

When women broke the mould: Profeminism and gender equality in Vandana Mishra's *I, the Salt Doll*

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Vandana Mishra's autobiography *I, the Salt Doll* which was originally published as *Mee Mithaachi Baahuli* in Marathi in 2014 and translated by Jerry Pinto in 2016. It attempts to analyze the concept of profeminism by unfolding some significant sociocultural reformations in women's lives in the colonial metropolis of Mumbai. The study explores how a section of women revolted against the rigid gender norms to assert themselves in the public realm. It also concentrates on the miserable plight of widows who adopted the nursing profession. This paper features how male stalwarts, in those days, advocated not only for the upliftment of women through education, but also championed women's involvement in theatres. The study employs narrative analysis and highlights how profeminism can be useful to unearth Vandana Mishra's mother's strenuous challenge against regressive gender stereotypes surrounding female education and nursing profession while setting an example for women of the next generation to follow.

Keywords: profeminism, feminism, widowhood, patriarchy, autobiography

Introduction

Literary texts primarily consist of language and culture, wherein language serves as a vehicle for presenting cultural dynamics (Lovrović and Kolega 2018, 266; Trivedi 2007, 280 and Thompson 2016, 3). Even though language and culture are integrally related, they are regionally diverse (Deka 2020, 1121; Guo 2012, 343; and Imami et

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al. 2021, 180). In this respect, translation blurs cultural and linguistic barriers and makes the texts available to a wider audience whose lingua franca is English. The dominant ideology of mainstream society not only influences the translator's background but also constrains translation activities (Bian and Li 2021, 443). The translator navigates the background of the source text to comprehend the implications of the text concerned (Postan 2020). Precisely, the translator's task is to bring the nuances of indigenous culture and gender relations into the mainstream knowledge systems. Khadka (2022) has opined that since many women writers are not proficient in English, they articulate themselves in their mother tongue. The myriad experiences of women are recorded in regional languages instead of English. Murthy (2019) has argued that translation into English or any other language opens windows to women's trials and tribulations, which have remained unheard of for a long time. On the other hand, by laying bare the gender dynamics and the lesser-known facts about women's lives in public, translation draws readers' attention to autobiographies of female actors. Saha (2016, 125) has commented that the suppressed voices of women as embedded in the texts come into the limelight through translation. According to Jabeen (2021, 67), translations of women's writings, especially autobiographies, add critical insights into women's hopes, fears, aspirations, and failures, which substantially deepen our understanding of their life experiences. This paper aims to concentrate on the female actor Vandana Mishra's autobiography *I, the Salt Doll*, which was originally published as *Mee Mithaachi Baahuli* in Marathi in 2014 and translated by Jerry Pinto in 2016. The study employs narrative analysis and highlights how the female actors strived to establish their positions and express themselves despite the rigid patriarchal norms predominant in the nineteenth century.

The autobiographies of the female actors revealing their struggles against the prevalent patriarchal ideologies in the context of colonial India have invited several critics to engage in multiple critical debates. Several critics have focused on these translated autobiographies while adopting feminist analysis. Dandapat has explored how the Bengali actor Binodini Dasi's autobiographies *My Story* (1912) and *My Life as an Actress* (1924-25) designated her position as a female actor and talked about the miserable plight of women in Bengali society (2015, 142-151). On the other hand, while studying the autobiographies- *You Ask, I Tell* (2013) and *I, Durga Khote* (2006), Bhat (2017, 83) has highlighted relationships between two distinct star icons in private and

public spheres while contextualizing the politics of stardom. Pandey (2019) has concentrated on the historicity of performance along with the spatiality of self in Vandana Mishra's *I, the Salt Doll*, and Hansa Wadkar's *You Ask, I Tell*. Scholarly engagements and academic discourses on autobiographies by the active female actors in the colonial era have not yet explored the concept of protofeminism as reflected in colonial India. While situating the autobiography within the theoretical framework of protofeminism, the paper aims to explore how Vandana Mishra succinctly portrayed the miserable plight of widows and nurses in the male-dominated society, mainly in the nineteenth century, through her mother's voice.

Theorizing protofeminism

Protofeminism is a kind of philosophical tradition where modern feminist ideas are anticipated even though such concepts were not formally defined (Botting and Houser 2006, 265-276). In her critical book *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), Toril Moi was believed to have coined the term 'protofeminism.' Dammann-Matthews (2014, 7) commented that 'proto' means before, so 'proto-feminism' came into existence while defining women who had pioneering qualities before the feminist movement took place. While feminism refers to the idea that women should access the same privilege as men, protofeminism indicates a period of feminism when the term 'feminism' did not gain currency and when the women's movement was initially started (Wong 2015, 2). 'Protofeminism' also denotes women's behaviors, activities, or attitudes that influenced, expressed, and accomplished change that promoted equality. Mohamed & Mohamed (2018/2019, 4) have opined that the feminists involved in various movements concerning women's rights in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are better understood as under 'proto-feminist' term as the wide use of the word 'feminism' did not come into use until the 1970s. The protofeminists were the persons preceding but anticipating or laying the groundwork for feminism. They struggled strenuously against the hierarchical power relations to exercise their agency. They bravely fought for women's rights to education and their active participation in public workspaces. Indeed, they paved the way for the coming generation to follow their ideals (Bajpai 2021).

The concept of protofeminism has been used in Indian academia, even though it has not been used to examine how women in the nineteenth century protested against the patriarchal moral codes for the

articulation of their selves in the public sphere as exemplified in the translated autobiographies of Indian female actors. In her autobiography, the female actor Vandana Mishra narrated how women of her mother's generation, including nurses and homemakers, had challenged the status quo in various pioneering ways when widows, nurses, and female actors had to face obstacles in both private and public spheres.

Patriarchal domination of widows in colonial India

In the autobiography, Vandana Mishra narrated various women's issues, such as child marriage and the miserable plight of widows. Devi (2018, 1196) has opined that child marriage led to the ill-treatment of many innocent and ignorant young brides, as she highlighted, "My mother was fifteen when she got married" (Mishra 2016, 2). Her mother's early marriage and her father's death increased the family's misery. On the advice of her relatives, Vandana Mishra's mother, with her three children, visited the ancestral house in Adivre. Here, her mother had to live as a widow shaving her head and desisting from participating in sociocultural activities. Furthermore, her mother's engagement in the household chores of one of her relatives restricted her to the marginalized status.

"Widowhood was perceived as a disrupter of social order and a potential violation of the moral order" (Chakravarti 1995, 2248). Widows had to suffer political, social, cultural, and economic hardships. The widows had also to experience a sense of despair about the emotional stress that resulted from their husband's death and the challenges they had to undertake in fulfilling the basic amenities of the households. To pay off the debt, Aai, the mother of Vandana Mishra, had to resort to unpaid domestic work for survival and, at the same time, suffered from financial insecurity. The widows had to undertake several duties as child-raiser, homemakers, decision-makers, caregivers, and breadwinners. After her father's death, her mother prohibited herself from consuming sweets and attending festivals. Indian family was generally patriarchal in structure (Grace and Sarah 2021). Widows in Vandana Mishra's mother's times had no choice of sitting and sharing secrets with men. A widow suffered helplessly at the hands of a patriarchal figure. Older men in a patriarchal family were in charge of decision-making and acted as protectors of female members. Shakaram Appa, her father's maternal uncle, was one of the authoritative figures in the patriarchal family as referred to in the

autobiography: “We had to live according to Appa’s rules. His was the last word in that house. He kept everyone in a state of fear” (Mishra 2016, 5). Besides the stringent ambience in Appa’s house, women did not hold inherited property. Mukund (1999, 1353) commented that women failed to inherit the property of their parents and husbands because the patriarchal norms tended to keep the property intact within the ownership of the patrilineal family. Aai, the mother of Vandana Mishra, was also deprived of a share of the commonly-held ancestral home in Adivre. Conferring jewelry on women during their marriages signaled the decline of their property rights in their fathers’ houses. “We had a share in this house, Aai said (Or something like that). Shakaram Appa was enraged. ‘Don’t talk about your share. Your ornaments should be enough” (Mishra 2016, 5). Having received no financial assistance and emotional support from her in-laws, she opted nursing, which was suitable for a widow. Her mother’s endeavors to resist the norms of widowhood by leaving her in-law’s house and choosing the profession of a nurse in the city of colonial Mumbai exemplify the protests of a protofeminist as manifested in the autobiography.

Many of the female candidates who chose the nursing profession in colonial India were orphans, insolvents, or widows because they had no other option to undertake (Healey 2011, 60). “Widowed, orphaned and abandoned women were seen as suitable for the nursing or teaching professions” (Mishra 2016, 9). But, the association of widows with the medical profession was a contested issue as they were stigmatized severely in the patriarchal society. Nursing seemed to be one of the noblest professions, but in reality, it had no moral or social acceptability. As the narrator stated, many people were hypocritical toward nurses: “Nurses are called ‘Sister’ but in reality, they are seen as women who clean shit and piss of patients” (Ibid., 87). Vandana Mishra’s mother was one of the leading ladies who took up the nursing profession, suggesting her commitment to the principles which promoted equality. Besides depicting the miserable plight of widows and nurses, she brings out how the dissemination of knowledge awakened new consciousness among some women in colonial Mumbai. Her emergence as a professional nurse in those days amidst strict gender norms encouraged other women to choose this field, flouting the strict binary of the private and the public spheres. Vandana Mishra also stated that Aai’s (her mother’s) widowhood and her association with the nursing profession might even lead to an acid

attack on her. The unsavory incident happened when “Aai was on night duty” (Mishra 2016, 84). After this tragic accident, her family lost financial stability and it compelled her to leave her education keeping in view the extra expenses.

Advocacy for female education and profeminist ideologies

Vandana Mishra pointed out how social reformists such as “Mahatma, Phule, Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade, Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Sindhe, Maharishi Dhondo Keshav Karve had all contributed to the reform of Maharashtrian society” (Mishra 2016, 15). They also supported the upliftment of women through education, as it is revealed: “They had shown the way for the education of all classes and castes, for the education of women too” (Ibid.). As Anagol-McGinn (1994, 191) noted down, these intellectuals argued that since women's illiteracy pushed them to be the victims of social conditions, they needed to be educated. The author also revealed that the city of Bombay played a crucial role in harboring social reformation for women and spreading it to the rest of Maharashtra. Besides, the progressive ideologies of these nationalists encouraged women to pursue education and profession; for example, Vandana Mishra's mother, after casting off the life of a widow, started her career in nursing. Their educational ideals also instilled in her a sense of strong fortitude: “Education had given her a new self-confidence, I could see” (Mishra 2016, 58). Vandana Mishra also referred to Mama Warerkar as one of male stalwarts who “believed that women should be educated and progress in every field” (Ibid., 102). According to Mohindra et al. (2012, 5), predominantly female children had to leave schooling to assist their mothers with family responsibilities. Many women in her mother's times thought education might bring their emancipation and help them assert their selves by contesting the hegemonic male ideologies, as manifested in the autobiography: “In those days, many women began to demand an education. This has had an impact on Maharashtra's society that cannot be underestimated” (Mishra 2016, 63). Vandana Mishra's mother considered the value of education and wanted her children to be well-educated, indicating her effort to subvert the gender bias associated with education. “Aai wanted all of us to study up to the matriculation level at least” (Ibid., 4). On the other hand, the patriarchal authority in the family never intended to allow girls to study, so that they could not question the prevailing gender norms. It has been discussed when the narrator highlights the

issue: “What’s the point of educating girls. They’re supposed to help with the housework” (Mishra 2016, 4). Her mother fought bravely against Sakharam’s (Vandana Mishra’s father’s maternal uncle) gender-biased ideologies of education.

Although Vandana Mishra’s mother was “largely unlettered” (Mishra 2016, 63) as she had to leave schooling early, she understood the importance of women being educated or acquiring skills was conducive to boosting their independence. Her self-awareness regarding the prerequisite skills for attaining agency pushed her to train as a midwife. She also convinced her daughter to either study or hone some skills, as expressed in the autobiography: “Education, she believed, would help you make the best of yourself. If you could not study for some reason, you should acquire a skill or a craft (Ibid., 89). She expressed her firm conviction that lack of education reinforced not only regressive ideologies but also increased acute misery in women’s lives. Only “through further education” (Ibid., 63) women could improve their degraded condition and reclaim their rights in public sphere. She regretted the incompleteness of education of her daughter and reflected in her words: “I felt so bad that Babi (Vandana Mishra) could not study” (Ibid., 89). Besides contesting the existing gender stereotypes about female education, the mother of Vandana Mishra desired all her daughters to be educated and thereby carve a space in the male-dominated society. Conforming to the progressive ideals of her mother, Kashi, the elder sister of Vandana Mishra, was enrolled in “the Sassoon Hospital, training to be a nurse” (Ibid., 58).

Espousing the introduction of women’s roles in theatres by male stalwarts

Sticking to notions of respectability, the Gujarati theatre did not allow women to execute roles on stage. It instead introduced female impersonation on stage for public entertainment. Like in Marathi theatre, female impersonation lost popularity on the Gujarati stage because of the demands for the realistic representation of female characters (Mitra 2015, 308). “The age of female impersonators was over”, and “theatre had to change with the times” (Mishra 2016, 102). The increasing popularity of theatrical performances and the presence of female actors popularized the Gujarati theatre. The question of morality and sexuality became intertwined in performances by female actors. Women performers who dared to engage in these theatres were stigmatized because it was thought that “girls from good families

should not go into films” (Ibid., 162). The female actors appeared to be influential personalities on stage but they faced disgraceful situations outside. “A Kalavant (actress) is fine on stage and in the night. But when she’s cleaning her teeth with tobacco in the morning. Who needs such a sight?” went a common saying” (Mishra 2016, 49). Many male stalwarts of society, like Mama Warekar and Dada Altekar, protested against such prejudices about women’s engagement in theatres.

The enthusiastic spirit of Mama Warekar had brought about some reformation in apparently stagnant Gujarati and Marathi theatres. “Mama’s encouragement brought a whole host of women to the stage: Sindhu Gadgil, Gulab Center, Kanchanmala Shirodkar, Girjabai Kelkar” (Mishra 2016, 102). The narrator describes Mama Warekar as one of the feminists she met in her professional career. Setting aside the prevailing gender norms of discrimination, Mama Warekar argued that “women should act in plays” (Ibid.). He greatly influenced the professional career of a famous director Parshwanath Yeshwant Altekar who also championed women’s roles on stage. “Dada Altekar had great devotion to Mama Warekar. Dada took part in whatever Mama did” (Ibid., 99). At an early age, Vandana Mishra was encouraged by Dada Altekar to join the Little Theatre Group, trained as an accomplished actor, and later performed in Gujarati and Marathi theatres. She expressed her indebtedness to Mama Warekar and Dada Altekar for providing women a platform to empower themselves: “If these women ventured on to the stage, it was because of Mama and Altekar” (Ibid., 102). Furthermore, both the male stalwarts’ support of female roles on stage indicated their allegiance to the principles of equality.

Conclusion

The translation of the autobiography reveals how Vandana Mishra’s mother’s glorious achievement in the nursing profession in those times became an exemplar for women of the next generation to follow. The defiance of her mother to the stringent rules of widowhood and her mother’s advocacy for female education amidst the hegemonic male ideologies exemplify the nuances of protofeminism as reflected in the autobiography. While giving a clear portrait of the miserable plight of widows, the paper discusses the degraded condition of nurses in the context of colonial India. Along with unraveling the prejudices among many persons towards the inclusion of female actors to perform female roles in theatres, the paper refers to the contribution of Mama

Warerkar and Dada Altekar in paving the way for women performers on stage. While using the concept of profeminism, the paper concentrates on the strenuous struggle women of her mother's generation had to undergo. In this respect, the study unearths new avenues and adds new scholarship to exploring gender relations in colonial Mumbai.

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