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Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia

Siobhan Lambert-Hurley

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In *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia*, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley aptly poses questions central to the exploration of South Asian women life writers: "*who writes when?*" and "*why?*" (58–59; italics in original). These critical questions get to the heart of Lambert-Hurley's historical approach to surveying over 200 examples of South Asian women's life writing: her inquiry shifts the traditional and historical definition of the archive from a colonial library to the interior world of *zenana* women's spaces. Cutting along socioeconomic lines, Lambert-Hurley's exploration of the private lives and writings of South Asian Muslim women, particularly from marginalized backgrounds, offers a refreshing take on women writers who had previously been silenced in national discourses. Ever mindful of Gayatri Spivak's famous methodology of "measuring the silences," Lambert-Hurley expertly uncovers layers of women's writing previously not discussed. This is not to say that silence exists in an existential vacuum, but rather, if we were to expand our definition of the archive, we would find a rich tapestry of narratives previously ignored, missed, or denied value. Indeed, what is intriguing about this work is that Lambert-Hurley paints a vivid picture that moves the archive from the familiarly cold contours of the British Library to the lesser known warm

terrain of “the home, the market, the street” (39). Borrowing from Antoinette Burton’s methodology, Lambert-Hurley also views her subjects as “dwelling in the archive” (qtd. in Lambert-Hurley 39).¹ In so doing, she strives to create a feminist project that focuses on autobiographical writings belonging to South Asian Muslim women, and she succeeds in drawing attention to voices that refuse to be stigmatized for speaking out.

The impetus for writing such a narrative stems from Lambert-Hurley’s desire to spotlight the power of South Asian Muslim women’s writings. For her, the uncovering of such examples “offers a means of restoring agency and subjectivity—even if the historical conditions under which that agency and subjectivity were constituted need to be identified, understood, and problematized” (2). In her first chapter, Lambert-Hurley surveys the definition and production of autobiographical material by South Asian women, spanning from the Mughal Period to the contemporary era, to disprove the colonial notion that autobiography is the “exclusive creation of the modern West” (Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley qtd. in Lambert-Hurley 13). Rather cleverly, Lambert-Hurley autobiographically introduces her own meditations on South Asian women’s autobiographies while detailing her methodology in determining what constitutes the personal writings of South Asian Muslim women (31). At the outset, the author wants to pursue “personal narratives,” but ultimately settles on “autobiographical writing” to show the “instability of genre while still evoking . . . a focus on the written life” (55). In doing so, she sets out to disrupt the Western canon of autobiographical writing by presenting South Asian Muslim women writers in a “new, globalized history of the field” (55). Throughout this process, she delivers an important point with her applied methodology: autobiographical writing was not limited to white, European men, particularly when looking beyond traditional definitions of both life writing and the archive.

The archive, therefore, becomes a liminal space between public and private, which Lambert-Hurley points out has been demarcated by gender in India. The author employs Burton’s expanded definition of the archive as a methodology to show how South Asian Muslim women have been writing long before and more prolifically than previously considered. Thus, she upends the notion that autobiographies are “essentially European” (14). Her reference to Islamic life writing, or *sira*, as evidenced in the early compilations recording the life of the Prophet Muhammad during the seventh century, is useful here. This historical example, she argues, establishes a mode of narration that predates European notions of autobiography, since *siras* recorded the “exemplary life, whether of one of the Prophet’s Companions, a Sufi shaikh, or a notable ‘*alim*, was to offer a model of Islamic practice for every ‘Ordinary’ Muslim to become . . . ‘living hadith’” (35).

In addition to discussing what constitutes autobiography, and where it is written, Lambert-Hurley expertly presents her chief argument for focusing on women writers in Chapter 1. As Lambert-Hurley has found, while men tended to focus on the self, women were more connected to their familial networks and

communities (52). Those familiar with women's life writing can attest to the idea that with women's memoirs, the reader often receives a more holistic picture of the community surrounding the female storyteller, often not the case in men's autobiographical narratives, as Leigh Gilmore, Cynthia Huff, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson have demonstrated.

In chapter 2, Lambert-Hurley pays careful attention to *who* is writing, their education, status, and the access that they have towards literacy. The autobiographies that would have survived or existed during the modern period would have been penned by the upper or middle classes with "relative privilege" (67), who would have been granted a more secular education, since many girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were merely schooled to read the Quran (59). These autobiographical works allowed newly middle-class women to situate themselves in relation to the previous nobles who had been penning memoirs and solidifying their status, while at the same time ignoring the lives of the commoners below them. Ultimately, she finds that courtly women, educationalists, writers, politicians, performers, in addition to the truly exceptional, were writing and recording their autobiographies. She bookends her overview of Muslim women writers with examples ranging from historical princesses to the more recent Malala Yousafzai, who courageously demanded education from—and was shot by—the Taliban (75).

Chapter 3 explores *where* women were writing and in which language, while Chapter 4 investigates *how* they were producing their works. Lambert-Hurley offers an insightful overview of how partition changed the production of autobiographical writing. Bangladesh, she finds, has the most available memoirs, though there are memoirs scattered all over Pakistan and India. Since Urdu was considered a literary language and the most common for Muslims, she determines it to be the most popular language of memoirs, followed by Hindi, Bengali, English, and regional languages. What I find most compelling is her focus on the reader and the audience for which the works were written. Like Lambert-Hurley and Amina Yaqin, I have also found that a text like Mukhtar Mai's *In the Name of Honor*, written in English for Euro-American audiences, is expected to offer a "devastating indictment of women's role in Muslim society," which also accounts for its popularity (Yaqin qtd. in Lambert-Hurley 115). Through her geographical and linguistic mapping of who is writing, Lambert-Hurley ultimately complicates narrative trends concerning South Asian Muslim women writers. In many cases, regional culture impacted the popularity of autobiographical writing as a mode of expression for Muslim women writers, particularly for those belonging to smaller sects and communities wishing to resist marginalization (121). Highlighting the audience and narrator relationship, she notes that "just as the audience plays an active role in receiving and interpreting the autobiographical act, so does the author, in effect, *perform* her life with a particular audience in mind" (123).

The fourth chapter successfully engages in questions of production, authorship, and audience, particularly as they relate to regionalisms and power structures

left over from colonialism. From travelogues to women's journals to traditional autobiographies, the works range from communal conversations to solitary reflections. As is the case with many memoirs, the author notes how male editors shaped and cut down autobiographical writing. In addition to case studies about how editing, co-writing, and translating influence women's narratives, the author notes how publishers also impacted autobiographical writing trends by encouraging works by and for Muslim women. This is an issue that resonates today with respect to the publication of Muslim women's autobiographies. She notes that, at the time, social reform was impacted by increased autobiographical writings that justified the social ascent of middle-class families through embellishment. What is striking here is that alongside these marketing and publishing trends, the promotion of women's narratives for female audiences stems from an earlier Victorian sensibility and mode of writing often seen through the period: the recording and publishing of diaries as "appropriately feminine" (139).

To explain the varied process of production for Muslim women autobiographical writers, Lambert-Hurley invokes performance as a framework for theorizing the relationship between staging and selfhood. She asserts, "Regarding the author as a performative subject—an artiste acting out her life story . . . enables an appreciation of how each rendition of a life story may be tailored *to* and *by* audience, literary milieu, or historical moment" (153). Through this analogy, a network of actors impacting autobiographical writing becomes clear: "the publisher as director, coauthors as scriptwriters, editors and translators as stagehands, the audience as reviewer" means that autobiography becomes less monologue and more "theatrical production" full of performances and stage directions (154). This is worth noting, as it counters a Lejeunian sensibility that the act of autobiography is a solitary "retrospective narrative in prose that *someone* makes of his own existence" (Lejeune qtd. in Lambert-Hurley 152). At this point in her text, Lambert-Hurley has organized her chapters around central questions of inquiry and numerous case studies to bolster her findings. As a literary specialist at times I crave in-depth close readings of just a few texts, but as a lifewriting scholar I appreciate the in-depth focus of methodology and the presentation of results concerning so many case studies throughout the first four chapters of this book.

Those seeking deeper analysis of just one case study will be amply rewarded in Chapter 5, wherein the author discusses autobiographical form and content as it relates to both gender and history via life writing produced by the Tyabji family of Bombay. Ranging from "family diaries, travelogues, speeches, memoirs, autobiographies, and articles" dating from the 1850s to the present, the Tyabji men and women engaged in every sort of life writing (157). When evaluating their memoirs, Lambert-Hurley finds several motifs regarding women writers from the family, namely those concerning partition, nationality, regional and cultural identities, motherhood, sexuality, and belonging as it relates to locating home (157). Other themes include social mobility and status, particularly for the men of the family attempting to cement their position as educated and elite (159). While

Lambert-Hurley surveys the many topics Tyabji men and women wrote about, it is her attention to politics and gendered differences that are striking. She attempts to trace the subtle differences as recorded by men and women in relation to the same events, noting that Tyabji women's writings were not as politically charged as their male counterparts'. The women's entries tended to focus on places visited, drawing rooms sat in, and English gardens strolled through. Yet, Safia Tyabji's travel writing offers one of the most revealing critiques concerning British ignorance of Indian culture presented in Lambert-Hurley's text. Most surprising to Safia, but surely not to the reader, is the average Briton's stereotyping of Indian women, exclaiming, "There were many who were fully surprised to find an Indian woman . . . able to walk about, and go about in their moving staircases. . . . Alas they are under the impression that Indian ladies generally lie on durwans [divans] in gorgeous apparel . . . surrounded by wealth and luxury!" (167). Safia's use of perfect English throughout her writing undercuts British stereotypes about Indians, but it also records Indian expertise about the British before partition. The British view unsurprisingly casts Indian women as weak and opulent, bearing the worst imprints of an orientalist rendering.

Moving onto other Tyabji examples, Lambert-Hurley emphasizes one that is notable and resonant with current-day audiences, namely the work of Sohaila Abdulali, who penned a two-page confessional piece for the feminist magazine *Manushi*, which detailed her gang rape in Chembur, near Bombay over thirty years prior. The piece resurfaced and went viral in 2013 after the infamous "Delhi gang rape case" as a classic testimonial, which was later expanded on in two separate articles for the *New York Times* and *The Guardian* (184). As Lambert-Hurley expertly notes, Abdulali's essay further complicates the already complex terrain of Indian sociopolitical issues by pairing personal revelation of experienced trauma with outward accusation of the police for mishandling her case. In all, the Tyabji family, who spilled over into other genres of writing in the contemporary era, has significantly contributed to the diverse genre of life writing, making this a rich case study for Lambert-Hurley to evaluate.

Some contemporary scholars may challenge Lambert-Hurley's use of unveiling as a metaphorical act of disclosure for South Asian Muslim women writers, as evident when she lauds autobiographical writing as "*the ultimate unveiling*" (193; emphasis in original). Lambert-Hurley uses unveiling as a concept to describe the act of autobiographical writing, noting, "To write autobiography . . . perhaps even one's thoughts and feelings—is thus to transcend the most severe limits on bodies and voices alike: to break the silences, to move beyond the boundaries of permitted discourse, to make the unseen visible" (192). This is not altogether inappropriate, since she makes this assessment after surveying South Asian women's memoirs meditating on *pardah* (the veil), life narratives that question whether to maintain, reform, or banish it altogether. While the act of unveiling in a predominately veiled society is a "dramatic and daring" one (189), the link between unveiling with

positive autobiographical disclosure and veiling with negative narrative concealment for South Asian Muslim women seems a hasty generalization. It is possible that Lambert-Hurley creates this assessment based on her sample of those who were *pardahnashin* (veiled) and writing, but there are times when more evidence is warranted to correlate veiling practices with modes of autobiographical disclosure (192). To make this argument, Lambert-Hurley employs Farzaneh Milani's view on veiling in post-revolutionary Iran, wherein "The concrete, the specific, and the personal are also veiled. Communication is veiled. Words and feelings are veiled" (Milani qtd. in Lambert-Hurley 7). This implies that veiling is linked to the lack of women's autobiographical writing as a mode of discourse in Iran. But, as Milani notes in "Veiled Voices: Women's Autobiographies in Iran," cultural norms could also have contributed to the absence of autobiographical production. Proverbs recommending one should "save face," "protect appearances," and "keep the face red with a slap" were commonly used in Iran, even before compulsory veiling laws came into effect (9). Lambert-Hurley applies this idea to the South Asian context to determine how Muslim women of her study might have equated privacy with the concealment of ideas in a "veiled society" (192).² Yet, while this might describe *some* in her text, there is a risk that it can be read as reinforcing negative western views about veiling, which depict it as inhibiting agency for *all*.

Despite the ambiguity of these few moments, this ambitious work succeeds in discussing South Asian Muslim women's autobiographical writing around carefully posed questions concerning women's motivations for writing. The author must be commended for not only presenting her survey of rarely cited and found works, but also her meticulous attention to methodology and awareness of her own privilege and positionality as a white, educated "western" woman crossing personal boundaries. Ultimately, the text is triumphant, not only because of the sheer number of works it surveys, but for opening up spaces beyond the traditional archive. In so doing, *Elusive Lives* innovatively expands upon what is considered autobiographical form and literary production by South Asian Muslim women, and proves that they engaged in life writing long before Europeans claimed exclusivity to autobiographical modalities of self-representation.

Notes

1. Drawing heavily from Antoinette Burton's seminal work, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, Lambert-Hurley uses two key ideas from her text. Firstly, the "archive" is "the source of evidence from which each woman produced historical accounts of life in colonial India" (Burton 5). Secondly, the "archive" consists of memories of home and family that are themselves an archive of "counter histories of colonial modernity." Ultimately, Burton emphasizes "the importance of home as both a material archive for history and a very real political figure in an extended moment of historical crisis" (5).

2. There are many reasons for Iranian women's lack of autobiographical production throughout the twentieth century, many of which had to do with government control, censorship, and/or a cultural outlook of "saving face." Conversations about Iranian veiling laws and attitudes are too complex to discuss here. For further reading, see Nima Naghibi, Chandra Mohanty et al., Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, Mohja Kahf, and Gillian Whitlock for discussions about Muslim women, their perceptions of veiling, and the veil's relationship to cultural production (if any).

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