

# Voices of Contemporary Indian Women Memoirists

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## Abstract:

A memoir is a literary genre that unfolds the innermost suppressed feelings of a writer. A memoir is a form where the very aim of the writer is to reveal himself / herself from all angles. Traditionally, women have been oppressed and suppressed in a male-dominated society. The women of India have been taught to be obedient to the male-centric world. So the fact is that 'they can talk about power but are powerless; they can discuss liberty but are imprisoned.' In this scenario, they have chosen literature as one of their arms to fight back against the male-dominated society.

The writings of contemporary women are not revolts against patriarchal society. They write to define their identities, to find themselves and their position, and to recollect the past and consider the future. They write to explore the world, to understand themselves and their local contexts, to develop questions, and to propose answers. The present paper explores the voices of contemporary Indian memoirists and addresses questions of sexuality, love, relationships, politics, economic realities and disparities, private or secret experiences, etc.

**Key Words:** voice, contemporary, memoir, patriarchal, male-dominated

At present, memoir mania is widely spread in the literary world. A number of people are writing memoirs. They are giving the title of their written work, Memoir. Today, the word memoir has become fashionable, whereas some years ago, 'autobiography' might have been the word of choice.

The memoir is a teaching document. It not only teaches the memoirist about herself but also instructs readers as they learn from the text by communicating with the memoirist. She is defending her work before an audience or readers. According to Susan Engel:

“Autobiographical memory is, on the one hand, a deeply personal, subjective and vivid construction of the past, a construction that reveals, creates, and communicates a personal identity. But we constantly use these memories in public transactions. To that extent, we expect reliability, accuracy and objectivity. What and how we remember has consequences for our own lives and lives of those included in our memories”. (Engel 21-22)

The majority of contemporary women writers have been choosing memoir as a form to express their suppressed and suffocated voices. It is a form in which the memoirist uses both material realities and imaginary possibilities. The Indian contemporary women memoirists used a style that is at the same time narrative and descriptive, factually testimonial and anecdotal fictive. Therefore, it is not surprising that memoirs have become popular with women. It is women who most often take up the memoir form for the specific purpose of revising cultural contexts so that their experience is not denied.

When a woman is going to write a memoir, she writes to initiate a certain process. She recalls all her history and memories with her own views; her reflections on her own life are all mingled in her memoir to make it sharp.

“Memories establish a connection between our individual past and our collective past (our origins, heritage, and history). The past is always with us, and it defines our present; it resonates in our voices, hovers over our silences, and explains how we came to be ourselves and to inhabit what we call ‘our homes’.” (Agnew 5)

Today, women’s memoir writing as it emerges into life-writing practice is a mixture of ‘confession’ and ‘autobiography’. We can also say it is a different kind of life-writing practice because it asserts female-gendered life stories and female-gendered selfhoods.

Contemporary women writers recollect emotions and merge them with past events. They write memoirs with realities—the sensations and the resulting feelings and thoughts of the self, as well as the viewpoints, opinions, actions, and reactions of others significantly involved in the event. They wish to retrieve the emotions and thoughts of the past—fears and desires, waves of anger and delights. This is the voice of self.

“I prefer the term memoir for literary reasons, but for etymological ones as well. By its roots, memoir encompasses both acts of memory and acts of recording – personal reminiscences and documentation. The word record, which crops up in almost every dictionary definition of memoir, contains a double meaning too. To record literally means to call to mind, to call up from the heart. At the same time, the record means to set down in writing, to make official. What resides in the province of the heart is also what is exhibited in the public space of the world.” (Millar 2)

Almost all memoirs written by Indian women revolted against the patriarchal tradition, a male-dominated tradition, or a male-centric tradition. This tradition always considered a woman’s sub-gender, keeping them in a marginalized position. The Indian women memoirists have written their memoirs in a contemporary socio-cultural scenario. They outburst their agonies, rages, pathos, and complaints against the patriarchal custom in the form of memoirs. Indian women memoirists of the twentieth century like Kamla Das (*A Childhood in Malabar*), Sudha Majumdar (*A Pattern of Life: The Memoir of an Indian Woman*), Dhanvanthi Rama Rau (*An Inheritance: The Memoirs of Dhanvanthi Rama Rau*), Romola Chatterjee (*Courtyards of My Childhood: A Memoir*), Haimabati Sen (*Because I am a Woman: A Widow’s Memoir from Colonial India*), and Thrity Umrigar (*First Darling of the*

*Morning: Selected Memories of the Indian Childhood*) are the best examples of painful recollection of childhood that has grown under a male-dominated environment.

Kamla Das is a pioneer Indian poet, short story writer, and autobiography writer in English as well as in her mother tongue, Malayalam. She writes her name Kamla Das in English as well as Madhavikutty in Malayalam. She was born in March 1932 in Punnayoorkulum, in the Malabar district of Kerala. She was the daughter of V. N. Nair, a former managing editor of the widely circulated Malayalam Daily *Matrubhumi*, and Nallapatt Balamani Amma, a popular Malayali poetess. She has written two self-life narratives. *My Story* (1976) is a world-famous controversial full-length autobiography that is a poignant account of her married life, while *A Childhood in Malabar* (2003) is an excellent narration of her joyful childhood in Malabar.

Kamala Das's *A Childhood in Malabar: A Memoir* (2003) was originally written in Malayalam and was later translated into English by Gita Krishnankutty. In the preface to her memoir, Kamala Das writes,

“Often I would grow physically tired with the effort of remembering and the weight of memory would prove too heavy a burden for me as I journeyed through a childhood in which I had shuttled between Calcutta and Malabar, shifting between three different cultures: of Kerala where I used to spend the long summer holidays, of Calcutta where I lived with my parents and the British culture I encountered at St Cecilia's, the school I went to while we were in Calcutta. I slowly learned to sort out these memories, to find words for them, to arrange them in some kind of sequence.”  
(Das K Preface ii)

Of course, she passed her childhood joyfully because she was born into a prestigious and wealthy family. She grew up in well-to-do households with many servants. She has written this memoir to explore the influence of patriarchal dominance in the society of her childhood. *A Childhood in Malabar* is a reflection and richly detailed account of her memories of growing up in Malabar and Calcutta. This memoir depicts the society of her time, which was thoroughly dominated by male authority while women were considered the embodiment of love, affection, and care but confined to household work. She recalls her grandmother saying, “I had been in Amamma's care for about two years. A period during which she had drawn the deepest satisfaction for rubbing freshly made coconut oil into my hair every day, then washing out the oil with powdered green gram, drying my hair and combing it neatly.” She further recollects about her grandmother, “Amamma was no feminist but she was extremely feminine which must have been why she discovered heaven itself in her husband's demonstrations of affection and in attending to his needs [.....] He was thoroughly male what he needed was a sweet-natured and soft spoken wife.” “You must never say anything offensive to your husband.” These were the words her grandmother repeatedly told the author.

She recounts that her father failed to perform his responsibilities when she was a child. Her father never cared for her. So she was deprived of fatherly love. She recalls, “When I was nine, my father, coming home on leave,

found me to have become too rustic for his liking and immediately admitted me into a boarding school run by the Roman Catholic nuns. I went with him in a taxi, carrying with me a long black box shaped like a child's coffin in which my grandmother had packed my meager belongings." In this way, the seeds of male-centric ideas were sown from her childhood that her father never cared for her, which had been growing with her age, and so her marital life was also disturbed. Her voice of courage sprung from her writing, encouraging all-generation women to fight against patriarchy, oppression, and rights.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, **Sukanya Rahman** wrote a masterpiece memoir on Indian dance and dancers, *Dancing in the Family: An Unconventional Memoir of Three Women* (2001). The trio is Esther Luella Sherman, aka Ragini Devi, her daughter Indrani Rahman, and Sukanya "Baby" Rahman. Ragini Devi, an American woman from Minneapolis, was convinced she had been a Hindu in a previous life and was reincarnated to devote her life to Indian dance. She helped to rescue ancient Indian classical dance forms threatened with extinction under British rule in India and was instrumental in the revival of Kathakali dance, now one of the more familiar Indian styles. Her daughter, Indrani Rahman, continued this pioneering effort. She helped revive the long-neglected Odissi dance and presented Indian classical dance throughout the world with her troupe of dancers and musicians. Sukanya, granddaughter to Ragini and daughter to Indrani, carried on the family tradition by teaching and performing the Bharata Natyam, Odissi, and Kuchipudi styles of Indian dance in the United States and other countries. In a historic performance in New York City shortly before Ragini Devi died, the three generations danced together in what Ragini called "the climax of my life," seeing the pure tradition safeguarded by Indrani and Sukanya.

**Vidya Rao**, a proficient practitioner of the delicate art of singing Thumri and Dadra, is also the writer of a memoir on her guru, the late Naina Devi, *Heart to Heart: Remembering Nainaji* (2011). Vidya began to learn music in her childhood, which was spent in Hyderabad. "Although I never consciously thought of becoming a professional singer, I was always very serious about music," she says. After her graduation in Madras (now Chennai), she joined the Delhi School of Economics to do an M.A. in sociology. It was in Delhi that she became a student of Professor B. N. Datta to learn classical music. She joined the Centre for Women's Development Studies as a researcher and worked there for five years. It was singer Shubha Mudgal who suggested it; rather, she cajoled her to learn from Naina Devi after Datta passed away. Thus began the exciting musical journey that saw the emergence of Vidya Rao, the performing artist. While she later learned from several maestros like Mani Prasad, Shanti Hiranand, and Girija Devi, it was Naina Devi with whom she spent the most time and, in the course of her conversations, learned both about music and life.

Naina Devi's life was extraordinary. At the age of 17, she was married to Ripjit Singh, the youngest son of the Maharaja of Kapurthala. Widowed at 32, she distributed 300 acres of agricultural land among landless peasants, gave away her exquisite clothes and jewellery, moved to Delhi to lead a life of austerity, and started singing as Naina Devi so as to protect the dignity of her in-laws. Spending long hours with her while learning and talking has obviously given Vidya a rare insight into music and life and the way they influence each other.

Another great contemporary memoir of classical music is **Namita Devidayal's** *The Music Room* (2008). In this memoir, the memoirist portrayed the stories of her childhood. She was born into a family of business people, where girls were brought up to believe that finding a good husband and knowledge of extracurricular activities like music and dance was a dream. In the second phase, she narrates her journey in music and her lessons under the guidance of Dhondutai Kulkarni. In this memoir, she narrates not only' but also the thoroughly lived lives of Dhondutai, her teacher Kesarbai Ketar, and other Hindustani classical music scholars.

“As for Namita Devidayal, she had had the privilege of learning music from ‘*gaanjogini*’ Smt. Dhondutai Kulkarni and to become a part of the exquisite lineage of the famous and one of the oldest of the Gharanas, Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana. Dhondutai, who is a singer of her own stature, learnt from Ustad Natthan Khan, Ustad ManjiKhan and Ustad Bhurji Khan (sons of Ustad Alladiya Khan, the founder of the Gharana. She is also the sole disciple of legendary Smt. Kesarbai karkar. *The Music Room* (2007) is an account of Devidayal’s lifelong traditional and rather unconventional ‘*guru-shisya*’ relationship and musical journey with Dhondutai Kulkarni that expands for not less than three decades.” (Roy 53)

**Sonia Faleiro's** *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars* is originally a memoir under the mask of narrative non-fiction. As mentioned above, we have seen Dalit as a marginalised community; here, the writer narrates the community of marginalised dancing girls.

Sonia Faleiro's *Beautiful Thing* is the painstaking story of a bar dancer. She met many bar dancers and conducted hundreds of interviews with them. Faleiro meets Leela, a bar dancer, in 2005. Through her character, Sonia Faleiro gives a clear picture of the world of bar dances, a world of sex, violence, gangsters, ugly politicians, policemen, and prostitutes. Leela is a nineteen-year-old girl who is dancing in the Night Lovers bar on Mira Road. Leela tells Sonia Faleiro about her past. She was from Meerut, a small town in the north. She was a good student, but she was banished from the classroom and playground. Her father, Mahohar, used to beat her simple-minded mother, Apsara. He did odd jobs in the military cantonment in Meerut. He wanted Leela to act in blue films. When she refused, he sold Leela to the local police station at the age of thirteen. At the police station, she was repeatedly raped and given some money. Her father bought a television set with the money they gave him. He forced her to visit the police station. One night, she escaped from him and got on a train to Bombay. Finally, she was caught by a woman whom she believed would help her. The lady had the brothel camp, which secretly imprisoned orphans and trafficked them as sex workers. Leela eventually found her way to the dance floor of Night Lovers. She learned how to attract customers by dancing. She likes to show her watchable body parts to customers, who are very pleased to see and touch her womanly parts. She proudly stated about her customers, “They think I dance for them, but really, they dance for me.” (Falerio 13) She became a dancer as well as a prostitute. When she was offered more money, she used to sleep with customers. In the beginning, Leela thought that she wanted to work as a dancer, not as a prostitute, but her conditions made her a sex worker. She and her friend Priya had a dream of being housewives and mothers. There is no pity and no sorrow. They knew that they were sucked by customers, and at the end, their



bodies were not needed by anyone. They dreamt that one day a rich man would come from the town, walk into the bar, fall instantly in love, and say, “Your past is your past.”

“Ameena was a prostitute. She was so small, so she could have been mistaken for a child. She must have been beautiful once. She had full lips and her thick, black plait coiled all the way down to the floor. But her skin was scaly and covered with a film of sweat and pouches under her eyes were the colour and fullness of ripe plums.” (Falerio 127) Apsara ultimately deserts her husband and starts living with Leela just like a parasite. She ate food, watched T.V. and thoroughly enjoyed her life, which was disliked by Leela.

Some of the prostitutes who get pregnancy were unable to bear the burden of the child. Sonia observed that they kill their own child. But soon they would realize that a child was not a table, it was not a chair. It must be fed, it must be clothed, and it needed toys. “One day the child will go to school. What will happen? I’ll tell you what will happen, because I have seen it with my own eyes. One day I happened to pass a *kachre ka dabba* (*dustbin*) and in it, not even deep inside it, I saw a dead baby...It happened again. Another *kachre ka dabba*, another baby.” (Falerio 130) Sonia eventually proves that poverty makes criminals of everyone. The narrative ends up Sharma, in charge of a bar, expresses his long-time experiences about these women who had big dreams. "She will sell her daughter, even if she is her only child, her only family, because her mother sold her, and who is her daughter to deserve better?" (Falerio 211)

### Conclusion:

Indian women memoir authors draw our attention to the weaker aspects of society. They are not claiming or arguing for their rights in their writings, but they are expressing their inner urges, desires, hopes, and dreams in the form of memoirs. It is found that they are not happy in the environment where they grow or have been growing. They have aptly chosen the genre of memoir as a medium to express their inner urges and feelings.

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