
UNIT 1 WOMEN AND LIFE WRITING

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

By now, you would already have some idea about life writing - its forms and definitions. To further our understanding of women's life writing, let us begin by asking some questions. To what extent are life writings marked by gender? Or, conversely, to what extent are gendered identities evident in life writing? For instance, if we were to read an autobiography without any idea of the gender identity of the writer, would we be able to make out the gender of the writer through a reading of the text? This unit would suggest that texts are always gender-marked, that is, the gender of the writer/subject can be discerned through the writing, in terms of its themes and styles. Moreover, since life writings often dwell on the formative years, we will also look at how life writings demonstrate the construction of gendered subjects and subjectivities. In this unit, we will dwell on these issues by examining women's life writings in the context of related theories and practices, themes and issues, and forms and styles.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Critically evaluate the creative and critical input of women's life writings;
- Examine the impact of such writings on the theory and ideas of autobiography;
- Explore the broad themes and patterns which run through women's life writings;
- Identify how issues of individual and collective identity are articulated in women's life writings; and
- Discuss the role of subjectivity and language in the context of such writings.

1.3 WOMEN'S LIFE WRITINGS: THEORIES AND PRACTICES

In recent years, women's life writings have offered considerable scope to feminist theory and to autobiographical studies. They have reshaped the map of these disciplines. They have also challenged our fundamental assumptions about gender and gendered roles across a cross-section of cultures and societies.

The first point that we must keep in mind while reading women's autobiographies is that there is no universal category of women. So while we keep the category of gender in mind, we have to remember that women are the products of culture and history as much as men are. If being a woman is a primary attribute, so are facts of race, class, caste, community and region. Thus the cultural assumptions underlying the writings of a white middle class woman would be different from those underpinning the writings of working class Jewish women or the life writings of a coloured female slave. Further, as Amartya Sen and others have stressed (Sen, 2006), identity in the modern world is not singular but plural. As a critic notes in a slightly different context:

“We learn that (women) speak in different voices and from multiple historical, cultural, racial, economic and sexual locations. We learn of the shaping power of overlapping allegiances and oppressions which intersect in often conflicting modes” (Carraway, 1999, p. 6, Cited in Arneil). At the same time, critical writings on autobiography and life writing have identified some broad themes and patterns in women's life writings, which will become clearer once we begin to explore the various forms of women's life writing.

The self, in women's life writings, according to many theorists, is not fixed but fluid and flexible (Arneil, 1999). Identities and subjectivities are evolving and in flux and there is rarely a final place of arrival in the autobiographical text. One may argue here that even men's identities are fluid and relational and to label fluidity specifically as a feature of women's life writings is problematic. While identity or subjectivity maybe in flux and constantly evolving, traditional autobiographical theory seems to assume that the model of separateness (where the ego boundaries are clearly defined and where there is a sense of definite individuality and autonomy) constitutes the basis of autobiography. Studies of autobiography in the 1970s demonstrate a definite bias, which seems to accord a higher place to the autobiographies of famous white men. This privileging of one kind of writing over others is also implicit in the definition of autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" (Lejeune, 1982, p.193).

All these ideas and definitional propositions are challenged and its boundaries stretched by women's autobiographies. For instance, the testimonies (collective life writing) of women in struggle, oral narratives like that of the Telengana movement and Chicana women's narratives clearly deviate from the characteristics described and in a sense prescribed above.

The theory and practice of womens' autobiographies has forced a shift in the notions of both the individual as well as of autobiographical theory. It is probably not entirely a coincidence that womens' life writings gained importance as subjects of study at roughly the same moment that postmodernism and poststructuralism came to be "hot" topics of debate and discourse. Each influenced the other with the result that the issue of identity now had to be conceptualized differently. Identities had to be rethought differently and the notions of fluidity, multiple identities and contradiction became a part of the vocabulary/lexicon of identity. The first concept comes from French feminists about the nature of the unconscious and how it lies outside the grasp of our unified sense of rational self. As in Lacan's theory of the mirror that you have come across in earlier units (see MWG 001, Block 5, Unit 2.4), identity is never entire or whole, but is always partial and in process. This point would be explained in the following section.

Thus, the notion of 'identity' is increasingly replaced by the term 'subjectivity' which indicates its fluid, flexible and contingent nature and its multiple, plural and constructed basis. The life writings of women amply illustrate the point made by Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) that gender is a social construction. Thus, in both life writings and

autobiographical fictions, we see the childhood of the autobiographical subject as crucial and formative. In Virginia Woolf's autobiographical writings like *Reminiscences* (in *The Diaries of Virginia Woolf, 1915-1939*), *A Sketch of the Past* (1939) and *Moments of Being* (1941), we see her sense of loss and deprivation at the loss of the mother. We are also made to see her abuse at the hands of George Duckworth and how that might have contributed to her discomfort with heterosexuality.

Closer to our own context is the narration of their childhood days by many women autobiographers in the late 19th century and early 20th century Bengal and Maharashtra. Common to most of these life writings is a sense of the carefree nature of childhood, unencumbered by the bonds which were to tie women down in their later life. Thus childhood days are valorized and narrated with a nostalgia steeped in a sense of loss. Early marriages and a high rate of mortality lent a special poignancy to this remembered time. In what is the first published full-length autobiography written by a Bengali woman, Rashundari Debi's *Amar Jiban* (1868, 2nd ed. 1899). Rashundari relates her heart-wrenching separation from her mother. While childhood is narrated in many life writings by men, they are not marked by this sense of pain or loss as they are in women's life writings. Later, in her book, tied to her in-laws' house and unable to go to her dying mother, Rashundari writes: "I was like a bird in a cage, an oil-presser's bullock." She bemoans her fate of being born a girl. This motif is present in many of the life writings written by Indian women, who articulate a saga of dispossession. A sense of loss is manifested even in life writings by affluent women, which is evident in the title of Sarala Debi Chowdhurani's autobiography, called *Life's Fallen/Scattered Leaves* (1945).

1.3.1 Religious Autobiographies

Speaking from a historical point of view, the earliest women's autobiographies were religious in nature. Chronologically, perhaps the first life writings were the "therigatha", the songs of the Buddhist nuns of the sixth century B.C. They included a minimal amount of detail by the nuns about their own lives; the narrative focus is rather on how their lives were transformed under the impact of Buddhism. Accounts of transformation are a key feature of many early accounts, both Indian and western. Much of Bhakti poetry written by Mahadeviakka, Mirabai, Muktabai, Janabai and Lal Ded, besides inscribing the devotion of the female devotee, also give details of ordinary lives transformed by devotion to "Chennamallikarjun" (the subject of Mahadevi's devotional verse) or Mira's "Giridhar", which strengthens her in the face of opposition from her in-laws.

In England, the early prose accounts were of Hildegarde of Bingen (11th century) Dame Juliana of Norwich and Margery Kempe. All these narratives demonstrate an array of earthly difficulties offset by growing devotion to a personal god. The significant other of these accounts is God or Jesus Christ. Autobiographies and biographies of this kind aspired, in a sense, to the narrative status of hagiographies, which detailed lives of saints and martyrs.

Another feature that is clearly marked in women's autobiographies, is the use of the image or narrative trope of god, in an ambivalent way. In Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), we see that the grandmother's religious faith leads to an acceptance of social injustice, which the young Harriet/Linda is skeptical about. In Rashsundari's *Amar Jiban*, Rashsundari talks about social injustice and personal deprivation, yet in a kind of double-speak says, "Strange are the ways of god" (Debi, 1897). It is interesting to see that the idea of god is deployed here as a narrative shorthand for social custom and to suggest the force of social injunctions and prescriptions, which women internalize and reproduce.

1.3.2 Tracing of Lineage through the Mother

One of the things that you may notice in women's life writings is the close relationship of theory and practice. As we trace the trajectories and study the frequent motifs recurring in women's life writings, we see the emergence of a different kind of genealogy, where we see the recovery of a sense of a lineage through the life, activities and culture of the mother. For example, in African-American feminism, we have Alice Walker's critical-creative account of her literary foremothers called *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1987). Something that is highlighted in *Amar Jiban* is Rashsundari's sense of bewilderment when people refer to her as her father's daughter. As a child who lost her father before she gained consciousness, she thinks of herself as her mother's daughter and is surprised when people refer to her otherwise. In Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave-Girl* (1861), we see that the feeling of family comes to Harriet/Linda through her maternal grandmother. In Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942), Hurston writes of her sense of homelessness and wandering which is related back by her to the death of her mother which, for Hurston, as for Woolf, disrupted the world "which had been built out of her body and her heart" (Hurston 1984, p. 89). Further, Hurston is in a sense given the responsibility of speaking for the silent mother, prefiguring her future role as writer. When she is too ill to speak, she observes that her mother "looked at me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice" (Hurston, 1942, Cited in Anderson, 2001, p. 109). The mother's dying scene suggests that she requires the 9-year old Zora to speak up to resist the customs and rituals surrounding death decreed by their community. As

Linda Anderson comments: “Language (here) has a double function, both connecting and separating her from her mother and the community. It is also what puts her into motion as a subject, allowing her to avoid the ‘wordless feeling’ she associates forever after with death” (Anderson, 2001, p. 109).

There is also the instance of Simone de Beauvoir who writes of her mother’s death from cancer in one of her memoirs, *A Very Easy Death* (1966). Writing of her own mother’s death, in contrast, Carolyn Steedman emphasizes it as a working-class life and a working-class death. She writes: “Simone de Beauvoir wrote of her mother’s death (and) said that in spite of the pain it was an easy one: an upper-class death. Outside, for the poor, dying is a different matter” (Steedman, 1986, p. 2). Steedman, subjectivity is always implicated in the social and the specificities of place and politics, thereby reinforcing the point that there is no universal or one standard model of subjectivity.

While we can assume that the significance given to the mother in women’s autobiographies does not come only from a desire to make a feminist statement about female solidarity, the importance given to the mother is theoretically proved by some developments in psychology and psychoanalysis. As you have already learnt in previous courses (MWG 001, Block 5, Unit 2; MWG 004, Block 4, Unit2), many feminists and psychoanalysts have observed a gap or lacuna in Freudian theory, where the female child’s switch of allegiance from the primary object of love and desire (the mother in the case of both sexes) is inadequately theorized. Critics like Bracha Ettiiger have critiqued Freud’s idea of penis-envy as too centered on the phallus as a central signifier, and have considered the idea of breast-envy. Feminist psychoanalysis has opened up a space for the theorizing of women’s autobiographies in a more productive way, and help to explain the process of subject-formation.

The figure of the mother is also central in **Object-Relations Psychology** developed by Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1979), where she theorizes about the girl-child’s development. The girl child’s identity, she theorizes, is relational, while the male child’s identity is independent and autonomous. While it is problematic to universalize one model of growth and development which is specific to one culture, the broad pattern is perhaps applicable to the way infants are socialized in patriarchal, capitalist cultures. The mother -often the primary caregiver - also plays a vital role in the pattern of individuation, a process which is considered central to the genre of life writing.

Check Your Progress:

Read any life narrative discussed above. What, according to you, is the role of the mother in this work? Briefly describe it with the help of the theoretical framework provided above.

1.3.3 Self and Ego Formation: Theoretical Frameworks

The family is the primary site of gender formation in the psychoanalytic theory of both Freud and Lacan, whose theories you would have read about in the earlier courses (MWG 001, MWG 004). Notwithstanding the numerous differences in psychoanalytic theory between the views of Freud and Lacan, both propound a common view of psychological development as moving from identification to separation. Let us now review what you have learnt earlier.

In Lacanian theory, the child's separation of himself from his mother is followed by the mirror-stage, where the child realizes itself as a separate entity by seeing himself in the mirror. This image is mistakenly understood by the child to be a whole and coherent identity. As the ego develops and the oedipal phase supplants the early self-absorbed and narcissistic sense of self, the child continues the process of self-construction through the

acquisition of symbolic systems like language. For Lacan, the self constructed through language is also false, like the image in the mirror. Nevertheless, the mirror stage is an important stage for understanding autobiography, for on it hinges the sense of 'I'ness, which makes autobiography possible.

According to Nancy Chodorow, the development of the female child follows a different trajectory since the female child experiences love as a triadic relationship and experiences the contrary pulls of father-love as well as intense emotional commitment with the mother. This interferes with the process of ego-formation in girls unlike in the case of the boy child, who experiences love as a dyadic relationship (where the primary love-object is phased out in terms of societal demands), and whose gender is differently constructed.

Theories of ego-formation premised on separation from the (m)other and the drawing of sharp boundaries between the self and the other thus work differently for men and women, in terms of psychological and psychoanalytic understandings. Theoretical frameworks which work with the idea of separation rather than identification privilege certain models of selfhood where individuality and autonomy are central. Women's identity, on the contrary, according to Sheila Rowbotham, is based on a sense of collectivity and community. Therefore, as Susan Friedman emphasizes: "The very sense of identification, interdependence and community that Gusdorf (one of the influential theorists of life writing) dismisses from autobiographical selves are key elements in the development of a woman's identity, according to theorists like Rowbotham and Chowdrow" (Friedman, 1989, p. 38)

Further, women may be said to develop a dual consciousness in a dominant culture. One consciousness comes from the force of dominant culture and the force of patriarchal prescription and from the image of women commonly represented in such a culture. The other consciousness comes from that part of women which resists the force of such cultural prescription. In Rowbotham's words: "But always we were split in two, straddling silence.....From this division, our material dislocation, comes the experience of one part of ourselves as strange, foreign and cut off from the other which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity....in order to create an alternative an oppressed group (must overcome) a paralysis of consciousness and ...project its own image into history" (Rowbotham, 1992, p. 29-31).

Although the model of autobiography invoked above seems to be unitary and undifferentiated, it inscribes the 'difference' of women's autobiography quite sharply. Virginia Woolf's autobiographical sketches and writings are a good example of this difference. As she writes in *Moments of Being*, "when we write of a woman, everything is out of place... the accent never falls where it does with a man" (Woolf, 1941, p.2).

Woman's difference, so Woolf suggests, requires a different emphasis: it flies "in the face of conventional modes of representation, producing a multiplicity which cannot be captured within one and the same, the singular 'I' of masculine discourse" (Anderson, 2001, p. 98). The sense of multiple 'I's - or many selves - jostling for space and articulation is evident in many women's life writings. The autobiographer declares her gender identity as only one of the bases of her identity. Class, caste and race identity are also determining factors. In addition, her self- chosen identity in terms of activity/ profession or in terms of sexual orientation all add to a sense of plurality of identities. The life writings of African-American women has focused attention on the centrality of "group identity", "interdependence" and the importance of "voice-enabling traditions" (McKay, in Brodski & Schenk, 1988, p. 179). As the prison-writings of Chicana women in struggle put it - we were mothers and political activists engaged in struggle. There was no way we could chose one identity and reject the other.

Check Your Progress:

i) *What do you understand by the term "dual consciousness" in the context of women's lives?*

ii) *Explain this term in reference to any life narrative that you have read.*

1.3.4 Notions of Difference

Women's life writings have to be understood on the basis of two kinds of difference: the difference of gender and the differences between various kinds of life writing by women who differ from each other in terms of race, class, caste, ethnicity etc. Further, it is problematic to codify and fix the patterns evident in women's autobiographies in terms of loss, absence and anonymity without further exploration.

You have previously come across the term sexual difference in some of the earlier units (see MWG 002, Block 1, Unit 2; MWG 004, Block 4, Unit 2). Broadly speaking, the term refers to the differences between the sexes that derive from their different biological sex organs and differs from the term 'gender'; by extension, sexual difference in psychoanalysis and other theories is also shown to have cultural and psychic effects beyond the merely bodily (Wolfreys, 2002, p.76). Additionally, difference should be understood in terms not only of sexual difference. As Linda Anderson and Trev Broughton suggest: "the idea that women's self-constructions might be distinguished on the basis of sexual difference- as the "other" of some universal "man"- may be both "reifying and essentialist" (Broughton & Anderson, 1997, p. 97). Rather than sexual difference what we have to keep in mind is the construction of gender and gender difference in both men's and women's autobiographies. A good example here is provided by reading the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass, a male slave and Harriet Jacobs, writing at about the same time. The differences and similarities that emerge provide us with a glimpse of gender difference.

The other point to be kept in mind at this juncture is that gender is not the sole determinant of identity and gender-based oppression is not the sole oppression. Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith have posited that an exclusive focus on gender oppressions "effectively erases the complex and often contradictory positionings of the subject" (Watson & Smith, 1992, p. xiv). Subjects have also to be seen in terms of their location and position in terms of race, class and in the Indian context, in terms of caste. Thus the African-American woman slave may share some common experiences of exploitation and abuse with the similarly positioned male slave rather than the white woman, an upper caste Indian woman's experience of life is likely to be very different from that of the Dalit woman. Womanhood is thus not the only ground of difference.

You may have come across the notion of 'intersectionality' in earlier units. It is a concept which helps us to keep in mind the multiple -and varying- registers of subject construction. This is a useful concept to keep in mind while studying women's autobiographies since it prevents us from universalizing the subject. Instead it invites us to try and understand the multiple positionings and to grasp the historical location of the subject.

This understanding of the multiple determinants of subjectivity allows us to see the contradictions between various subject-positions. For example, in the classic psychoanalytical explanation of growth, alignment and separation shows the father as an embodiment of and occupying a place of power. The father as a symbol of phallic power shapes the Oedipal and phallic phase of the child's growth. However, in Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape For A Good Woman* (1986), she recounts her working class father's helplessness in the face of authority. She thus questions the equation/identification of masculinity and power.

Check Your Progress:

Briefly explain in your own words the notions of:

a) *"Difference"*

b) *"Intersectionality"*

1.4 WOMEN'S LIFE WRITINGS: THEMES AND ISSUES

While it is problematic to fix and codify women's life writings in terms of loss, absence and anonymity, there is discernible in women's life writing a distinct motif of loss. In psychoanalytic terms, it may be the loss of wholeness that comes with the separation from the mother; however, there is a socio-cultural dimension to it too. Thus, even though we may be conscious of the tendency to essentialize, and fix broad and universal patterns in women's life writings, we may still detect the inscription of a sense of loss and powerlessness in them. To give a few instances, Rashundari Debi in *Amar Jiban* talks of going without a meal for two days. Coming from an affluent family, she had really no reason to go without food. But such was the force of cultural prescriptions that she had internalized that she could not bring herself to eat at what was deemed an inappropriate time. The decision to deprive oneself presents a kind of paradox in that it shows an agency which is negatively deployed. According to the Marxist critic E.P.Thompson, the decision on the part of even affluent women to deprive themselves demonstrated the thin integration of women into lineages of caste and class. Thus, the recurring images of loss and dispossession are common motifs which keep appearing in women's life writings.

1.4.1 Narratives of Loss and Pain in Women's Life Writing

The sense of loss in Indian women's autobiographies is partly attributable to the alienation from the natal/paternal home and the lack of power experienced by the women in the house of the husband, where her existence and comfort were contingent on the social approval of others, particularly the mother-in-law. Thus, the account of Keshub Chandra Sen's mother talks of how her blood froze when her mother-in-law looked on her in a disapproving way. Even women from renowned families who were in a progressive mode talk of this feeling of loss and disempowerment. Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, Tagore's niece (the daughter of his sister, the novelist Swarnakumari Debi) talks of how her writings and work were lost in Punjab's political conflagration and tumult during the freedom struggle. This is surprising coming from a woman who led an active political life. The life writing of a famous Bengali stage actress, Binodini Dasi or Nati Binodini (as she was referred to) evinces a similar loss- loss of youth, adulation, economic security and respectability. She refers to her life-narrative as a "bedona-gatha" or narrative of pain. Rimli Bhattacharya who has translated and edited her life writings, *Amar Katha* and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban*, originally written around 1910 (1998) discusses her narrative as one of successive betrayals.

The sense of loss also imbues and informs the life writing written and illustrated in a graphic form, of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, where she

shows the erosion of a liberal ethos of Iran before the Islamic clampdown of Ayatollah Khomeini and orthodox and bigoted Islamists. In fact the resurgence of right-wing movements in many societies have been documented in various life writings.

1.4.2 Women's Writings as Social Documentation

The life writings of women can be seen as powerful social and historical documents. They may be said to have archival value as they provide us with micro-histories of the times they were written in. Not only do they provide a world and wealth of detail, they also show us history from below. Accounts which offer the everyday practices of women and minorities have gained a unique validity since they offer us history or her story from a different perspective. Thus, the disciplines of Sociology and History have used the life writings of women across a wide spectrum of spaces, times and classes in order to chart cartographies of struggle and to gain a more complete idea of societies and their histories.

In what way are women's life writings superior to men's life writings and other historical accounts? According to feminist standpoint theorists, narratives that emerge from a historically unprivileged perspective have greater epistemological validity than knowledge that emerges from a privileged position and perspective. Those in a position of privilege are not likely to experience caste, class or gender-based discrimination or oppression as those who have been historically disadvantaged. It is also likely that the writings which emanate from such groups of marginalized and disadvantaged groups will pose the question of identity in a different way. For example, life narratives like Bama's *Karukkai* (1992) and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (1986) think of identity in terms of the community not in an individual or autonomous way. Instead, their subjectivity is produced in terms of their subjection and subjugation. The basis of this identity is collective and social.

Similarly, Gloria Anzaldua's account of Chicana Mestiza experience encapsulated in *Borderlands* (1987) captures her sense of living in the border between USA and Mexico, settled communities and nomads and heteronormativity and homoeroticism.

So we can begin to see how women's autobiographies have radically revised the idea that individuality and autonomy are the foundation of identity. Instead collectivity and community can be postulated as the bases of identity. Indeed the whole idea that individuality is a necessary prerequisite for autobiography can be seen as a ploy, a ruse to prevent the sense of community or solidarity. Similarly, women's autobiographies have also offered a critique of rationality as a ruse of patriarchy. French feminists and feminist psycho-linguists have even critiqued language as patriarchal. Can women

inscribe their subjectivity, we may well ask, within the limits and confines of man-made language?

1.5 WOMEN'S LIFE WRITINGS: FORM AND LANGUAGE

Diaries, letters and memoirs are all informal genres which have been used by women. For instance, Woolf's *Sketch of the Past* (1939) presents an irreverent attitude towards the conventions of autobiography and its hierarchy of genres. Julia Swindells suggests that when ordinary women (as opposed to famous men) started writing in the nineteenth century, they did so in the extant genres that proliferated in print culture. Some of these forms with a high circulation rate were sensational forms like the melodrama or the romances. Thus, we see the use of informal forms and genres by women who were not exposed to the higher forms of literature like the epic. For instances, the narrative of Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) draws on the subgenres of the captivity narrative and the pursuit motif common to the genre of romance. In early 19th century England and late 19th century Bengal, we see the proliferation of conduct books, books which prescribed appropriate codes of womanly behaviour- like *Grihalakshmi* in Bengal (discussed in Walsh, 2004) and Mrs Beaton's *Books of Household Management* in England (1861). Books like these also shaped the narrative trajectories of many life writings which were didactic and trying to instill the values of thrift, hard work and prudence.

Many life writings also display a heightened consciousness and reflexivity about language. These writings make us question our commonly held assumptions about language. One such instance is the idea that language reflects experience. Domna Stanton in *The Female Autograph* (1984) questions the notion of "bios" embedded in autobiography. Why can't autobiography be recast as autograph, or writing a self, independent of the life it describes? Underlying this idea of the autograph is also an emancipatory move on Stanton's part - if women can't always choose their life, they can at least exercise agency in their choice of subject material.

The question of language is central to the concerns of many feminist theorists, including the work of the French theorists like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, as you have seen in previous units (see MWG 004, Block 4, Unit2). If language is centred around the male phallus, to what extent can it express the subjectivity of women who are implicated in this system of patriarchy and of language-use? Can women articulate their self outside of the symbolic order of language? To what extent does the semiotic - Kristeva's evocation of the space before-and outside-the symbolic, offer women a space to express their selfhood and subjectivity? Can we have a language without the structures of grammar and syntax? Or would it degenerate into some sort of psycho-babble?

Many women autobiographers are now turning to innovative modes of self-representation. Thus, there are the self-portraits/paintings of the artist Frida Kahlo, the graphic representations of the Iranian writer Marjane Satrapi in *Persepolis* and *Embroideries* and the narrated lifestories of Baby Haldar's life writings. Questions of form, innovation and authenticity are all raised here. In fact, the question of authenticity is often posed in life writings which were narrated to amanuenses, mostly by slaves, oppressed and disadvantaged groups. Another related issue which then arises is that of oral autobiographies, which has previously been discussed in the unit on 'Theoretical Challenges' as well (Block 1, Unit4).

Yet another question raised under the template of women and language is the story of many women's hard-won access to literacy. However masculinist language forms may be, women like other subjects, have to be able to access a language, whether their master's or their own. To Rashsundari, secretly and furtively learning to write, access to the written word was nothing short of a miracle. Her life writing and that of many similarly-placed Indian women dramatize their desire for and access to the written/printed word, usually achieved with great difficulty in hostile circumstances.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In the sections discussed above, we get some insights into women's life writings. We have seen these life writings in the context of theories and practices. We have also learnt about important themes and tropes, such as that of the mother, of loss and of pain. Women's subjectivities may be differently constructed owing to different cultural constructions of self and ego, and owing to the intersectionality of gender with class, caste and religion. The element of collective representation that we have discussed above also makes women's life narratives significant sources of social documentation. Some of these points will be further enumerated and explained in the subsequent units that you will read. You will also see how theories of life writing have undergone many shifts and changes in recent years with new life writings posing challenges to fixed formulations of autobiography. Thus life-narratives of disabled and transgendered women have effected many paradigm shifts within the field of life writing studies.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What do you understand by the term intersectionality? Why do you think it is important in the study of gender and life writing? Discuss with the help of examples.
- 2) Why do you think that the mother is central to women's life writing? Discuss in the context of any one life narrative.

- 3) Trace the idea of loss as unique to women's life writing with the use of relevant examples.
- 4) How would you regard the question of women and language in relation to women's life writings?
- 5) How has the notion of individuality been revised and challenged by the notion of the collective as a basis of identity in women's life narratives? Critically analyse.

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