

Portrayals of a Marginalized Class Women's Autobiographies: A Study of *On Balance, Bride at Ten, Mother at Fifteen and A Life Less Ordinary*

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Abstract: Women, no matter to which strata, class or caste of society to which they belong, are always the sufferers, the one to whom society metes out the rawest deal. If one studies the history of society from its beginnings to the modern age, one will observe that while society by itself has progressed to a commendable extent, the progress made towards improving the condition of women is comparatively, not much. Women are still viewed by the greater part of the society as mere belongings-of first the father, then the husband, and then that of the son. That a woman can exist as an individual, choosing to live life on her very own terms is, even in this twenty-first century, not acceptable to the larger, more dominant part of the society. The three autobiographies studied in this paper - *On Balance, A Life Less Ordinary* and *Bride at Ten, Mother at Fifteen*, represent the lives of three women from three different social strata, and yet their sufferings and humiliation at the hands of the patriarchal society that we still inhabit point to the truth of my contention that women constitute a separate oppressed class, based on their oppression as women, regardless of the socioeconomic class to which they belong.

Keywords: Women, marginalized, class, patriarchal, domination.

“With the coming of Post- Modernism, the era of the mega-narratives has ended. The little narratives of the many have become more significant in reconstructing a period. To put it slight differently, the de-construction of established historical myths becomes possible only when one views history from below. Elise Boulding, the Canadian feminist, uses an interesting phrase for this genre of writing: The Underside of History. Subaltern writings were a major step in this direction since it moved the headlights on the stage away from the 'heroic' figures and focused on the periphery. Thereby, the marginalized subaltern was brought on the centre stage. Perhaps one of the problems with the subaltern school was that merely shifting the focus did not alter the essential perception of the relationship as one of subalternism versus domination. Narratives of individuals, diaries of unknown men and women become important in their own right without falling into the paradigmatic trap of subaltern studies.”(Ramaswamy 2003: xi) This quotation from the work of Sethu Ramaswamy is perhaps enough to underline the importance of the three autobiographies that this article proposes to study.

Leila Seth was the first woman Chief Justice of a High Court in India, the first woman Judge of the Delhi High Court, the first woman to top the Bar examinations in London. One may wonder that what experience can an upper class woman like her, who apparently has had the best of both worlds, have of the oppression and conflict which is an indispensable part of the existence of most other women. However, sentences like: "At nineteen, I already felt that I was being left on the shelf and marginalized, as they appeared to be no life for a girl without marriage." (Seth 2003: 55), indicate quite clearly that the politics of patriarchy are successfully in operation in every strata of society, and can make an educated, enlightened, upper class woman feel as useless, inadequate and marginalized as one belonging to the lowest strata of the society. Also, we are informed that the "valuation" of young women—even those who were educated and accomplished, was made in terms of their physical attributes, even in this so called well educated and westernized society: the most important factor being their complexion—"... Ma was very upset when she learnt of Moyna. ...Ma just could not bear the idea of Moyna's duskiness." (Seth 2003: 61) This we find, is the prevailing mindset even in an educated and enlightened family. Women, no matter how educated they are, no matter how great their accomplishments are; are in the final count, to be measured in terms of their physical attributes. In the case of a woman, it is what she is born with that matters; what she has made of herself by her efforts does not count. Society—long dominated by the male—has tried (and it must be pointed out, very successfully) to subjugate women completely by ensuring that all her efforts to uplift herself, her efforts to be valued as anything other than an attractive commodity designed for the physical pleasure of the male are devalued and viewed with contempt. What is more disheartening to note is that in this case, it is a woman—Seth's mother, who in all her other attitudes is extremely progressive—who resents her son's choice of his fiancée solely on the ground that her complexion is dusky. Thousands of years of social conditioning make it impossible for a woman to break out of the mental chains and think logically and sympathetically, instead of how she has been trained to think by the male dominated society.

However, while choosing a husband for her daughter, the emphasis on looks is strikingly absent: "...Ma liked the young man's manners and looks, though he was rather short...He was wearing brown and white co—respondent shoes, fawn—coloured gabardine trousers and a cream coloured silk shirt. He was chewing paan, which made his lips look red and messy. He seemed pleasant enough, but this 'England—returned' man spoke English with a rather Indian accent and seemed to be showing off about his work and achievements. I was frankly put off....it appeared that he liked me and told my mother so at the end of the next day....Ma was delighted and wanted to know my reaction." (Seth 2003: 75) Standards, it therefore becomes eminently clear are different for men and women. In the case of a daughter-in-law it is the physical attributes which matter—education and accomplishments are hardly worth any

consideration. However, while choosing a son-in-law, it is his educational accomplishments which are highlighted; his looks or social skills are skimmed over. A man who has proved himself by his ability to earn good degrees and commands a good salary is valued high in the marriage market; his looks are of no consideration whatsoever. This, sadly, is the prevailing social mindset, which social reforms, or the much touted woman's emancipation movement has been unable to change.

The idea of woman's subjugation to men, the idea that the female always comes second is so deeply ingrained in the social psyche that it cannot but manifest itself in each and every social interaction. Leila Seth, in her autobiography strongly underlines this social divide: "Ganga Datt always served Premo first and me afterwards, and that too a bit grudgingly." (Seth 2003: 81) Gender differentiation, it is clear, overrides class differentiation. Ganga Datt, the household cook and bearer, although inferior to Seth in terms of class, actually deems himself superior to Seth by virtue of his gender; and feels that it is his right and duty to enforce the social laws of gender disparity in the household which dares to bypass it. Gender bias, it therefore becomes crystal clear, is more pervasive, and more deeply ingrained in the social psyche, than class distinctions. Women, it would appear, form a separate class as it were, born to be demeaned and oppressed by men, who belong to a separate, privileged class.

"When I joined the Patna High Court, I was the subject of much curiosity and discussion.... The advocates, in particular, were fascinated. They watched every move of mine... An advocate, Lalit Mohan Sharma, later to become the Chief Justice of India, had been away for many months in England for medical treatment. On his return, the first thing his clerk told him was that a young woman had started practicing in the Patna High Court." (Seth 2003: 127) The idea of a woman working in a space which has been traditionally male dominated was perhaps not acceptable to the larger section of the men in the profession. Difficulties and discrimination at work had to be taken in stride. Seth's workplace did not even have a "...proper ladies toilet." (Seth 2003: 127) Even the basic amenities of a workplace were denied to a woman—or was it simply inconceivable and undesirable to the authorities that a woman should ever choose to storm into what had traditionally been a male stronghold? Seth's candid narrative subtly underlines the struggles, the conflicts, the turmoil, which had always been a part of Seth's life—one which *apparently* managed to comfortably blend a happy home life and a fruitful career.

Sethu Ramaswamy, a woman who became a bride at ten and a mother at fifteen had always, apparently, led the placid life of a woman that patriarchy idolizes – the "angel in the house". She dutifully adhered to the role traditionally allotted to women—looking after the house, catering to the comforts of her husband and her six children. Hers was a life which has its mirror image in that of millions of middle-class Indian women, in no way exceptional, in every way traditional. And it therefore becomes even more important and interesting to note the fissures of protest, of

discontent, of angst in her normally placid narrative: “Looking back I wonder how I could accept so much private hurt and public humiliation without any visible protest. Not that I did not protest, but my anger did not extend beyond gritting my teeth while doing my routine cooking or making a little more noise with my pots and pans than usual. I think I could not have protested in any other way because I lacked economic independence. Like many other women of my generation, I had willy-nilly to bow to my husband's wishes because I was simply a housewife with no independent source of income. The storms in life blew over and our marriage lasted fifty-seven years, but some of those wounds still rankle.” (Ramaswamy 2003: 140) Ramaswamy, the docile, it becomes clear, is both “docile” and “housewife” of necessity, not choice. Her impassioned protest against patriarchy, which, she realizes, oppresses women economically, politically, socially and psychologically is a clarion call for the rights of women, a call which has been ignored again and again down the ages. Time and again she talks of the tribulations of the women, their silent suffering—“Frequent pregnancies were a tribulation I shared with most women of my generation. Family planning was practically unknown and women conceived without a choice. Casualty rates were high, both among pregnant women and newborns. I remember that a woman who had successfully delivered would be greeted by women visitors with the phrase, '*cheththu pizhaichchiya*', meaning 'Have you returned from the brink of death?'” (Ramaswamy 2003: 137-38) This is the same motherhood which lifts the woman to the status of the “devi”, and has had thousands of poems and songs composed in praise of it. Sethu's angst at her condition and that of millions of women of her generation reverberate strongly in the phrase “without a choice”. (Ramaswamy 2003: 138) It is a truth universally known, but never openly acknowledged, that for the greater majority of men, even in this day and age, women exist only as physical creatures—created for the pleasure of men. It is their body that matters; their mind, or emotions are of no consequence whatsoever. Marriage is the social institution which gives the man an absolute ownership over a chosen female body—it is his to play with or violate at will, with absolute disregard to the feelings of the woman in question. That a woman might not wish to participate in the physical act, or that she might have reservations over the condition of motherhood—especially when the latter event occurs again and again—need not bother her husband; who by the powers vested in him by the institution of marriage, may treat his wife in whatever way he likes.

As the feminist thinker and writer Christine Delphy points out—just as the lower classes are oppressed by the upper classes in society as a whole, so also women are subordinates within families. Delphy contends that women as such, constitute a separate oppressed class, based on their oppression as women, regardless of the socioeconomic class to which they belong. Married women, according to Delphy, act as unpaid domestic labour, and their hard lifelong labour is looked down upon and trivialized, and not considered important enough to be a topic of any serious

discussion, or debate in its own right. Delphy points out that:

"[all] contemporary "developed societies..... depend on the unpaid labour of women for domestic services and child-rearing. These services are furnished within the framework of a particular relationship to an individual [the husband]. They are excluded from the realm of exchange [i.e., these services are not treated like the jobs people do for money outside their own home] and consequently have no value. They are unpaid. Whatever women receive in return is independent of the work which they perform, because it is not handed out in exchange for that work [i.e., as wages to which their work entitles them,], but rather as a gift. The husband's only obligation, which is obviously in his own interest, is to provide for the wife's basic needs, in other words, he maintains her labour power.' (Delphy 1984:60)

Baby Halder's autobiography- the poverty and violence which shaped her childhood, teenage years and adulthood--showcases patriarchy at its darkest, in its most violent colours. Beaten up by her father, and then beaten up by her husband, to whom she was married when she was "twelve years and eleven months old", (Halder 2006: 33) she has known nothing but abuse, pain and fear all her life. About her marriage, the institution that patriarchy glorifies and idolizes, Baby says: "Little did Baby know that this was the beginning of her days of grief and pain." (Halder 2006: 34) The "marriage" with an under-teen does not deter the much older Shankar from claiming what he obviously deems as his marital rights. Halder is forced to endure what can only be termed as a form of sexual slavery. Three children are born in quick succession to the underage bride while bouts of violence continue to recur. Baby's account of her marital life reads like continuous reruns of episodes like the following one: "He [her husband] didn't say a word when he saw me, but roughly caught me by my hair and started kicking and beating me...People walking past on the road could see what was happening but no one stopped him. In fact, some of them even seemed to be enjoying the spectacle. I lay on the ground, quietly, while my child wept with fear." (Halder 2006: 80) Halder's quiet, impassive voice offers a scathing indictment of patriarchy, records her valiant struggle against its powerful forces. An interesting thing to observe is the fact that although Halder writes about her own experiences, she often lapses into the third person. Perhaps that is the only way in which she can bear to graphically evoke once again, the searing, suppressed memories of her painful life. Halder's quiet, impassive voice hides a minefield of turbulent emotions within. Her traumatic tale is not hers alone, it gives voice to the oppression and brutality endured my millions of women daily, worldwide.

Colette Guillaumin, the French feminist author observes that the primary form of women's oppression which also reveals their function as property is appropriation. She observes that it is not merely the case that women are exploited in the labour market,(where as everyone knows, they are paid less than men for the same work) and in the home, where their daily labour goes unpaid, but they are also oppressed by what she

calls “ direct physical appropriation”. By this phrase she refers to the “reduction of women to the state of material objects”.(Guillaumin 1996:72-103))This she compares to slavery and serfdom. In reference to the case of women, Guillaumin terms this appropriation “sexage”. According to her sexage occurs in four main forms:a. the appropriation of women's time, b. the appropriation of the products of women's bodies c. women's sexual obligation, d. women's obligation to care for whichever member of the family cannot care for themselves as well as for the healthy male family members. Guillaumin further observes that the marriage contract places no limit on the time women will have to work. No holidays are specified on which they will not have to work. In fact all other women living in a family, such as daughters, aunts, grandmothers have to adhere to the same rules. By and large, the number of children that a couple will have is decided by the husband; also the children from a marriage are also the legal property of the husband. Guillaumin observes that women's sexual obligation to men occur both in marriage and in prostitution. However, she points out that in the case of prostitutes, there is a limitation placed on the time for which the prostitute's body may be used, and also, the prostitute must be paid for her services. Wives emerge as losers on both counts. Also, she points out, it is women who look after babies, children, the elderly, and the sick. The overall effect of all four areas of appropriation is to deprive women of their sense of individuality as well as of their independence and autonomy. Baby and Sethu are ready examples.

Women, no matter to which strata, class or caste of society to which they belong, are always the sufferers, the one to whom society metes out the rawest deal. If one studies the history of society from its beginnings to the modern age, one will observe that while society by itself has progressed to a commendable extent, the progress made towards improving the condition of women is comparatively, not much. Women are still viewed by the greater part of the society as mere belongings—of first the father, then the husband, and then that of the son. That a woman can exist as an individual, choosing to live life on her very own terms is, even in this twenty-first century, not acceptable to the larger, more dominant part of the society.

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