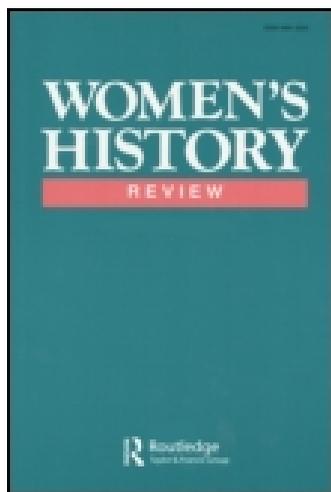


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# Performing the Political Self: a study of identity making and self representation in the autobiographies of India's first generation of parliamentary women

Annie Devenish

*Although India boasts a number of prominent women politicians, there remains little critical scholarship on the agency and contribution of Indian women in politics post independence. Responding to this gap, this article explores how identity and agency is articulated in the autobiographies of three influential women who were part of India's first generation of women in post independence politics: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903–1988), Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1900–1990) and Renuka Ray (1904–1997). Using the framework of intersubjectivity—the notion of the construction of the self through a wider network of social relations and identities—this article analyses how these women performed the political self in their autobiographies by positioning their lives within a larger matrilineal lineage in their narratives. Situating themselves as the inheritors of their mothers' and grandmothers' struggle for social reform and education, who in their own lives take this legacy forward by their entry into political activism and statecraft, they emerge as pioneers in their public careers. Through their encouragement and criticism of their daughters' and granddaughters' generation, they both distinguish their specific generational contribution, but also put forward*

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*a challenge to this new generation to return to the Gandhian values and developmental strategies that shaped their political world view.*

Over the past decade, a heated debate has been brewing in India's national Parliament around the introduction of a pioneering piece of legislation which, if passed, will dramatically change the landscape of parliamentary politics. The Women's Reservation Bill mandates 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha be reserved for women candidates. Supporters of the Bill argue that securing the presence of a critical mass of women within institutions of power is vital if women's interests are to be adequately addressed. Opponents emphasise that the Bill's agenda of empowerment is merely a front for upper class and caste interests.<sup>1</sup> The framing of this debate reflects an ongoing concern in Indian politics with the agency of women politicians, and the extent to which the political sphere offers women the scope to operate as subjects, rather than objects in the hands of other vested interests. India boasts a number of prominent women politicians from poetess Sarojini Naidu through to Indira Gandhi, the country's first female Prime Minister, and yet there remains little critical scholarship on Indian women in politics post independence. For example, were such women able to negotiate the nexus of class, caste, familial and religious identities to construct personas as political subjects? Did the political sphere offer them the possibility of liberation from the constraints of gender relations, or rather reproduce and reinforce these?

This article engages with some of these questions, by exploring the construction of the self in the autobiographies of three politically active Indian women: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and Renuka Ray. These women cut their political teeth in the Indian nationalist movement of the 1920s where they actively participated in the struggle against British colonial rule, then, after independence in 1947, moved into various public careers in politics, government and civil society. The eldest of this cohort, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1900–1990), is best known as diplomat and sister to Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister (1947–1964), but she also pursued a successful political career which was well established by the time she entered the world of diplomacy. Between 1946 and 1962, she became an established figure on the international stage serving as Indian ambassador to Soviet Russia, the United States and Mexico, England, Ireland and Spain, and headed several Indian delegations to the UN, before returning to politics in 1962 as Governor of Maharashtra and a Member of Parliament. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's (1903–1988) career moves in a circle from an early interest in the arts, particularly theatre, into nationalist politics in the 1920s, and after independence returns to its original artistic orientation through her involvement in the co-operative movement and the development of Indian handicrafts. After committing herself passionately to the nationalist struggle as a teenager, Renuka Ray (1904–1997) was sent by her father to study Economics at LSE in the early 1920s. This was followed by her marriage to Satyen Ray, a civil servant whose job postings in rural India brought Ray into contact with village life and its problems. In the 1930s, she was able to apply this experience to the nationalist

cause when Gandhiji asked her to volunteer in his village reconstruction programme, after which her career in social and constructive work took off. She continued to pursue her commitment to women's rights, rehabilitation and welfare after independence as a Member of Parliament and as a Cabinet Minister in West Bengal.

These women came of age at an important moment in India's anti-colonial struggle. By 1920 Mahatma Gandhi had emerged at the helm of the country's leading independence organisation, the Indian National Congress, and was transforming nationalist politics through Satyagraha, a form of peaceful civil disobedience against British rule that aimed to expose the moral bankruptcy of colonialism. Satyagraha took a variety of forms, including protests, courting imprisonment, boycotting British institutions and foreign products, and rural constructive work, and was a key strategy in the struggle for *Purna Swaraj*—the achievement of complete political, economic and moral independence. Gandhiji's first major Satyagraha campaign, the Non-Cooperation movement (1920–1922), opened up nationalist politics to middle-class Indian women for the first time. Ray, Pandit and Chattopadhyay were part of a generation of women who were able to pioneer political careers by entering the nationalist movement at this moment, and were able to deepen these initial gains through their participation in the later Civil Disobedience movement (1930–1931) and the Quit India campaign (1942–1944).

Another area in which this generation of women was able to break new ground in the 1920s and 1930s was in electoral and parliamentary politics. Although the franchise was only universally granted to Indian women under the Constitution in 1950, the colonial government devolved certain functions to educated Indians at provincial level. This devolution gave a small number of Indian women the right to vote and to be elected or nominated to provincial legislatures.<sup>2</sup> Pandit's political career began this way when she was elected to the municipal board of Allahabad city Council, and later in 1937 was made a state minister in the United Provinces government. Ray sat on the Central Assembly in 1943 while Chattopadhyay stood unsuccessfully as a candidate in the Provincial elections in Madras in 1927. Their credentials in the nationalist struggle, together with their early electoral and parliamentary experience, facilitated the entry of Pandit, Ray and Chattopadhyay into public life after independence, where they continued to break new ground, building and shaping India's nascent democracy.

Reflecting on their public careers the authors began to write and publish their autobiographies in the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, adding their voices to a growing body of Indian life writing. Autobiography as a form of postcolonial life writing provides a useful analytical tool for feminist scholars enabling the 'recovery' of women's voices from history.<sup>3</sup> Telling one's story requires a narrator; to have a voice one must have an identity as an individual. As Carolyn Steedman notes, one of the tacit assumptions accepted by scholars working with this genre is that writing is linked to subjectivities, the urge to tell the self is part of the process of self construction.<sup>4</sup> This self is not constructed in isolation but through the perspective of the 'self in society', inflecting the individual life through 'a wider

network of relations and identities'.<sup>5</sup> The intersubjective or relational nature of identity construction has been identified as a feature of post-colonial and women's life writing by scholars such as Tess Cosslett, David Arnold, Stuart Blackburn and Bart Moore-Gilbert.<sup>6</sup> And it is precisely this intersubjectivity that makes these autobiographies useful tools for exploring how this generation of women negotiated within this nexus of social relations and historical forces to construct an identity for themselves as political subjects.

While the 'selves' in these autobiographies are remembering how their political careers were shaped by the social relations and historical forces of their time, this process of remembering takes place against the backdrop of a more recent period of Indian history, the 1970s and 1980s. The crafting of Pandit, Ray and Chattopadhyay's autobiographical characters in relation to this latter context transforms these texts into sites of self performance for their authors, providing a stage upon which the narrator consciously performs a 'public' version of themselves who engages with the 'present' context of their audience.

### **On Being Our Mothers' Daughters: pioneering a new identity from social reform to nationalist politics**

The autobiographies of Ray, Chattopadhyay and Pandit display a number of characteristics conforming to the western canon of modern autobiography. They all present a chronological narrative, at the core of which is their political and social development as individuals. And yet these narratives are really about the nationalist story of India's struggle for freedom and its development as a country from their perspective as participants. The development of the autobiographical subject around the 'axis of the nation' where the political self develops in relation to a collective political consciousness defines these texts as typically postcolonial.<sup>7</sup> Ray, Chattopadhyay and Pandit's accounts offer detailed descriptions of various political personalities and events of their time, and are intertextual, weaving historical documents such as letters, speeches and photographs into their recollections, making these narratives mini historical archives.

One of the ways in which these women perform the self in relation to this larger historical account is through positioning themselves as part of a matrilineal lineage within their narratives.<sup>8</sup> Ray, Chattopadhyay and Pandit situate themselves as the inheritors of their mothers' and grandmothers' struggle for social reform and education for women. In their own lives, these women take this legacy forward expanding and re-orientating it by their entry into political activism and statecraft, while through their encouragement and criticism of their daughters' and granddaughters' generation, they both distinguish their specific generational contribution, but also put forward a challenge to this new generation to return to the Gandhian values that shaped their political world view.

It is within their family environments that these authors' political conscientisation first occurs and where their early sense of gender justice is ignited. The autobiographies of all three of these women begin with several chapters on their family background, emphasising both the politically and socially progressive nature of

their home environments. Renuka Ray recalls growing up ‘with nationalist slogans of “Bande Mataram” and “Swadeshi”’ and ‘longing for the liberty of our country’ in her middle-class Bengali home in Calcutta.<sup>9</sup> Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay remembers her mother as a ‘staunch nationalist’ who ‘had a lot of political literature lying around’ the family home in Mangalore.<sup>10</sup> Pandit’s political consciousness developed in her affluent family home in Allahabad where prominent nationalist characters were often invited to socialise.<sup>11</sup>

The close interlinking of nationalism with social reform is evident in the families of Ray, Chattopadhyay and Pandit, who supported both the freedom of Indian subjects from the British Raj, and the freedom of Indian women from the shackles of ‘backwardness’ and ‘custom’. Launched by male reformers, such as Rammohun Roy and Pandit Vidyasagar, in the early nineteenth century, the Indian social reform movement promoted the ‘modernisation’ of Indian women through education and social reform.<sup>12</sup> The work of historians such as Lata Mani, Uma Chakravarti, Partha Chatterjee and Tanika Sarkar has questioned the real motives behind this movement, arguing that Indian nationalists used the discourse of social reform to construct an identity for themselves as progressive citizens deserving of independence from British rule, and that consequently women became objects rather than subjects within this discourse.<sup>13</sup> This may indeed have been the case, but it does not preclude the possibility of women taking advantage of the new opportunities opened to them by social reform for their own development as individuals. Although the movement was initiated by male reformers, by the second half of the century pioneering women such as Pandita Ramabai, Anandibai Karve and Parvatibai Athavale, had also taken up this cause. These women were role models for Ray, Chattopadhyay and Pandit’s mothers and grandmothers, offering a new example of how middle-class women could carve out a professional identity in the area of social work.

For the authors, in turn, the identity of their mothers and grandmothers provided inspiration for their own lives, and played a major role in the development of their nationalist consciousness and their sense of gender equality. In their autobiographies, the matrilineal inheritance of the narrators is deeply woven into their broader sense of family identity and inheritance. On the very first page of her autobiography, Renuka Ray describes her mother Chandra as ‘an early feminist’ who ‘believed in equality of the sexes’ and who had passed many of her ideals onto Ray and her siblings.<sup>14</sup> Kamaladevi describes her independent and well travelled maternal grandmother as ‘a colossus who strode across my life’.<sup>15</sup> She recalls that many of her mother’s heroines were contemporary freedom fighters such as Annie Besant and Pandita Ramabai, reminding her daughter that she too ‘could become a crusader’ like them.<sup>16</sup> In Pandit’s life, her brother Jawaharlal Nehru and her father Motilal Nehru were the most influential figures both personally and politically; however, she too describes with pride a number of female relatives in the opening chapters of her autobiography. These included her remarkable grandmother, Indrani, who taught herself how to read and write in Hindi and her cousin’s wife, Rameshwari Nehru, who ‘was the only woman’ invited by the British government to sit on a committee to fix the age of consent for girls.<sup>17</sup> Pandit

begins her story by positioning her mother as traditional and orthodox, belonging to the old world of India, in contrast to her progressive and westernised father. In her narrative her parents represent the 'two Indias' of her generation, 'the young India of today and the ancient land of yesterday'.<sup>18</sup> As her life story progresses and the Nehru family become involved in the nationalist struggle, Pandit describes how her mother is invigorated when she is brought out of her limited world of home and family by participating in Gandhiji's Satyagraha campaigns.

In describing their matrilineal lineage in their autobiographies, these women tell the story of 'Indian woman', from ancient Vedic times through to her 'awakening' and participation in social reform and nationalism. This larger narrative is one of collective empowerment and agency, but it is told within the personal frame of the narrators' own lives and experiences. Take, for example, Renuka Ray's chapter entitled 'Women in India', which introduces this history as part of her own family narrative by describing her mother's reform activities among rural women in Bengal. These orthodox women adhered to the practice of Purdah, the seclusion of women in the home and outside world from the sight of men. To Ray they appeared 'totally alien' from the women she knew because their restrictive dress, behaviour and mobility represented a 'past world' in the context of her childhood family where the values of social reform had freed her mother to go out into the world to pursue a professional career.<sup>19</sup> In Pandit's autobiography, the artefacts of her family history become national history, as she tells us how her mother's 'bloodstained sari', worn during a Satyagraha protest where the police charged, was still preserved in a museum in Allahabad.<sup>20</sup>

By outlining their matrilineal inheritance, Ray, Chattopadhyay and Pandit set the scene for the entry of their characters into the public sphere. The watershed moment for Ray 'and for many of my generation' was the special Congress session in September 1920 in Calcutta where Gandhiji outlined his Satyagraha programme.<sup>21</sup> Ray, who was only sixteen at the time, recalls how she met Gandhiji for the first time and 'it changed my life'.<sup>22</sup> Pandit's first meeting with Gandhiji also took place at this crucial moment. She remembers being 'carried away' and donating her jewellery to the cause after Gandhiji called on volunteers to collect money to help the families of those arrested in his 1920 Satyagraha campaign.<sup>23</sup>

Kamaladevi first entered nationalist politics in 1923 when she was invited to become a volunteer in the *Seva Dal*, an organisation established to train satyagrahis. Shortly after this, she became involved in the Congress Youth movement. By the time of her participation in Gandhiji's 1930 Salt Satyagraha, a campaign against the British monopoly on the manufacture of Indian salt, she was beginning to show real leadership potential. Chattopadhyay's descriptions of this campaign, which ignited the Civil Disobedience movement, convey a sense of making history and breaking boundaries. In setting the scene, she writes that although India has had a long 'illustrious tradition of women warriors', that the Salt Satyagraha marked 'their first appearance in any modern militant political campaign'.<sup>24</sup> She goes on to recall that while signing her name on the campaign pledge, 'It seemed such a stupendous moment in my life, in the life of the women of my

country. I felt I was tracing not the letters of my name but recording a historic event'.<sup>25</sup>

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, there were a few prominent women leaders in Indian politics, such as Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant, but they were exceptions and, as Geraldine Forbes points out, their role within the political sphere was largely symbolic.<sup>26</sup> It was Gandhiji's entry into Indian nationalism in the 1920s and the non-violent nature of Satyagraha that facilitated the entry of women into politics as active participants.<sup>27</sup> Gandhiji argued that it was Indian women's moral purity and their capacity for self sacrifice and service that made them ideal nationalist workers. A highly gendered and class-based understanding of their role as wives and mothers both facilitated their participation in nationalist politics, but simultaneously defined and restricted the nature and scope of this participation.<sup>28</sup> What is significant about Gandhiji's political philosophy was the fact that he saw 'women not as objects of reform and humanitarianism but as self conscious subjects who could, if they chose, become arbiters of their own destiny'.<sup>29</sup> Their entry into the nationalist movement at this moment provided these authors with the opportunity to establish political careers for themselves as active participants and later leaders within this movement. By positioning themselves as pioneers in their matrilineal lineages, these women strove to carve out a role for themselves as autonomous subjects. In this way, their autobiographical characters emerge not as products of the social relations and political forces of their time, but rather as individuals who have negotiated a sense of political and personal identity within these relations and forces.

### **'An Asian victory': Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and the politics of international diplomacy**

Although Pandit held high-ranking representative positions as part of Congress government both before and after independence, reflecting on her public career in her autobiography she describes herself as belonging to the world of international diplomacy, rather than that of contemporary politics. On her ambassadorial career she comments, 'I have always felt equally at home in both worlds, the East and the West'.<sup>30</sup> In contrast she describes herself as out of place 'In the political field after independence', stating 'I am not a politician. The ways of modern politics are not my metier'.<sup>31</sup> Pandit's identification as a diplomat by nature enables her to create a subject position for herself in her autobiography, which distinguishes her contribution to nation building from that of her family's role within the sphere of nationalist politics. This position also allows her to distance herself from the erosion of democracy associated with the leadership of her niece Indira Gandhi in the 1970s.

Pandit's heritage as a member of the Nehru family and her nationalist credentials gave her a legitimacy and profile on the international stage, while her Western-orientated upbringing familiarised her with the social etiquette and cultural milieu of the United Nations. This familiarity allowed her to socialise and negotiate with these representatives—a vital skill for a delegation leader.

Combined with her diplomatic aptitude, these abilities helped establish her popularity in this arena, where she was elected the first women President of the General Assembly in 1953, a major achievement in the masculine and Western dominated field of diplomacy.

In her role as an international diplomat, Pandit successfully manages to draw on her family identity as sister of India's first Prime Minister, and her collective identity as the embodiment of 'Indian womanhood', but she does not allow these two identities to subsume her in this role; she uses them strategically and stamps her own personality and vision onto the job. She performs her diplomatic career as being self-made through a process of learning, growing and developing. So when Gandhiji first persuades her to lead a diplomatic mission in 1946, she says that she was 'horrified' feeling completely unqualified for such a role.<sup>32</sup> Later on, while talking about her time at the UN, she states that she does not think that any ambassador was 'on the mat' as often as she was during her career with all the new the terms and ideas.<sup>33</sup> But she soon found her feet and later reflected that she 'taught herself a great deal by reading' and that at the end of the day 'I feel that my record was not wholly undistinguished'.<sup>34</sup>

Moving and thriving in what was at that time a highly masculine world, Pandit's career as an international diplomat offered her the opportunity to challenge gender stereotypes. She confesses how she enjoyed the ongoing surprise she created in the 1946 UN session where many people struggled to reconcile her presence with 'their firmly established view of an Indian woman—a clinging vine subservient to all manner of caste restrictions'.<sup>35</sup> On another occasion, she reminisces about how the question of whether she should be treated as a man or woman at formal dinners agitated the UN chief of Protocol. Pandit always insisted as firmly as possible that she would 'join the men for cognac and cigars'.<sup>36</sup>

During her time as leader of the Indian delegation in United Nations, and later in 1953 as its President, Pandit captured the world's imagination by drawing on the symbolic power that Indian women represented in the public sphere to promote the principles at the heart of India's foreign policy, such as independence for colonial territories in Asia and Africa. As an empowered woman who was able to engage with the world's political players on her own terms, she conveyed India as a new nation state grounded on the principles of equality, freedom and empowerment. It is quite possible that Gandhiji aimed to take advantage of this symbolism in choosing Pandit to lead the first Indian delegation to the UN in 1946. The Mahatma had been monitoring the deteriorating situation of Indian subjects in South Africa, and was especially alarmed when the government passed the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946, which restricted the property ownership and land rights of Indians living in the province of Natal. Gandhiji tasked Pandit with ensuring that this issue was inscribed on the UN's agenda. In successfully bringing discrimination against Indians in South Africa to the World's attention, Pandit set a precedent for all colonised people, ensuring that violations of their rights would no longer be accepted silently. In her autobiography she describes this success as 'An Asian victory'.<sup>37</sup> It was not only a personal or

even national triumph, but became a symbol of the right to freedom for all Asian peoples around the world.

**‘No category of women as appendages to their husbands’: Renuka Ray and the politics of outspokenness**

In the final chapter of her autobiography, Renuka Ray reflects on her life, stating that she cannot claim to have been a pioneer in social and educational work, as her mother and grandmother had paved the way before her, but that the one area where she had been a ‘proud pioneer’ was that ‘without breaking up married life I established the right of wives of those in public service to follow their own independent career’.<sup>38</sup> This, she states, set a precedent for future generations of women, in that it ‘establishes that no category of women can be treated as appendages to their husbands’.<sup>39</sup> Ray’s achievement is significant especially considering her husband, Satyen Ray, was a prominent civil servant (Chief Secretary to the Minister) in West Bengal. Prior to independence, this placed the couple in opposing camps with Satyen working for a British-ruled India, while Ray was challenging this India through her nationalist activities.

Ray was a pioneer not only in her ability to balance an independent public career with a family life, but also within her political career. She was the first woman to hold a state cabinet post as Minister of Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal (1952–1957) and was a long-standing Member of Parliament (1947–1952 and 1957–1967), during which time she was an outspoken advocate for the reform of social laws relating to women. She also held strategic influence within the Congress Party as a member of its executive committee. Ray’s autonomy, her ability to ‘be her own person’, within the networks of her personal relations extended into the professional networks of her political career as well. She tells us that ‘Since the time of Mahatma Gandhi I had always been able to express my viewpoint even when I differed with the party and sometimes won my point also’.<sup>40</sup> This became one of the defining features of her political personality post independence where her vocal criticism of Congress policy at certain moments enabled her to maintain a sense of autonomy, and a sense of a distinct and individual political orientation, rather than being defined merely as a Congress politician. In her autobiography, she describes how she was part of ‘a small minority’ who opposed Nehru and Congress over the degree of protection accorded to private property in the Indian Constitution.<sup>41</sup> Ray was chosen by this group to move their proposed amendment calling for changes to the property rights clause and she appendixes an extract from the speech she gave in support of it in her autobiography. This outspokenness surfaces again in her parliamentary career when she joined the Socialist Study group in Parliament which ‘did not endear me to the party bosses’ who felt she had moved too far to the left.<sup>42</sup>

Ray defines herself as a pioneer in her matrilineal narrative because of her success in separating her public and private worlds, thereby ensuring that her political persona remained removed from her identity as ‘Mrs Satyen Ray’. The framing of her autobiography however reinforces the interdependence of the

public and private. Ray was only able to develop a successful public career because of the support of her husband, 'whose deep understanding' as she states in her dedication of her autobiography, 'made it possible for me to pursue public activities without jeopardizing family life'.<sup>43</sup> Ray's public career, indeed the performance of her very life story, was only made possible by the existence of this overarching narrative relationship, which introduces her autobiography to the reader.

### **The rebel artist: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and the politics of self expression**

While Gandhiji's Satyagraha campaigns enabled women to take up active roles in independence politics, they still demanded that women adhere to a certain moral and social code of behaviour. Just as the performance of Ray's political career was made possible by the support of her husband, so Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's performance is constrained by the absence of a supportive husband and stable family life. First married as a child bride in 1917 and widowed two years later, Chattopadhyay defied Hindu tradition by remarrying Harindranath Chattopadhyay, the younger brother of Sarojini Naidu, at the age of twenty. This was a love match with both young people sharing a passion for amateur theatre and creative writing. But Chattopadhyay was unprepared to tolerate her husband's aggressive temperament and so defied tradition once again to divorce in 1933. With divorce being a taboo in India during this period, her respectability was likely to have been tarnished by the breakup of her family life and this could have negatively affected her career prospects in party politics.

Chattopadhyay describes her withdrawal from political affairs as a decision prompted by the changing nature of politics with the coming of independence: 'As Freedom came, service was replaced by struggle for positions of power ... To me the beacon lay elsewhere, in the side lanes of creative and constructive work'.<sup>44</sup> Within her autobiography, however, there is a tension between her statements which dismiss an interest in a political career, and her actions as a political figure. Her active participation within the nationalist movement and her involvement as a founding member of the Congress Socialist Party defined her as someone who was intensely interested in the political sphere and was trying to carve out a space as a political actor.<sup>45</sup>

The events in Chattopadhyay's personal life might help us to better understand her disavowal of politics. Reena Nanda, one of her more recent biographers, argues that Chattopadhyay's political prospects in the Congress party were indeed impeded by her personal life, and that this marginalisation began in 1936 when Gandhiji, concerned that her divorce made her unsuitable moral role model, was influential in blocking her appointment to the Executive of the Congress.<sup>46</sup> Chattopadhyay mentions none of this in her autobiography. As her title, *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces*, suggests, her narrative separates the story of her public career, the outer self which intersects with the world, from the private self lodged within inner recesses of her relationships and emotions. This right is claimed in the opening paragraphs of her story when she says that regardless of the recent trend towards the personal in autobiographical writing that she did

not feel required 'to lower the barriers of the discreet reticence which govern our everyday life'.<sup>47</sup> In telling her life story, Chattopadhyay would have been caught between what Arnold and Blackburn describe as the 'desire to tell the truth and an equally intense desire to regulate it'.<sup>48</sup> The silence in her narrative offers a way to resolve these conflicting aspirations by removing her personal life from her autobiographical performance, providing a form of self protection from the public gaze.

Chattopadhyay disentangles her professional and personal narratives, writing the latter out of the script of her life story. Her life experience, however, like that of Ray, illustrates the interdependence of the public and the private spheres. Her career in party politics shows how the patriarchal power relations of the family—that define notions of social respectability—infiltrate the political sphere, constraining the freedom and choices available to individuals who rebel against such conventions. On one level Chattopadhyay's life trajectory can be interpreted as one defined by external constraints. Yet she emerges as an agent within this trajectory through her ability to negotiate determinedly and creatively around these restrictions. Like Pandit and Ray, her career in arts and handicrafts development emerges as a professional path that is self made, marked by her own personality, creativity and political orientation. With party political avenues narrowing, local economic development and refugee rehabilitation through arts and crafts provided an alternative path which allowed Chattopadhyay to reconcile her political and creative selves: 'Training, planning and the active fight for freedom exhilarated me, though politics was not my medium of expression'.<sup>49</sup>

Chattopadhyay's focus on the revival of village handicrafts as a means of sustainable livelihoods illustrates the way in which she combined the Gandhian philosophy of village regeneration and self sufficiency, her own socialist belief in co-operative development and decentralised power, and her love of traditional Indian arts and crafts. She diverged from a more traditionalist and romantic Gandhian approach to village revival, however, by being a pragmatist who realised the need to adapt crafts to make them marketable and desirable for a modern audience.<sup>50</sup> Chattopadhyay used her career in the development of rural arts and crafts for an explicitly political purpose. She was not just concerned with the preservation of craft forms for their aesthetic value, but also with how crafts and cottage industries could create livelihoods to ensure the survival of communities: 'At the core of the artist was a socialist politician whose interaction with peasants and workers had given her an insight into poverty and problems of rural artisans'.<sup>51</sup> Her career therefore provides not only an interesting case study of the way in which this generation of women interpreted, developed and implemented Gandhian philosophy, but also challenges conventional understandings of the boundaries of the political.

### **As Our Daughters' Mothers: engaging with the second wave women's movement**

These autobiographies were written to tell the past, but they are equally concerned with shaping the future. Ray, Chattopadhyay and Pandit wrote and published their

stories during the Prime Ministership of Indira Gandhi (1966–1977 and 1980–1984), a time of political and social upheaval in India. Responding to this turbulent climate, a new wave of social movements began to emerge, including a second wave women's movement, which articulated a very different culture and political ethos compared to the movement in which the authors' feminist consciousness had matured. One of the influential developments igniting this movement was the publication of the *Towards Equality Report* in 1974, which revealed that constitutional equality and legal reforms had not improved the quality of life for the majority of Indian women; in fact their quality of life had actually deteriorated. This research raised many questions about the legacy of the first wave movement.

These women's autobiographies attempt to engage with the politics of this emerging second wave in several ways. Firstly their stories are concerned with enabling this younger generation to understand the events of their time, as Ray puts it in her preface 'through the eyes of my generation'.<sup>52</sup> Situating their public careers as ground-breaking performances within a longer matrilineal narrative functioned to ensure that their pioneering contributions to women's empowerment and nation building would be acknowledged, and not overlooked or misinterpreted with the writing of a revisionist nationalist history. A message which is clearly articulated in the closing of Pandit's narrative when she pays 'heartfelt tribute' to her colleagues in the women's movement who she emphasises 'built the road' upon which the next generation of women 'can walk forward today'.<sup>53</sup>

While Pandit, Ray and Chattopadhyay's generation tended to distance themselves from their gendered identity in the public sphere, claiming the right to participate in this sphere on the basis of merit and citizenship, the second wave women's movement was deeply concerned with notions of difference and how these shaped power relations in the public sphere, not only differences between men and women but also differences of class and caste. This movement criticised their predecessors for their middle-class orientation which they argued ignored the needs of peasant and working class women. Ray, Pandit and Chattopadhyay, in turn, offer a response to this criticism warning of the dangers of an identity politics founded on difference. Pandit stresses in her autobiography that India had never needed a suffragette movement because 'there was no antagonism between the sexes'.<sup>54</sup> While Chattopadhyay laments the 'great tragedy' of contemporary women 'isolating themselves from a cohesive society'.<sup>55</sup> Rejecting difference enabled this generation of women to articulate an identity for the Indian women's movement which was distinct in approach and character from that of the women's movement in the west, and allowed the authors to claim equal citizenship and empowerment through merit, rather than through special treatment. Her generation, Chattopadhyay reminds her readers 'never sought reservations for women in any sphere. Nor nominations on bodies as *women* but because they qualified as citizens'.<sup>56</sup> Pandit, Ray and Chattopadhyay's disapproval of identity politics also needs to be understood within the political context of their time. During the nationalist struggle and the early years of independence when a fragile new nation consisting of many interests groups had to be held together, difference

often acted as a divisive force—as the painful partition of the subcontinent demonstrated. Ultimately however the inability of the authors to acknowledge difference limited the type of freedom that they were able to envision for women in the public sphere, and in so doing marginalised the voices of other classes and castes of women in their autobiographies.

## Conclusion

Pandit, Ray and Chattopadhyay's careful crafting of their autobiographical characters reminds us as readers of the 'artful, interpersonally negotiated and politicized construction of life stories'.<sup>57</sup> This cohort of women articulates a unique subject position for themselves in their autobiographies by situating their characters as pioneers within a longer matrilineal narrative and, in turn, within the larger story of India's birth and development as a nation. Their life stories allow the scholar to analyse not only their performance as autobiographical subjects, but also the refashioning of the authors as political subjects. Pandit, Ray and Chattopadhyay worked hard to develop public careers that were self-made; careers marked by their personalities, political orientations and creativity, which defined them not as the products of the social relations and political contexts of their time, but as subjects who were able to negotiate an individual identity for themselves within this context. But the possibilities for refashioning themselves as political subjects were also limited by the gender relations of their day, as the trajectory of Chattopadhyay's public career suggests, and their historical context, which blinded them from the very real divisions amongst Indian women. Although they warn their daughters and granddaughters of the danger of creating disunity through the politics of difference, it is precisely such a politics that enables this next generation to take the legacy of Ray, Chattopadhyay and Pandit forward. By using difference to reveal and challenge the way that power operates within Indian politics, this next generation of women follow in the pioneering footsteps of these authors, opening up the public sphere to new categories of Indian women.

## Notes

- [1] N. Menon (2000) Elusive 'Woman': feminism and the Women's Reservation Bill, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35(43/44), pp. 3837–3838.
- [2] See V. Agnew (1979) *Elite Women in Politics* (New Delhi: Vikas), pp. 110–112 and Geraldine Forbes (2009) *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 106, 124.
- [3] Liz Stanley (2000) From 'Self-made Women' to 'Women's Made-selves'? Audit selves, simulation and surveillance in the rise of the public woman, in Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury & Penny Summerfield (Eds) *Feminism and Autobiography: texts, theories and methods* (London & New York: Routledge), p. 41.
- [4] Carolyn Steedman (2000) Enforced Narratives: stories of another self, in Cosslett et al., *Feminism and Autobiography*, pp. 25–26.
- [5] David Arnold & Stuart Blackburn (2004) Introduction: life histories in India, in David Arnold & Stuart Blackburn (Eds) *Telling Lives in India: biography, autobiography and life history* (Delhi: Permanent Black), pp. 19, 21.

- [6] Ibid., pp. 19, 21.
- [7] Bart Moore-Gilbert (2009) *Postcolonial Life-Writing: culture, politics and self representation* (London & New York: Routledge), p. 25.
- [8] Drawing on elements of matrilineal identity within life histories as a way through which to frame and construct the self has been identified by several scholars working in the area of postcolonial life writing. See, for example, Sara Scott & Sue Scott (2000) *Our Mother's Daughters: autobiographical inheritance through stories of gender and class*; Tess Cosslett (2000) *Matrilineal Narratives Revisited*, both in Cosslett et al., *Feminism and Autobiography*, pp. 128–140 & 141–153; and Kirin Narayan (2004) 'Honour is Honour After All': silence and speech in the life stories of women in Kangra, North-West India, in Arnold & Blackburn, *Telling Lives in India*, pp. 227–251.
- [9] Renuka Ray (1982) *My Reminiscences: social development during the Gandhian Era and after* (New Delhi: Allied), p. 5.
- [10] Kamala Chattopadhyay (1986) *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces: memoirs* (New Delhi: Navrang), pp. 18, 23.
- [11] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1979) *The Scope of Happiness: a personal memoir* (New York: Crown), p. 64.
- [12] These laws, such as The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, were concerned with removing customs such as sati and child marriage.
- [13] See, for example, L. Mani (1998) *Contentious Traditions: the debate on Sati in colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Uma Chakravarti (1999) *Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, nationalism, and a script for the past*, in Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid (Eds) *Recasting Women: essays in colonial history*, pp. 88–126 & 27–87 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press); Partha Chatterjee (2001) *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question*, in Gregory Castle (Ed.) *Postcolonial Discourses: an anthology*, pp. 151–166 (Oxford: Blackwell); Tanika Sarkar (2001) *Hindu wife, Hindu Nation: community, religion and cultural nationalism* (London: Hurst & Co).
- [14] Ray, *My Reminiscences*, p. 1.
- [15] Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces*, p. 15.
- [16] Ibid., p. 18.
- [17] Pandit, *The Scope of Happiness*, pp. 27, 31.
- [18] Ibid., pp. 34–39, 24.
- [19] Ray, *My Reminiscences*, p. 73.
- [20] Pandit, *The Scope of Happiness*, p. 144.
- [21] Ray, *My Reminiscences*, p. 15.
- [22] Ibid., p. 15.
- [23] Pandit, *The Scope of Happiness*, p. 86.
- [24] Ibid., pp. 152–153.
- [25] Ibid.
- [26] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, pp. 122–123.
- [27] Madhu Kishwar (1986) *Gandhiji and Women* (Delhi: Manushi Prakashan), p. 22.
- [28] See, for example, Forbes (1998) *Women in Modern India*; Jayawardena Kumari (1994) *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Atlantic Heights); Gail Minault (Ed.) (1981) *The Extended Family: women and political participation in India* (Delhi: Chanakya).
- [29] Kishwar, *Women and Gandhiji*, p. 1.
- [30] Pandit, *The Scope of Happiness*, p. 318.
- [31] Ibid., p. 319.
- [32] Ibid., p. 205.
- [33] Ibid., p. 214.
- [34] Ibid., p. 318.

- [35] Ibid., p. 214.
- [36] Ibid., p. 251.
- [37] Pandit, *The Scope of Happiness*, p. 208.
- [38] Ray, *My Reminiscences*, p. 265.
- [39] Ibid., pp. 265–266.
- [40] Ibid., p. 227.
- [41] Ibid., p. 52.
- [42] Ibid., p. 51.
- [43] Ibid., Dedication.
- [44] Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces*, p. 385.
- [45] Reena Nanda (2002) *Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay: a biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 34.
- [46] Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces*, pp. 78, 82–84.
- [47] Ibid., p. 2.
- [48] Arnold and Blackburn, Introduction, p. 17.
- [49] Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces*, p. 385.
- [50] Nanda, *Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay*, p. 155.
- [51] Ibid., p. 138.
- [52] Ray, *My Reminiscences*, Preface.
- [53] Pandit, *The Scope of Happiness*, pp. 312–313.
- [54] Ibid., p. 313.
- [55] Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces*, pp. 123–124.
- [56] Ibid.
- [57] Narayan, ‘Honour is Honour After All’, p. 249.