
Compound Testimonies: Social Critique and/as Life Narration

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Abstract

The paper proposes to focus on the life-narration of Pandita Ramabai's life through her slim autobiographical summary, *My Testimony*(1907) with occasional reference to her letters. It suggests that her subject position and ideology is equally manifested in her critique of upper caste Hindu practices, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*(1887).The critique of Brahmanical patriarchy, along with glimpses into Ramabai's life, can perhaps lay claim to being studied as a sort of a biography of a collectivity. Through reading various accounts of Pandita Ramabai's life along with her social documentation and critique, the paper proposes to foreground the nuances of reading gendered life-narratives. While it is acknowledged that there is no single matrix or method to read and interpret life narratives, the paper seeks to demonstrate that social documentation could be a form of autobiography, albeit that of a collectivity.

Keywords: Life narrative, autobiography, gender, social critique, patriarchy.

The paper proposes to focus on the life-narration of Pandita Ramabai's life through her slim autobiographical summary, *My Testimony* (1907) with occasional reference to her letters. I suggest that her subject position and ideology is equally manifested in her critique of upper

caste Hindu practices, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) and therefore it can lay claim to being studied as a sort of a biography of a collectivity. Through a creative re-visiting of her life, the paper hopes to add to efforts to pull her out of the relative obscurity which both contemporary and reformist discourse have pigeonholed her into, by either deifying or demonizing her, leaving no space for a balanced appraisal. The attempt is in a sense to retrieve her life from the various overlapping and contesting ideologies and discursive networks within which it has got embedded through her own writings (Kosambi 2000) or the numerous biographies which exist in Marathi and English. What complicates the task is the evolution of her belief systems which did not adhere to one faith or school or doctrinal position.

Between Ramabai's search for meaning and the social climate of opinion of her time lay a vast chasm. This paper explores the various aspects of Pandita Ramabai's position(s), her insider-outsider status, the accusation(direct and indirect) of being a comprador colonialist and an outspoken feminist at a time when debates about female education and raising the age of consent were already challenging the status quo and adding to the threat of a world upside down.

The interconnectedness between life and writing, explored in life narratives, can and is complicated by varying relationships between the two, the person who is writing and the self that is written about. On the one hand is the idea about the witness self and the deconstructive notion evident in the idea that autobiography or life-narration is a running away from the self that seems to undo any straightforward connection between the nature of the self who is writing and the one that is written about.

This generates multiple possibilities of interpretation intertwined with the questions of truth, memory, and agency of the writing subject. While establishing the subject as the prism and refractive lens of narration, these narratives also offer the subject's experiences of the world in its multifarious forms. At the center of life narratives-and this would apply to both autobiographies and biographies- are located not only the self-projections of the subject, but also the projections of others who are trying to record the life in question and under scrutiny. But in focusing on the subject, life narratives also engage with not only questions of epistemology but also the current cultural and social climate of opinion. The idea that the act of personal recollection, whether through one's own narratives or those of others, often offer

unintended and unforeseen consequences complicating any easy judgements or opinions about questions of individuality, subjectivity, interiority, or authenticity associated with the author.

The patterns of self-disclosure in life writings vary in their representation of the subject, the multiple axes of identity-gender, class, caste, race and these variations often result in a plurality of forms. Further, these narrative structures often offer contradictory accounts of a person's life as life narratives are as much constructed by an individual subject as they are produced by their multiple contexts that intersect in many ways. In order to explore the interconnectedness between life and writing, we have to keep in mind not only the possibilities of interpretation but also the agency of the writing subject as well as the subject written about. Interestingly, even as we establish the subject as the prism of narration, we have to concede that the life narrations of famous people sometimes present a narrative excess that go beyond the cartographies of singular narrations. The temptation of a single or singular interpretation should be resisted even as the reader grapples with the pulls and tensions of differing lenses of subjective perception.

In order to evaluate the significance of Pandita Ramabai's or other women's lives through an exploration of their writings, one is reminded of some of Carlo Ginzburg's radical moves. The historian who was an advocate of oral history demonstrates how an early manifesto on history "from below" appeared in the form of an "imaginary biography", where the intention "was to salvage through a symbolic character, a multitude of lives crushed by poverty and oppression." The "mixture of imaginary biography and historical documents" enable even Dalit histories "to leap at a single bound over a threefold obstacle: the lack of evidence, the lack of importance of the subject according to commonly accepted criteria and the absence of stylistic models." (Charu Gupta EPW, 2007)

In her article on the Dalit 'viranganas' in the 1857 war of independence, the historian Charu Gupta raises the question of representation as being of critical importance, in the way the "pasts are remembered and retailed". Representation can also pose afresh the relationship between memory, myth and history, oral and written, transmitted and inscribed." Further, Foucault has argued that all representations are by their very nature, insidious instruments of surveillance, oppression and control-both tools and effects of power. However, within the field of representation," counter-images can emerge, challenging hegemonic images." (Gupta 2007)

Various versions of Pandita Ramabai's biography-both real and imagined -were in circulation in Ramabai's lifetime as well, but the silence on her life, apart from an occasional mention in history textbooks-her massive work, her many journeys, the overwhelmingly positive response to her talks in America have all been shrouded in relative obscurity and silence, in contrast to the cultural impact of some other journeys undertaken by male travellers. This silence alternates with hyperbolic appreciation, for instance in A. B. Shah's introduction to a volume on *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, where he calls her "the greatest woman produced by modern India". (Shah 1977)

The project of recuperating or retrieving the complex and palimpsestic nature of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati's life, belief and activism is complicated by "her multiple ideological locations and evolutions, and the intricacies of her feminism within the intersecting and sometimes conflicting structures of patriarchy , religion, nationalism and internationalism."(Kosambi 2016)Her life and writing show a convergence of competing concerns which can be grouped under the rubric of religious, feminist and nationalist. (Malhotra, 2016)

Perhaps a good starting point from which to explore the trajectories of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati's (1858-1922) many journeys would be to look at her childhood when she and her family were eking out an existence as "Puranikas," itinerant brahmins adept in the recitation of puranas, the Hindu scriptures at temples. She had learnt Sanskrit at a young age from her mother, Lakshmi, the second wife of Anant Shastri Dongre. Lakshmi was much younger than Anant Shastri and their marriage was solemnized while she and her family were on a pilgrimage. She was 9 and he was 44 and years later, this was to be recounted in *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) without revealing the identity of the people involved. In any case, marriages between girl children to much older men was a common practice among upper Hindus, a practice which is critiqued sharply by Ramabai in *The High Caste Hindu Woman*. Ramabai was shocked, to say the least, about the casual nature of these marital transactions. Her sharp critique of Hindu upper caste customs and Brahmanical beliefs and practices could be viewed in the context of her plural concerns about women's emancipation and rehabilitation from a life of destitution that early widowhood often entailed.

Ramabai's writings conveys a sense of the family's gradual descent into poverty because of observance of the numerous rituals demanded by Hinduism/Hindu practice, as also the fact that their education was not geared towards any practical ends. As she noted in 'My Testimony':

My parents did not like us to come in contact with the outside world. They wanted us to be strictly religious:" Further learning any other language except Sanskrit was out of question. Moreover, securing livelihoods through education was hardly admissible and not a possibility to be entertained. Secular education of any kind was looked upon as leading people to worldliness, which would prevent them from getting in the way of "moksha"(salvation)..To learn the English language and to come into contact with "malechhas"(foreigners) was forbidden on the pain of losing caste.(Ramabai,1907[Sept 1977]:12-13)

In a sense, this upbringing created a situation where the basis of selfhood and identity, the fulcrum of one's existence, became religion .The lack of a practical education "further deepened the all pervasive ethos of the household and made religion the main site of their hopes, aspirations and failures.(Bapat:228) Pandita Ramabai's relentless questioning and pursuit of religious faith and conviction could perhaps be located in this mode of education instituted early in their life.

The High Caste Hindu Woman(1887), it could be said, came out of many years of observation and interrogation. It was finally written after Ramabai's conversion to Christianity (1883) and much before her narrativized account of her inner journey in *My Testimony* (1907). Her stringent criticism of the pathetic plight of Hindu womanhood voiced in the book could be read as a justification/ explanation of her conversion and her turning to an alternative religion and value-system. Written two decades prior to *My Testimony* (1907) which details her interior journey, it is arguably a befitting preface to her later document. It could, in part, be also seen as a defensive gesture to answer the upholders and self-appointed custodians of Brahminical patriarchies, great leaders who attacked what they saw as Ramabai's anti-Brahmanical stance and iconoclastic approach towards institutionalized Hinduism (Kosambi 2016) Her challenge was not only thrown at Brahminical hegemony but had struck at the roots of the epistemological oppression of Brahmanical patriarchies by questioning their sacred texts and received traditions.

Social documentation and critique, particularly of marginalized, oppressed groups, acts as a form of autobiographical discourse. The notion of tethering autobiography or life writing to, or defining the autobiographical in terms of the individual, betrays an individualistic bias. A shift in the definitional proposition of autobiography is perhaps needed here where we are called upon to redraw the maps and borders of the autobiographical and accept collective identities as the appropriate subject of autobiography. In Ramabai's case, the collective identity or subject is the high caste Hindu woman, weighted down by rituals and tradition, held up and legitimized through scriptural sanction. Interestingly, Ramabai herself was a high caste Hindu woman before she chose to go "outside the fold." (Vishwanathan:2000,8)

According to Meera Kosambi in her book on *Pandita Ramabai: Life and Landmark Writings*, (Kosambi 2016) it is not so much the fact of Ramabai's conversion to Christianity as her feminist inclinations which had challenged and stormed the bastion of Hindu orthodoxy and stirred up trouble. Gauri Vishwanathan in her work "*Outside the Fold*" (Vishwanathan 2000) examines the ramifications of conversion and puts conversion at the heart of Ramabai's self-identity." Ramabai's feminism is evident in her insistence on the importance of 'choice', which also ultimately entails the choice of a specific subject position, which she decides on at each stage of her life. Thus, while her early education and scholarship may have been a family legacy, her decision to marry outside her caste, presumably a person from a relatively lower caste, her interest in religious disputation, were actions that demonstrate her agency. In choosing her identity at all stages of her life and of shaping the contours of her subjectivity, she demonstrates a kind of agency which is unusual for women from her milieu. All these may be construed as signs of her modernity, of reflexivity, a sign of her self-knowledge and awareness. Thus, she writes in one of her letters to Sister Geraldine, that while she had converted to Christianity and critiqued Hinduism, she was not ready to accept the Cheltenham sister's position on all doctrinal matters:

I have a conscience, and mind and a judgment of my own. I must always think and do everything which GOD has given me the power of doing.... Obedience to the law and to the word of God is quite different from perfect obedience to priests only. Then, to drive the point further home, she continues: I have just with great effort freed myself from the yoke of the Indian priestly tribe, so I am not at present willing to place myself under another similar yoke by accepting everything which comes from the priests as authorized command of the Most High. (Shah 1977:59-60)

She was insistent on the right to use her reason and exercise self-determination and the right to choose, that alienated many orthodox sections which were invested in patriarchal, Brahmanical or imperial ideologies, both in India and in England. In one sense, intertwined in Ramabai's words is a rudimentary form and an early version of a rights discourse of basic human rights. For her, received wisdom about womanhood derived from the Hindu scriptures fell far short of any idea of the most basic human rights. Ramabai's zeal was not so much about proselytizing but about developing some notion of a human/women's rights discourse.

Kosambi's earlier work on Pandita Ramabai alerted many readers to the broad rich multifaceted legacy of this remarkable woman. From conduct books about women's education called *Stri Dharma Niti*, written in Marathi, to her account of her travel to England in 1883, accompanied by her young daughter and one female companion, Ramabai's ability to think, observe and fearlessly articulate her opinion and argument, radiates confidence and independence. Her early upbringing, exposure, travel, helped her to become cast in the mould of a world citizen.

In her book on the life and times of Pandita Ramabai, Uma Chakravarti embeds and contextualizes Ramabai's story against the backdrop of the "peshwai", the power play between various segments of orthodox Brahmanical society in Pune and Maharashtra in the latter half of 18th and 19th century. Most of these historians writing feminist histories-'herstories'- realise that it is only against the grain of established orthodoxies that women could define themselves meaningfully and carve out their own spaces, if they were to move towards any sense of emancipated self realization. In an earlier essay on the prevalence of the Altekarian paradigm which existed as a dominant paradigm when it came to analyse the position of women in ancient India, Chakravarti interrogates the idealized nature and notion of Hindu womanhood in Vedic times and in ancient Indian society.(Chakravarti,1989) According to A.S. Altekar, whose definitive views on women in ancient India shaped the contours of much ensuing historiography, women in the early Vedic period occupied a high status and enjoyed a central role in family and community affairs. However, this had begun to change by the later Vedic period. This slide continued and reached its nadir in medieval times under the Muslims.

For Ramabai, driven by reformist zeal to change -ameliorate and improve the condition of women and specifically that of widows, the scenario appeared very bleak. She viewed Hinduism as inimical to women's development and critiqued shastric (Brahmanical scriptures) injunctions which she saw as sanctioning the oppression of women. Works like Tarabai

Shinde's "Stri Purush Tulana" (translated as A Comparison between Men and Women) would have resonated favourably with her. Even before her conversion to Anglican Christianity, she had been associated with reform movements like the Brahmo Samaj (in Bengal), Prarthana Samaj (in Maharashtra) and had gone to meet Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj. The fact that these reform movements opened up spaces for women was reason enough for Ramabai's largely positive view of them.

The other point about Ramabai's feminist orientation also emerges through her writing is the value she places on reason and liberty. Her questioning mind interrogated everything, including the finer points of Christian dogma and earlier, Hindu doctrine. A quaker, she was in search not only in search of religious faith, but faith informed and backed up by reason. It is her reason and reasonable expectations from the Anglican church that makes her question its patriarchal authoritarianism. This reliance on the workings of reason places her in the Enlightenment tradition which was the crucible of many philosophical developments, including the production of foundational texts of western feminism like Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Women". Lives informed by reason and not lived solely in the light of faith demonstrates confidence, a spirit of enquiry and is a sign of modernity, especially when viewed in contrast to other Hindu and Indian women of her time. Proof of her independence is amply available in her letters, Where she says that, "I have long since taken all matters which concern me into my own hands, and shall, by no means, let others lay a hand on my liberty. (Shah 1977:50-51) Her propensity to challenge imperialism, Anglican Christianity for its patriarchal tendency, put her aeons ahead of many women of her time and exemplifies a prototype of the new modern woman. She is sharply critical of a tendency, prevalent among many Christians to learn about Hinduism with the sole purpose of pinpointing the errors of Hinduism. (Bapat 1995:237)

Most accounts of Ramabai's life, writings and cultural practices, emphasize that her conversion, stay in England did not change her food habits or lifestyle. She had welded Hindu womanhood with the spirit of rational intellectual enquiry, in a context where the latter was often seen as a western/masculinist prerogative. Even in her trips to America she strived to retain her Indianness and wrote an essay on "Indian Religion" to dispel the false misconceptions and biases informed by imperialism and racism. Her attempt to build a bridge between cultures is evident in many of her statements and writings; in her essay she attempted

to portray Hinduism sympathetically to her English readers. The charge of succumbing to being a comprador colonialist is completely unconfirmed, such labeling by society was a result of a feeling of frustration aroused by Ramabai's independent views.

Pandita Ramabai's views on the plight of Hindu women voiced in "*The High Caste Hindu Woman*" (1887) found many takers in America, where she stayed on for almost three years from March 1886 to October 1888. It was to explain the plight of her "Indian sisters" that Ramabai wrote the book which helped mobilize resources for her proposed social reform. The first edition sold 9,000 copies and there was a demand for a second edition. The book was an important milestone in the discourse on Indian womanhood, though it elicited criticism, censure and opprobrium from orthodox sections of Indian society. However, her critique also provided a blueprint to some extent about what needed to change in Indian society. Her fund raising attempts in America were much more successful. According to Kosambi, the fact that Ramabai was a Christian helped in eliciting a positive response in America and opened many doors to the elite/highest feminist circles. She addressed the historic convention, the International Council of Women held in Washington in March-April 1888, which was also attended by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and others. The contribution of many American women towards the setting up and building of Sharda Sadan and missionaries served as an entry point for American social reform activity in Western India. This exchange and interaction, though it worked well for Ramabai to some extent, came fraught with its own tensions. It set the tone and tenor for a "global sisterhood" which was located on uneven terrain and unequal terms since it was a case of Christian charity for the benefit of "heathen" sisters.

Locating and tracing the context of Ramabai's social documentation in *The High Caste Hindu Woman* and *My Testimony* offers different takes on Ramabai's life, activism and religious convictions. The first part of both cover similar ground, her early life with its share of hardships, losses. Yet we can see one as a preface and preamble to another, although the orientation, direction and focus might seem to vary. *The High Caste Hindu Woman* is outwardly directed, sharply critical and persuasive in its depth of observation and frequency of its anecdotal evidence. Ramabai's insider-outsider status makes her a constant traveler, translator of her own experience. The urge in both the writings is to express but each narrative is tethered to a different cause. In the former, on which lies her claim to both fame and notoriety-fame on the international stage and criticism at home, lies the most thoroughgoing critique of Indian religious and social norms. It is temporally relevant in the context of the

1880s as well. It was a decade that was witness to the Rakhmabai case, “The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood” by Mrs Marcus B. Fuller and the contentious Age of Consent debates -so Ramabai’s writing, though the best known work of this genre, is certainly not the only critique of its kind.

My Testimony, in contrast, is much more inward looking and is not so much about any denomination or school of Christian belief as it is about her personal and deepening engagement with Christ. It is a much shorter piece and it ends like an extended monologue. The biographical facts offered in both the texts are the same-the family background of being ‘nomadic’ scholars exposed to many influences, while being grounded in the Vedic doctrinal-textual-scriptural tradition, the deaths of many family members in the famine which swept through Maharashtra and others parts of India throughout the latter half of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th.

This essay offering a brief overview of Ramabai’s life and work approaches her life, work and contribution to social causes in a threefold way. It attempts to locate her history within the rubric/template of feminism and gender representation and recuperate her as a foremother of Indian feminism. In recapitulating her many journeys, it is tempting to point out the contrast between the journeys of male political leaders like Gandhi or spiritual leaders like Swami Vivekanand and Ramabai’s journeys. This neglect begs the question about gender blindness and social judgment, issues that Pandita Ramabai had to contend and grapple with, through much of her life. Third, her critique of Hindu Brahmanical patriarchies and conversion raised the hackles of many leaders like B.G.Tilak. She was accused of betraying her country, religion and culture. Refuting /rejecting the charge of being a comprador colonialist, Dr Rachel Bodley’s introduction to Ramabai’s polemical tract clearly makes a point:

Ramabai is not an iconoclast. She loves her nation with a pure, strong love. But her love had reached the height where it is akin to the motive of a skillful surgeon: she dares to inflict pain because she regards pain as affording the only sure means of relief. Moreover, she is satisfied that India cannot arise and take her place among the nations of the earth until she, too, has mothers, until the Hindujenana is transformed into the Hindu home (Bodley, 1887, p. vi)

Bodley's introduction includes Ramabai's opinions on female education which were articulated/expressed in response to the Hunter Education Committee in September 1882 (Malhotra 2016:200). Ramabai's responses provide ample evidence of her grasp of issues, the practical, positive aspect of her agenda and the realization that Indian women need female teachers and doctors to train and look after them.(ibid xiv) Her protest against the denial of educational opportunities and medical care to women is reminiscent of Anandibai's Joshee's public protest in February 1883 against similar issues (ibid xiv) Further, "she seeks to reach Hindu women as Hindus, ...she would make no conditions as to reading the Bible...but to put within their reach ...the Bible and the sacred books of the East"(ibid, xviii)

Pandita Ramabai's Social Critique as Life Writing

Pandita Ramabai's critique *The High Caste Hindu Woman* is not the story of her own life, but a documentation of the lives of upper class-caste women, although *My Testimony* draws on her own life. To a lesser extent, as I have shown, so does *The High Caste Hindu Woman*. How then do we bring them into the fold of lifewriting or autobiography? In other words, to what extent can Ramabai's social critique justify itself as an autobiography?

Central to autobiography and Ramabai's critique is an overwhelming concern with selfhood and identity, its condition, its development and the space for its articulation. As Ruchi Mehra points out, the "emphasis is on the common oppression of Indian women who have been suppressed for long under exploitative ideologies and structures...the writing subject's sharp critique of existing norms and customs reflects an emerging female perspective." Further, Ramabai's writing is "concerned with a study of women with explicit reference to the West; her writing is characterized by a conscious struggle to compare the traditional and the progressive models of femininity in order to arrive at a new definition of the female self. (Mehra, 2000: 1)

It is this active agential notion of the "female self" that could be the matter of feminist historiography. The social critique offered by Ramabai should be assimilated and incorporated in histories of reform which has often been a male-stream one, with men the agents and women the relatively passive subjects-and beneficiaries- of reform. The fact was that Ramabai was giving voice to an issue already raised in public discourse by numerous voices should be factored in here. Thus Rakhmabai's letters to *The Times of India* (Sept 1885), social reformer

Malabari's *Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood in India: Being a Collection of Opinions, for and Against* (1887) and the bitter age of consent debates were, not coincidentally, happening around the same time.

Although her reform work was a source of alarm to many contemporary reformers (presumably male) because it resonated with the critical discourse of Christian missionaries and evangelicals, a necessary distinction or clarification could be made. Although critical of attempts to valorise Hindu womanhood, Ramabai's ethical concern about representing the condition of Hindu women and discovering her inner voice in Christ and space in Christianity did not necessarily mean that she approved of or consented to imperialism. The tendency to conflate ethical and political concerns should be avoided.

To sum up, Ramabai's life demonstrates sweeping sea-changes and contains complexities as she journeyed and transitioned from one faith to another. Further, in the light of recent developments in Disability Studies, it is possible to study Ramabai's increasing deafness from the point of view of Disability Studies. Another aspect of her life is the narrative of Ramabai in her maternal role. The narrative of her travel with her very young daughter, Manorama and the fact that the young Manorama, at the age of six, was travelling alone across continents, has been noted, though probably not studied in detail. Given the recent interest in migration, movement and studies on transnational identities, studying a life may well be like peeling an onion—it is in the layers that meaning/s unfold/s or ultimately resides and gets interpreted.

Conclusions

In a context of marginalisation and oppression, social critique becomes an expression of collective anguish of the oppressed, and can be seen as the autobiography of the oppressed. The luxury of streamlining their life to follow the formal and generic requirements of memoir or autobiography is not open to many segments of society and a narrowly puristic approach misses the point. Like the Dalit histories/(life)writings invoked in the introduction with reference to Carlo Ginzberg, which, in a sense, leapfrog over the formal, literary aspects or hurdles of style, appropriate subject or subject-matter, Ramabai's life and life narrations, both

autobiography, biographies and critiques should be released from the straitjacket of mainstream history to be a subject of women's history or feminist historiography.

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