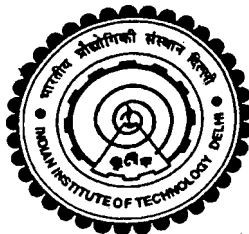


**ENGENDERING TRANSGRESSIONS:
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS OF LATE
19TH CENTURY INDIAN WOMEN REFORMERS**

by
Sheeba Sarah Härmä (née Mathen)
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

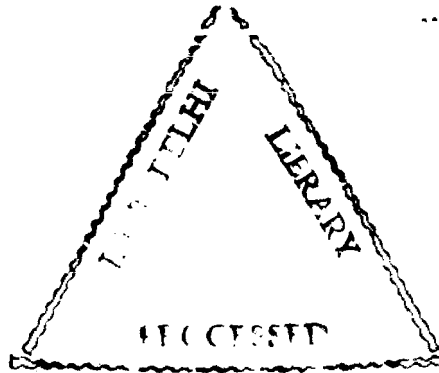
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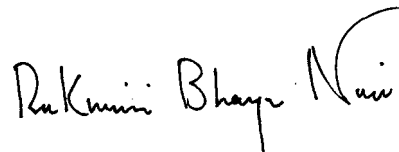
Dedicated to
Parul and Lalitha
Two resilient individuals in a South Delhi slum
who deal with the sharp end of many of the issues touched upon in this thesis

CERTIFICATE

It is certified that the thesis entitled '**Engendering Transgressions: autobiographical writings of late 19th century Indian women reformers**', being submitted by **Ms Sheeba Sarah Härmä (née Mathen)** to the Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy**, is a record of bonafide research carried out by her under my guidance and supervision.

This thesis or any part thereof has not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma.

April 19, 2002



(Supervisor of the student)

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Sheeba Sarah Härmä (née Mathen)

Abstract

This thesis is a study of the autobiographical writings of women in the 19th century that deals with women's reform and education. The reason I have taken up this particular area is to bring into focus these ignored texts whose transgressive voices have so often had an untimely death. For me personally, as someone works in the educational area of social reform, these texts are more than mere thesis material. This thesis draws material from the lives of women at many points in time and from many positions in their lives. By focusing on women's resistance and social reform in this thesis, my primary aim is to foster a broader conversation for ground action relating to women's education. This conversation on ground action arises out of the women's writing about themselves and the representations of women that circulate through such writings. These works illustrate the infinite variety of ways in which women have reflected upon, reacted to and initiated social change by resisting the gendered conditions of their lives. Throughout this work, I have chosen not to promote any particular feminist/gender/literary theory, but rather to emphasize that these lived experiences are relevant to grassroots social activism and reform. There have been many discussions in universities and academia on gender issues, women's experiences, concepts of 'woman', and on culturally specific ideologies relating to the social role of gender. However, we need to realise that women's studies and gender studies first arose out of social movements and hence women's writings on their own experience of the injustice they have suffered under patriarchy are still crucially relevant to work in social reform. Women at the grass roots level are likely to relate much better to such life writings than to any complex insights from

feminist/postcolonial or gender theory. Hence my interest in this thesis is to connect grass roots social reform and women's education as directly as possible with women's autobiographical writings. It is for this reason that I have brought together the experiences and thoughts of several women on gender and social change so that they bear upon the issue of how gender has mattered and continues to matter on the ground. Since I have directed my attention in this research towards the possibilities of social change and need for women's education in India, my thesis here is straightforward. Although these writers dealt with many issues that demanded questioning in their social times, like the situation of widows, child marriage, the age of consent and sati, it has to be noted that the underlining basis of their need to voice these concerns publicly was to campaign for the educational reform of women. It is this aspect that I wish to highlight and here lies the significance of the work.

I have titled this thesis 'Engendering Transgressions' because, the writings of the women I am engaged with, describe the social taboo those women had to break through during the late 19th century, and the different ways in which they rebelled against or transgressed that order. Their 'new' identity after transgressing the set social order of their time was seen to be highly individualistic, strong and engendered. What these women thus shared was the need to respond to the unjust situation of women's position in society and the need to enhance the education of women in India.

The status of Indian womanhood was first conceived of as an issue relevant to both British imperialists and the Indians in the 1820's. In an age that inaugurated social

reform in India, women like Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Rashsundari Debi, Cornelia Sorabji etc wrote to critique existing patriarchal and imperialist structures. Considering that writing itself was a transgressive act in their case, they however remain relatively unknown in modern India and their names do not even appear in the card catalogues of most leading libraries and are not studied thoroughly in the realm of sociology/women's studies. Hence the desire to rescue these works from their hitherto fragmentary existence and to link them with the situation of women in the present century is the main motive behind this endeavour. However, to avoid the danger of homogenization, each text is read separately to highlight the writers' differences in their approach.

Chapter One is an introductory chapter highlighting the genre of autobiography in Indian literary studies. It introduces the texts on which the study is based and shows how the autobiography connects three key notions in this thesis - transgression, reforms and finally 'engendering'. Chapter Two entitled 'Transgressions: 19th century reformers and the breakthrough in social norms' trace the history of women's reform movements in 19th century India. Here, I show how the issues taken up in these autobiographical texts by women all concern 'transgressions' triggered by practices like child marriage, female infanticide, the denial of education, denial of rights for widows etc. The texts themselves are divided into two chapters for analytic purposes, even though segregating them thus causes some violence to the integral connections between them. Chapter Three deals with empowered female subjectivity in Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Rashsundari Debi and Cornelia Sorabji. These women were vocal primarily with regard to issues relating to

widows, widow remarriage and rights, child widows, women of the zenana, female infanticide and the right to education. In Chapter Four, I deal with the matter of religious conversion and the avenues that were opened as well as denied to women who converted to the Christian faith. Laksmibai Tilak and Krupabai Sattianadhan are the two writers I deal with in this section.

Chapter Five entitled 'Final Considerations', treats all the issues dealt with individually by the writers as a whole and relates them to the notion of 'subaltern' or 'third world' women, the idea of nationhood as symbolised by as well as conceived of by Indian women, their empowerment - all in relation to the genre of autobiography. Hence the genre itself is seen as the arena of those who are socially displaced and shows that life-writing as a genre gives vent to suppressed emotions and struggling voices of individuality. Chapter Six, which is the concluding chapter, relates the social issues discussed in these 19th century women's autobiographies to socio-cultural issues in the present day postcolonial postmodern 21st century. Here, I stress the need to recognize these women voices and to study them not only as literary texts but also as sociological and anthropological ones, and to relate these writings to the area of social activism and reform, specifically to the area of women's education.

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