

Dynamics of History & Social Realism in Parvati Athavale's *My Story: Autobiography of a Hindu Widow*

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Abstract

The paper aims to focus on the social reformer Parvati Athavale's autobiography *My Story: Autobiography of a Hindu Widow* (translated from Marathi into English in 1996) and highlights the miserable plight of widows in colonial Maharashtra. The study looks into how male and female reformers took the initiative to improve widows' conditions by providing them with facilities for education, training, and homes. The autobiography unfolds a historical portrait of child marriage, child widowhood, and widow remarriage. Considering this autobiography as a primary source, the paper uses the concept of 'autobiography as a source of history' to demonstrate the social and cultural reformations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also employs the idea of 'social realism' to unveil the real-life experiences of the narrator and the condition of women in those days, as reflected in the account.

Keywords: autobiography, gender, history, widowhood, reformation, colonial Maharashtra

Introduction

In the latter half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, autobiographies by women such as Rassundari Devi, Binodini Dasi, Hansa Wadkar, Pandita Ramabai, and Lakshibai Tilak, were made available in print. These literary works reflect the social and cultural taboos that promote hegemonic male supremacy. Women's autobiographies play a vital role in bringing forth social transformation and cultural criticism (Sharma 2). In the nineteenth century, various socio-cultural transformations were conducive to uplifting women from their miserable condition. In colonial India, the evangelization goals of Christian missionaries were materialized through their efforts to introduce education, literature, and social service (Kshetre 2). Christian women were integral to the women's movement in colonial Maharashtra. They encouraged Indian women to be path-breakers by instilling their progressive ideologies in the public domain (Anagol-McGinn 59). Along with their attempts to arrange educational facilities, the social reformers paid attention to the issues of widowhood in the context of colonial Maharashtra. Atwal opined that mainstream social reformers such as Pandita Ramabai, D.K. Karve, Sasipada Banerji, and Keshav Chandra Sen introduced various reformation agendas for the Hindu widow in the wake of social and cultural modernization (9). Rachel Meyer stated that the autobiographies by Pandita Ramabai and Parvati Athavale opened up conflicting and resisting spaces in the dominant nationalist discourse relating to widowhood (28). Set in the context of social and cultural reformation in colonial Maharashtra, the paper focuses on the social reformer Parvati Athavale's autobiography *My Story: Autobiography of a Hindu Widow* (translated from Marathi into English in 1996) and highlights how widows had to endure suffering amidst patriarchal

norms. Born in 1870 in the village of Devrukh in the state of colonial Maharashtra of India, Parvati Athavale, who became a widow at a very early age, was a public lecturer on the necessity of female education and the wrongs of Hindu widowhood (Abbott, vii-viii). Before proceeding to the textual analysis, the study will explain the concepts of autobiography, history, and social realism.

Autobiography, History & Social Realism

Women's intention to write history indicates a principal factor in terms of life narrative, exhibits a representation of selfhood and unravels gender-specific details (Khan 61-62). Self-narratives such as autobiography showcase the history of a period. Autobiography is not a chronicle of memories but a historical narrative (Forguson 143). Helholz opined that autobiographical texts are a kind of historical evidence, and to some extent, they can be described as history (150). Women's autobiographies testify to the process of retrieving women's history. (140). "Autobiography is a form of history" (Forguson 140). Another critic, Animol Jacob, observed that 'autobiography as history' enriches our understanding of the past through personal narratives (1469). "An autobiography is a historical self-portrait, composed retrospectively" (Forguson 140). Memory provides autobiographers with a platform to reconstruct their life history.

In the Indian context, autobiographies can be deemed a source of history as they record first-hand experiences, offering insights into the socio-cultural and historical context of a particular period (Jacob 1466). According to Rajni Sharma, "The social upheaval got expression not only in poetry and fiction but also in the autobiographies" (3). Autobiographies portray real-life experiences of individuals as well as societal norms. It can be analysed using the realistic approach representing things as they were. Budhathoki argues that 'realism' is the depiction of a real-life in literature while excluding any romantic or ideal subjectivity (85). Society is considered to be the central concern in social realism as it represents the social life and its activities (Jha & Mukherjee 668). Although realism is related to the literary movement in nineteenth century France led by French novelists Balzac and Flaubert, George Eliot introduced it into England, and William Dean Howells imported it into the United States (Dave 11). Social realism deals with various social issues, including discrimination, prejudice, gender biases, injustice, and flaws in the marriage system. While using these critical concepts, the paper will unearth the issues of female education, child marriage, and child widowhood reflected in the select personal narrative.

Marriage, Education & Widowhood in Colonial Maharashtra

In the 1870s, there was no school for boys and girls in the village of Devrukh as no one came forward to question female education. Only girls were taught how to maintain homely responsibilities without thinking of any arrangements for female education, as narrated in the autobiography of Parvati Athavale. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, much attention was paid to the prospects of child marriage rather than to their education. Athavale sketched a social portrait of how girls were married at a young age. "At that time Hindu girls were married as early as five years of age. I was now eleven years of age. My eldest sister had been married when she was seven years of age. My other sister, Baya, had been married when nine years of age" (Athavale 8). Girls who remained unmarried even at the end of ten years were subject to social taunts. Parvati Athavale had to endure such a disgraceful situation: "Because I was now eleven years old, our neighbors would look at me and say, "What a big girl she is, and not yet married!" (Athavale 8). Her unmarried state caused social

anxiety among the neighboring women who made faces at her, as embedded in her account: “So that the women who came to our house for work or otherwise would whisper to one another, “What a big girl she is and not yet a bride!” (Athavale 8). Girls did not even understand the meaning of marriage, nor did they express their personal opinions about it. Athavale, as a girl of eleven years old, even showed her anxiety at her marriage alliance: “Girls, eleven years of age, may perhaps feel a certain joy in the thought of the music and the glare of the wedding festival, but I felt no joy” (Athavale 12). The autobiography also unveils a social picture of the dominance of parental decisions in choosing matches for their daughters: “In those days, it was not customary for the bride to see the bride-groom before marriage” (Athavale 12).

In her own words, Parvati Athavale described how the child widows had to face a miserable condition. “Child-marriages resulted in the ill-treatment of many of the ignorant and innocent young girls. Widow remarriage was forbidden, resulting in a community of child widows” (Devi 1196-1197). The narrator encountered such a situation as her husband left no property, home, and no relatives to whom she could visit. As a result, she spent her life as a widow in her parents’ house. “At this time my eldest sister, daughter-in-law of Mr. Paranjpe, was a widow, and being very seriously ill came to live at our Devrukh home” (Athavale 14). Her autobiography records how her eldest sister, as a widow, had to undergo the same condition even though her other sister, Baya, continued to reside at her mother-in-law's home after the death of her husband. Child widowhood indicated the wrongs of the patriarchal society in those times. The autobiography reveals a historical portrait of how widowhood was deemed to be a curse in the patriarchal society: “Thus with three widowed daughters our parents felt the burden of a deep sorrow” (Athavale 15).

In her personal narrative, Parvati Athavale referred to the ceremonies, including the treatment of the wife on the day of her husband’s death. She also argued that it was excruciating on the part of a widow with children. Athavale had to experience such a situation on account of the death of her husband. “It was the common idea that along with the husband’s course should go the hair and bracelets of his widow” (Athavale 15). A widow was forced to wear red sarees besides cutting her hair- an effort to make her look ugly and unsightly so that she would not come under the critical surveillance of men (Anagol-McGinn 96). The autobiography unravels how agonizing it was when a child of a widow asked about her dress codes as well as her physical appearance- a kind of social realism that the autobiography projects:

Noticing my changed and odd appearance, he used to say to me, “Why are you wearing this reddish sari, and where has your hair gone?” Overcome with emotion I would reply, “My hair has gone with your father.” To this he would say, “Then let us go where he is.” At such times the condition of my heart was such as only those can know who are widows with children. Others cannot know it. (Athavale 15).

Parvati Athavale recapitulated how female reformers in those days espoused the cause of widows and advocated for the establishment of widow homes- thus, her autobiography retrieves women’s history. After returning from America, Pandita Ramabai started a widow home known as the ‘Sharada Sadan’ as narrated in her account. “This Institution Baya (the sister of Parvati Athavale) was the first pupil. Baya had great love for Pandita Ramabai. And Pandita Ramabai showed great love for Baya, her first pupil in the Sharada Sadan” (Athavale 16). The male and female reformers encouraged the remarriage of widows to bring an end to their wretched condition. From 1856 to 1900, the reformation project shifted its focus from

widow remarriage to widows' homes (Atwal 10). Her personal narrative provides a historical context of how the progressive ideologies of these reformers inspired Parvati Athavale's father to promote widow remarriage:

When Baya became a widow at the age of nine, our father lost interest in worldly affairs and started pilgrimage to Benares. On his way he stopped at Poona. It happened that a conference had at that time been convened at Poona for the discussion of the subject of widow-remarriage. Our father was present at the conference, heard the discussion by Shastris and Pandits, and became convinced that it was right for child-widows to be remarried. (Athavale 18).

Baya's marriage with a social reformer, Professor Karve, changed the narrator's opinions. The autobiography also mentions how her father tackled the unsavoury situation that her daughter's remarriage created. The remarriage news in the Devrukh village led the family to excommunication. "Our father was not at all troubled by being put out of caste" (Athavale, 1989, p. 18). The barber and the washerman boycotted the family members of Athavale. The 'keshavapan' (head shaving) custom unfolds the acquisitive and avarice nature of the barbers and priestly classes as it provides the fee and gifts during the ceremony to benefit these classes (Anagol-McGinn 97). Her father bravely fought against the injustices shown to his family. Regarding the remarriage of Baya, her father refuted the arguments saying: "She has committed no sin in remarrying, nor we in consenting to the marriage. Let people blame me if they wish" (Athavale 18). In her own words, Athavale revealed that widow remarriage was considered a disgrace to the family. While subscribing to the regressive ideologies, her mother did not approve of the remarriage of her daughter. Her mother prohibited her from following the footsteps of her sister Baya, as reflected in the account: "If Parvati should follow your example, it will mean a stain on our family. Rather than that, it would be better for her to go on the pilgrimage and die of cholera" (Athavale 20). The personal narrative captures the stigma attached to the widow remarriage- a social reality that must be addressed. Professor Karve, the husband of Baya, took initiative in establishing a widows' home. Dhandu Keshave Karve, married to a widow in 1893, started a school for widows in Poona in 1896, where the curriculum was designed to make widows self-reliable (Kumar and Perumal 3). In this respect, he advised Parvati Athavale to obtain a Teachers' Training Certificate. Accordingly, Parvati, as a widow, started to attend the Home Class where she did not get any attention from her teacher because of her widowhood. "At that time widows with heads shaven, and other signs of widowhood, were not accustomed to go to school" (Athavale 24). Another endeavour she made to learn while visiting the house of the late Professor Agarkar where she studied with proper attention: "I there learned the alphabet, read the First Book, learned the multiplication table up to ten times fourteen and to count up to one hundred" (Athavale 23). Despite innumerable barriers that obstructed her education, Parvati Athavale, as a widow, secured "a Teachers' Training Certificate of the highest grade" (Athavale 25), which helped her get a job in a Government School at the age of twenty-six and subsequently in the Widows' Home at Hingane. Parvati Athavale, in her own words, endorses historical evidence that the issues of widowhood must deserve critical attention.

During her tenure at this home, Parvati Athavale "became especially interested in the question of the shaving of the widow's head" and stood by a widow who dared to "give up her marks of widowhood" (Athavale 28), suggesting how an autobiography represents a kind of historical self-portrait on the practices of widowhood. She challenged the predominant ideologies of widowhood while working at the Poona Home: "I allowed my hair to grow and

made a change from a widow's grab by my own free choice, but I was very seriously criticised for doing so" (Athavale 48). Parvati Athavale also asserted that the voluntary shaving off the hair of widows was a rightful religious act. She questioned the prevailing gender discrimination: "Just as a man of his own free will may renounce all worldly living and adopt the sign of a shaven head, entering into the religious order in the presence of others, so if a widow wishes to submit to a similar rite, and before the world enter into some religious order, I think she would be free to do so" (Athavale 50). Even though her opinions contradicted those of other reformers, she was committed to advocating for widowhood. "I decided that the service I could render my motherhood was service to her daughters, who had the misfortune to become widows, and to bring into their lives the rays of hope. I determined to work for the betterment of my motherland by my efforts for her widows" (Athavale 29). In this regard, she also maintained her responsibility of collecting funds for the widows' home by visiting Gorkarna and Udupi, where she had to face various misdemeanours and disparaging remarks, and thus the autobiography expresses real-life experiences. She narrated how widows were treated in the Math (Religious House) at Udupi:

Widows spend their time idly from morn until night. In that town a widow is shaven even though she may be a mere child. Widows are not allowed to eat the evening meal. Their clothes are hardly sufficient to cover themselves. The widows there have to expose their bald, shaven heads, as do the mendicants, when they go on the street. (Athavale 44).

Her autobiography is not a chronicle of memories but a historical narrative that underscores the pains of widows in colonial Maharashtra. It also discusses the socio-cultural context while disclosing the attempt of missionary ladies to arouse consciousness among Indian women through education and social service. Parvati Athavale was passionate about learning English after finishing her training course and starting a job at the Widows' Home. She brought an English primer and began her study of English. It was proposed by Dr. Khandvala in 1914 that she should be admitted to the Bandara Convent School, run by missionary ladies, so that she could learn English very quickly. As Lingaraju argued, the Christian missionaries spread the English language as a medium of instruction, resulting in the emergence of educated elite people who took the initiative in modernizing the various aspects of Indian society (770). Professor Karve's plan to make her learn English in the school yielded no results as she faced callousness from the missionary teachers. In her own words, Parvati Athavale remarks: "I soon found that I was gaining no great advantage from my stay in the Convent, and my life there began to seem too much like imprisonment" (Athavale 64). She received the same treatment when admitted to Scottish Mission School as the autobiography noted: "Even here on account of my age I could not mix with the little girls, and teacher did not pay the same attention to me as them" (Athavale 65). Professor Karve decided that she should stay in an English family to learn English by direct method. This idea compelled Parvati Athavale to visit America and manage funds for the Widows' Home simultaneously. She worked as a servant in the Missionary Home of Peace in America to fulfill her dream of learning the language. She came across several women missionaries who had worked in India, returned to America on vacation, and started preaching Christianity to her. Parvati Athavale requested them to teach her English, as stated in the autobiography: "Teach me English. I shall then be able to compare your religion with mine, and I shall surely accept the religion that I think is true" (Athavale 82). Even though such an endeavour ended, she successfully learned the English language under the guidance of Miss O'Reilly.

Conclusion

The autobiography of Parvati Athavale unravels how she had to endure pains in the patriarchal society and how she tried to defy them. Besides delineating social issues such as child marriage, child widowhood, and widow remarriage, the paper concentrates on the endeavours of male and female reformers to facilitate proper training and homes for widows. It also unveils how widows underwent strict ceremonies along with the dress codes that saddened their hearts, as evinced in her account. Parvati Athavale fought against the hegemonic male ideologies about widowhood and female education. She espoused the cause of widows and was eager to make them financially independent, so she acquired skills in the English language and obtained a teaching training certificate. By employing the concepts of autobiography, history, and social realism, the study highlights various pertinent gender issues in colonial Maharashtra. In this respect, the paper dealing with the historical portrait of widowhood and female education adds critical insights into gender studies and life narrative research.

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