’s orthodox lifestyle, though she does not go against it directly. Nevertheless, she conducts her life in the way her mother trained her, which is, to be a perfect Bengali girl which is the ultimate goal for her as a girl. Mazumdar builds her identity in the backdrop of her mother and father’s conflicting lifestyles. She is neither orthodox nor fully westernized. Her relationship with her parents renders it impossible for her to develop an autonomous identity. She appreciates and admires her father’s concept of life yet at the same time is receptive to her mother’s point of view and tries to abide by them. Her acceptance of her mother’s views and lifestyle stems directly from the society and the times she lived in and the fact of being the female gender. This acceptance of her mother’s lifestyle appears to be reluctantly abided by from Mazumdar’s part. Furthermore, she labels her father as far sighted and liberal but at the same time recognises her mother as a strong woman, a character trait, which she tries to emulate herself.

Mazumdar admires her mother’s strength of character but does not specifically admit that her beliefs and practices were admirable. Instead she alludes to the fact that her childhood illusions and freedom were brought to an end when her mother strictly started training her to become the perfect Bengali girl as expected by society. She refers to the rigorous training she had to endure as a child thus implying her displeasure. On the other hand, she writes about how her father encouraged her to live a fulfilling life and attributes her love for reading to her father. Through the narration of the story of her father, the readers can conclude that she was more susceptible to the lifestyle and viewpoints of her father rather than that of her mother’s but had to comply with her mother due to her gender. Mazumdar knows that as a girl she is not privy to the privileges afforded to her brothers. She is in compliance with her status in the family and society which may be due to the influence of her mother and her upbringing. But we also see some strands of rebellion in her character where she goes against the gender norm in subtle ways. This character trait may be the culmination of her father’s influence and recognition of her as an individual when she was a young girl.

From her accounts, her father did not impose upon her the gender norms but rather tried to educate and liberate her. He encouraged her to learn new things and was even invested in her education at a time when

girl education was unheard of or frowned upon by society. It was from her father's table that she first tasted non-vegetarian food which was strictly prohibited for a Brahmin girl. Her father always brought books as gifts for her from his travels and her father even enlisted her for piano lessons. Mazumdar recalls that her father lived a very westernized life which he tried to influence upon his children. He even spoke in English with her and her siblings. This upbringing of hers may have been instrumental in her being more receptive later on in her life to her husband's ideas and motivation.

As a married woman, Mazumdar was further influenced by her husband and his way of life. Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, "for the woman there is, from the start, a conflict between her autonomous existence and her 'being-other'; she is taught that to please, she must try to please, must make herself object; she must therefore renounce her autonomy" (de Beauvoir 305). De Beauvoir opines that women do not have an autonomous identity, that she is conditioned to develop an identity which objectifies her. We see this in Mazumdar as a married woman as well, where she lived her life to please her husband. She conducted her life to appease her husband and developed skills and mannerisms to live up to the standards of her husband. Her identity was further developed in accordance with the needs of her husband. Her identity undergoes an evolution away from her parents and develops into an identity based on her status as a wife and mother. The representation of the 'self' constantly changes depending on her relationships.

As a wife, we see Mazumdar exploring her skills and talents through the encouragement of her husband. Mazumdar acquires new experiences, comes out of purdah and gains more confidence in public appearances. She does so to be accepted by her husband and to be regarded as the perfect Bengali wife of a government servant under the British Administration. Her motivation for improving herself and gaining confidence appears to be her husband and the concept of herself as a perfect Bengali wife. Mazumdar's identity is entangled with the perceived picture of the perfect Bengali wife. She does not go against her husband or tries to develop an autonomous identity but carves an identity based on her husband's idea of the ideal wife he wants.

Mazumdar, as a married woman, was motivated by her husband to live a more liberal life as compared to her peers. Like her father, her husband was also educated and highly influenced by the western ideology and way of life, though it was more pronounced in her father's lifestyle. Her husband worked for the British Administration during the height of the Indian Independence struggle which had some impact on their lives. Mazumdar may have likely come out of the purdah so as not to appear nationalistic or patriotic in order to safeguard her husband's career as a civil servant. Nevertheless, we see instances where Mazumdar meekly submits to her husband's urgings; when her husband wanted her to come out of the purdah, or to speak in front of the public. But the readers also get the sense that she did not feel forced though she was hesitant to a certain extent. Here is where we see the influence of her father. She was not horrified to come out of purdah or to speak in a public platform as was the case with an orthodox woman like her mother, but instead she appeared to be hesitant and shy. With the urgings of her husband we see her overcome her shyness and develop into a confident woman.

Mazumdar's character evolves from a young girl under her parents' shadow to a wife under her husband's identity. Mazumdar comes into herself as a young mother of two boys as she feels that she has fulfilled her duty as a woman. We see the confidence in Mazumdar as her story progresses, yet we also see the conflict that she goes through. As a woman who has realized her purpose: that of a daughter, wife and mother, Mazumdar undergoes a confusing stage where she turns to religion to find validity in her existence. According to Jill Ker Conway, female identity is merged in "her beloved" and that "Women often tell us about their relationships and leave the reader to interpret the silence about who they think they are" (Conway VIII). For Conway 'beloved' encapsulates a lover, an institution or a cause. Mazumdar narrates the story of her father, mother, and husband to tell us her story and define her identity. When she finds her place as a wife and mother she turns to the religious institution to define her identity and narrates to the readers about her relationship with God. As Conway states, Mazumdar does not specifically write about herself, her thoughts or beliefs but writes her story by writing about the people in her life and ultimately by writing about religion and God.

A very interesting aspect of the development of Mazumdar's identity is the role of the father-in-law in her upbringing. She undergoes massive rituals and training from a very young age in order to prepare for her future father-in-law's house. Her identity as a Bengali girl is shaped by the imaginary figure of the father-in-law who is an absentia figure in her childhood. Mazumdar had to build the persona of the perfect Bengali girl in order to be accepted by her father-in-law as the perfect bride for his son. She develops her identity of the perfect bride in relation to the imaginary figure of the father-in-law: a relational identity in absentia. Her role as a girl dictates that her relationship with her future father-in-law will determine her prospects of getting married and be accepted in his household. The imagined relationship she had with the imaginary figure of the father-in-law was pivotal in the development of her character and identity as a young girl.

Mazumdar's is a relational identity which is dependent on the relationships she has with her father, mother, husband, imagine of the father-in-law and ultimately with God to varying degrees. The representation of the "self" is dependent on the narration of the stories of her loved ones and her relationship with God. Her identity is not autonomous but is dependent on the relationships she develops, especially with the authority figures in her life. As Mason states, Mazumdar reveals the "self" through the narration of the story of her father, mother, brothers, and husband, etc which reveals her thoughts and beliefs. In order to explore her identity, she recognises the "other" and the importance of their presence in her life. The identity that she craved for herself and which she represents in the autobiography can be directly linked to the relationships she had with the important people in her life which makes her identity a relational identity. Thus, the self-representation in the autobiography is not that of an autonomous identity but the self-representation of a relational identity.

Bibliography

Beauvoir, Simone de *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 2011.

Brée, Germaine. *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Edited by BELLA BRODZKI and CELESTE SCHENCK, Cornell University Press, 1988.

Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

Conway, Jill Ker. *Written by Herself: Volume 2: Women's Memoirs from four Continents*. Vintage, 1996.

Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Cornell University Press, 1994.

Mason, Mary G. "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers." S. Smith and J. Watson, ed., *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, 1st ed. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press. 1998. Pp. 321-324.

Mazumdar, Shudha. *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, edited by Geraldine Forbes, Routledge, 2015.

Raleng, Kahor. "The Imaginary Patriarch in *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*" published in International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR, E-ISSN 2348-1269, P-ISSN 2349-5138) Vol 9, Issue 1 on January 12, 2022.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson, editors. *Women, Autobiography, Theory. A Reader*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.