

Embodied Narratives: Exploring Selfhood in Shanta Gokhale's *One Foot on The Ground: A Life Told Through the Body*

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Abstract

Autobiographies are works of art. An autobiographer views the truth about himself as more important than the facts; he engages in a conversation with himself, and the story becomes an afterthought of his quest for ultimate loyalty. An autobiography is a journey of introspection. In the first stages of an autobiography, the author lacks any notion of their eventual destination. The author thoroughly examines every facet of his thoughts, meticulously exploring every subtle hint and potentiality. Therefore, it is an exploration of self-awareness through personal life encounters. This paper analyses how women's life narratives are shaped and presented through their lenses. This research paper also studies how the autobiography of Shanta Gokhale, titled *One Foot on the Ground: A Life Told Through Body*, frames and communicates her experiences through the prism of her body. It delineates how the personal representation of the author's body contribute to or challenge dominant literary traditions and expectations for female narratives.

Keywords: Autobiographies, Women's Bodies, Self, Female Narratives, Feminism

Shanta Gokhale hails from Dahanu and has been raised in Mumbai. She is a multi-award-winning Indian writer, translator, novelist, journalist, theatrical critic, translator, playwright, screenwriter, teacher, and public relations specialist. She has served as an English lecturer at Elphinstone College and HR College of Commerce, a PR Executive at Glaxo Laboratories, as a sub-editor and arts editor at the *Times of India*. Gokhale has started by publishing short tales in both English and Marathi, and it was not until the 1970s that she begins publishing full-length novels. She is a well-known figure in Marathi literature. She has received two National Prizes for documentary film scripts and two Maharashtra state honours for her works *Crowfall* and *Rita Welinkar*.

Furthermore, she has received the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi in 2015 for her unwavering commitment to the performing arts. In 2018, she has received the Ooty Literary Festival Lifetime Achievement Award. At the age of 78, she has penned her autobiography *One Foot on the Ground: A Life Told Through the Body* published in 2019. The book follows the

growth of her body as it ages and finally begins to decay, chronicling her existence across eight decades.

Shanta Gokhale chronicles a timeline of her life spanning eight decades by observing the development, maturation, and eventual decline of her physical being. Commencing from her birth in 1939, where she initially remained in a state of philosophical silence until the doctor's intervention caused her to cry, she narrates her experiences from childhood to old age. Each chapter is structured around various aspects and functions of the physical body, such as tonsils, adenoids, breasts, and dental misalignment. Additionally, she explores topics like childbirth, weight fluctuations, cancer, and bunions. These memories reveal additional experiences that are not as easily noticeable but equally influential: a carefree upbringing in a progressive Marathi household in Mumbai's Shivaji Park during childhood; the joys of playing badminton, practicing Kathak dance, and learning hairdressing during adolescence; the comfort of friendships and a nearly romantic relationship in cold England; the experience of finding and losing a partner twice and raising her children as a single parent; the immense excitement of translating her first piece from Marathi to English; caring for her mother, who was dying of cancer; giving her mother an equal level of gentleness akin to caring for an infant, managing to overcome her battle with cancer and simultaneously composing her second literary work while recovering. She has narrated her life with seamless wit and frankness.

Women's identities are shaped by the intricate interaction of individual experiences, social expectations, and cultural influences, resulting in a dynamic mosaic of individuality and distinctiveness. This recognizes that women, like anyone, do not exist as homogeneous beings but as a spectrum of selves impacted by numerous influences. It captures women's diverse roles in many circumstances, such as the domestic, professional, and social spheres. Within the larger narrative of women's lives, "women selves" acknowledge the fluidity of identity and the continual process of self-discovery, resilience, and empowerment. This research paper will analyse how the autobiography of Shanta Gokhale frames and communicates her experiences through the prism of her body. It delineates how the personal representation of the author's body contribute to or challenge dominant literary traditions and expectations for female narratives.

In her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous fervently contends that women must proactively integrate themselves into their narratives. The story of her life unveil her identity and, significantly, the pivotal forces that moulded her. Hélène Cixous asserts: "Woman must write her 'self': must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 391).

Helene Cixous has created a theoretical framework in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) to explore the impact of gender on literature. Cixous' work posits a key principle: women have consistently been marginalised from the act of writing and the development of a method for self-expression. Cixous contends that writing is intricately entwined with the historical development of rationality and inseparable from the patriarchal past. Cixous argues that language, whether written or oral, historical or literary, has been chiefly defined, used, and appreciated from a phallogocentric perspective. According to Cixous, language has historically excluded women and has been used as a tool to suppress them. Therefore, Cixous suggests that women should actively use language of their own, expressing oneself in a distinct

manner using words. Empowering women to have a voice does not limit women to adopt the writing style of males. Instead, it needs the creation of a literary form of communication that acknowledges the inherent biological and ingrained disparities between women and men. To write in the feminine mode, one must recouple with the authentic involvements of the female body. Shanta's storytelling is characterised by her own vocabulary and phrases. Her memories resurface in conjunction with the associated parts of her body. It is a unique self-written account of one's own life. Cixous challenges the dominant belief system that prioritises and confines creativity, intelligence, and subjectivity to the phallogocentric mind. She breaks this belief system by recognising and appreciating the feminine body as a significant source of these qualities. Cixous proposes that the "écriture feminine (a feminine mode of writing)" (879) can be unleashed only through the body. To write in the "feminine mode," women must write through their bodies; they must invent impregnable language" (879). Cixous advises that a female writer should focus on writing about herself, since this act represents the creation of a new and rebellious writing. By doing so, the writer may seize the moment of her liberty and bring about necessary disruptions and changes in her narrative.

In her autobiography, Shanta recounts her experiences of childhood abuse. The author explains several noteworthy events during her formative years, including childhood and early adolescence. At the age of eight, she encountered an unsettling incident with Govind Ramji Chavan, who used to serve as the family's domestic helper. She remembers:

When I was eight, Govind Ramji Chavan of Chiplun, Ratnagiri district, an excellent live-in domestic and otherwise a good and responsible young man, held me close to him and rubbed himself on my behind. I knew this wasn't a game because I wasn't being asked to participate, and it ended within a minute of beginning. Govind Ramji Chavan trotted off back to his work. I was about to trot off to the book I was reading when I saw a blob on the tiled floor of the room. 'Govind,' I called out. 'See what you dropped.' Govind hastened to the room, took a look at the blob, and said, 'Oh, hat? It's nothing,' wiped it with a rag and threw the rag away. (22)

Although first bewildered by the occurrence, the author demonstrates perseverance by resuming her engagement with the book after this disturbing encounter. Shanta's narrative is unfiltered, and she describes her experience with foremost transparency. By recounting her life story, Shanta aims to reveal the stimulating external influences that determine and mould her existence. She explores and reflects upon the memories, experiences, people, and environments that shape her daily existence. She perceives herself and her life through the lens of these influencing variables, which guide her ideas and play a crucial role in shaping her unique perception of her identity and existence.

In her autobiography, Shanta talks about 'Menstruation,' and engages in an introspection over the physiological process of menstruation throughout her formative years, including childhood and adolescence. She explores the subject of menstruation, focusing on the cultural attitudes and practices that surround it. The author engages in a dialogue with her mother, who imparts a scientific elucidation of the female reproductive system and the physiological process of the monthly cycle. She recounts the incident:

One day in the spring of 1950, when I was ten-and-a-half, she sat me down in the verandah. The coconut trees in the wadi across the road swayed in the balmy breeze that blew every afternoon from the sea barely ten minutes away from the house. She drew a

diagram on a notepad and said that was the female reproductive system. ‘Every month, tissue builds up to line this bag called the uterus. The lining is meant to feed an embryo. The embryo is formed by a male sperm meeting a female egg. The sperm is like a little tadpole. Don’t ask me right now how it gets to the egg. It does. The egg comes out of this thing here called the ovary. The eggs keep coming regularly. But when there is no sperm around, no embryo is formed. So the tissue that lines the womb is shed and comes out of this passage called the vagina, as blood.’ Handing the diagram over to me for further perusal, she said, ‘If you see a spot of blood on your panties, tell me, and I’ll show you how to deal with it.’ (29)

In her research paper titled “Narratives of Body in Shanta Gokhale’s *One Foot on the Ground*,” Rachna Pandey observes that Shanta accepts the physical body to prioritise and liberate the spiritual essence. In her life story, Gokhale effectively communicates her experiences with sincerity and authenticity, combining seamless humour and candour. Throughout her compelling journey, she explores the transformation of her physical form from a concrete entity to an ethereal one. This metamorphosis is a constant reminder of her body’s existence, demanding the author’s perpetual attention.

Shanta gets to know about her full-blown Cancer, and she engages in introspection about the era encompassing 1992, a period characterized by a tumultuous state of matrimony, as well as the revelation of fibroids inside her left mammary gland. Despite receiving reassurance from her gynaecologist, she continues to focus on the many obstacles that life presents. In the year 2004, after the departure of her spouse, the fibroids mature to haemorrhage, resulting in the identification of Stage 3 malignancy. Shanta provides a comprehensive account of the second round of chemotherapy, which leads to the occurrence of alopecia. She adeptly manages this transition by using a wig, and after that, the story smoothly transitions into the contemplation of surgical intervention following the minimal efficacy of chemotherapy. The surgical procedure is characterised by amusing tales and a distinctive incision. Following the surgical procedure, Shanta’s narration shifts towards recuperation, engagement in physiotherapy, and her dynamic connection with her physicality. Radiation therapy is then administered, and the collective encounter of experiencing this treatment cultivates a feeling of interconnectedness among herself.

Shanta contemplates the stochastic nature of cancer, expressing appreciation for its gradual progression and constrained ramifications. The act of writing serves as both a source of diversion and a means of survival throughout her experience with cancer, ultimately ending in the successful creation of her second literary work. Shanta delineates how eminent writers such as Vijay Tendulkar plays a significant role in facilitating her recuperation, highlighting the interdependence between her personal and professional spheres.

Shrinkhla Sahai, in her article for *The Hindu*, acknowledges the theme-based narration of Shanta in her autobiography and applauds her. She opines that Gokhale consistently emphasises the significance of the body as a primary and central element in her examination of languages, literature, theatre, life, and ‘self’. The autobiography effectively encourages readers to introspectively examine their own connection with the physical form as they dig into the comprehensive chronicle of eight decades of life deeply engaged in the realms of arts, literature, and culture.

Throughout her life, Shanta has always maintained a sense of ‘self-assertion’, which has become possible only because of her upbringing that has been too strong. She never lets her divorce affect her amiable relationships with Viju or Arun. The journey of her writing career has been an integral part of her life. In her autobiography, she quotes in a chapter titled ‘Divorce and Marriage No. 2’:

Just as Viju and I had remained friends until his death in February 2004, Arun and I have remained friends over the past sixteen years. I presume he is happy in his new life. I am certainly happy with mine. I needed a room of my own to be the person I was. I had managed to write my first novel, *Rita Welinkar*, during the dribbles of time and slices of space available to me while I was married and working full time. I would let chapters write themselves in my head as I travelled to work by bus, then sit under a tree on the lawn at Glaxo during lunchtime, my back to the main gate to dissuade friends from saying hello and rapidly scribble down what I had thought of on the bus. (169)

A critical phase in the narrative of the female autobiographer might be described as a period of first crisis in her life. This phase reflects an internal turmoil in the individual’s consciousness due to the conflict caused by external influences or surrounding variables. This irritation provides the foundation for everything she dives into later. Caitlin Moran highlights the relevance of a woman absorbing external forces and causing agitation in *How to Be a Woman*:

But if there is to be a fifth wave of feminism, I would hope that the main thing that distinguishes it from all that came before is that women counter the awkwardness, disconnect, and bullshit of being a modern woman not by shouting at it, internalising it or squabbling about it – but by simply pointing at it, and going ‘HA!’, instead. (14)

Moran uses the phrase “going HA” to refer to the woman’s instant response, which is more essential than subsequent action. Here, she emphasises that what is more essential for women is not fighting the world but watching external pressures and their subsequent agitation inside.

Shanta uses her pen as a sword when agitated during her personal crisis. She doesn’t lose her wit and humour, even in the most complex situations. She realises that writing has been her sole comfort. She acknowledges her freedom and writes:

I wrote Tya Varshi seventeen years later, sitting in my own room unoccupied by any other body but mine. Rarely are women blessed with such blissful singlehood. The pleasure is not confined only to having my own space, my own work table, and my own bookshelves. It extends to having my own cool bed. I consider a cool bed a vital part of my singlehood. A cool bed in which I can stretch my body any which way I like, throw my arms about, sleep leg on leg or legs wide apart. A body by itself, no move it makes arousing thoughts of possession in another. The independence to be yourself, complete in yourself, is very heaven. (169)

Pankaj Shrivasan, in his article titled “*One Foot on the Ground: A Life Told Through the Body Review: The World According to Shanta Gokhale.*” observes that Shanta cites her mother, who advocates the principle of “*Ek ghav doan tukde*” - the notion of making a decisive break in the event of unfavourable circumstances, ensuring a clean separation without any lingering complications. She feels compelled to engage in such behaviour in several instances. However, she maintains her sense of humour despite the unravelling of life’s circumstances, which include unfortunate marriages, health issues, and job setbacks. She prepares herself for the imminent collision or, if possible, adopts a defensive posture, successfully transforming these experiences

into captivating narratives that attract her audience. Irrespective of the many peaks and valleys she experiences, she adapts to them gracefully, consistently maintaining a grounded perspective. Shanta's narrative is embodied with a perspective of 'Self' through 'body.' Her autobiography is neither a monologue nor a narrative conveyed through storyline and characters. Her autobiography is a literary work in which she aims to directly communicate with or actively involve the reader in a dialogue.

In conclusion, the genre of autobiography serves as a tool for the authors since they have chosen to write autobiographies in order to differentiate their "self" in a competitive manner and demonstrate their strong will to hold onto their driving beliefs. They pursued calm, seclusion, and tranquillity in their quest for righteousness. Shanta's relationship with her body has not been healthy, but with herself is astounding. She takes all her life's health-related or personal setbacks with utmost strength and wit. Consequently, she is raised in a free and empowered environment, necessitating individuality that harbours inside her innermost being with a profound need for self-governance, freedom, and an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Shanta's autobiography includes dignity, elegance, refinement, and composure. Although she encounters various challenges in her career, personal relationships, and health, she establishes herself as a skilled storyteller defying conventional gender norms. Through her brave writings, she has made noteworthy contributions and has lived a courageous life by accepting her body and overcoming her physical ailments.

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