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Reading the Autobiography of
Muthulakshmi Reddy**

Anandhi. S

Associate Professor

Madras Institute of Development Studies

MIDS Madras
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by Anandhi. S.

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Madras Institute of Development Studies
79, Second Main Road, Gandhi Nagar
Adyar, Chennai 600 020
Tel.: 2441 1574/2589/2295/9771
Fax : 91-44-24910872
pub@mids.ac.in
<http://www.mids.ac.in>

The Manifesto and the Modern Self Reading the Autobiography of Muthulakshmi Reddy¹

ABSTRACT

In defining the modern selfhood, Indian autobiographies of men not only privileged the 'public self' but also defined the boundaries of the public and the political through articulation of the masculine self as rational and enlightened which could transcend the contingencies of desire, affectivity and the body. In the process, they constructed the female self as the embodied, non-modern 'other' that belongs to the affective domain of the private or domestic, especially in the context of modernity. Women's autobiographies, on the other hand, offered a counter-public discourse by imagining an alternate modern selfhood that challenged the elision of masculinity and modernity by reconstituting women's subjectivity as political subjects in the modern public sphere. In narrating the gendered experiences of modernity women's autobiographies have adopted a form known as 'Autobiographical Manifesto'. The manifesto form enabled women to narrate their experiences of oppressions and exclusions from the public sphere and gave a call for new political collectivity and imagined future possibilities for modern selfhood. This paper attempts to analyse the autobiographical manifesto of a middle-class feminist from colonial Tamilnadu, S.Muthulakshmi Reddy who was the first woman medical graduate from the Madras presidency, the first woman to be elected as a member to the legislative council in British India, an ardent Gandhian nationalist who tirelessly campaigned against the Devadasi system and child marriage and one who brought about a range of welfare measures for women. The paper critically engages with her two autobiographies to explain the limits of manifesto and the modernity to radical politics.

Keywords : Women's Autobiography, Autobiographical Manifestoes, feminism, political citizenship and gender, modernity, women's movement, women's political participation, Tamilnadu.

Precisely because it calls into question the subject of a putatively universal, revolutionary “we”, the manifesto form is helpful in tracking the vexed efforts of feminist women to enter, occupy and reconstruct the public spheres of modernity by means of manifestoes and related polemical tracts. The use of the manifesto form by women challenges the assumptions about an ideal universal subject (Lyon 1999: 39).

Purposeful, bold, contentious, the autobiographical manifesto contests the old inscriptions, the old histories, the old politics, the ancien regime, by working to dislodge the hold of the universal subject through an expressly political collocation of a new “I” (Smith 1993 : 157).

I

Life writing or writing autobiographies by Indian men have been and continue to be an act of fashioning for oneself a modern selfhood. Despite such an openly avowed desire to court the modern, the Indian autobiographies differ distinctly from the Western ones. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, if the interiorised ‘private self’ ‘pours out incessantly’ in Western autobiographies, Indian autobiographies authored by men foreground their ‘public’ self — as if they narrate a world of ‘public without private’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 95). Similarly, Sudipto Kaviraj notes that Indian autobiographies are informed by ‘a reticence about the private’ (Kaviraj 2004).

Such singular emphasis placed on the ‘public self’ by Indian men in their autobiographies needs to be understood as a strategy of defining centers, margins and boundaries of the public and the political, through ‘the differential deployments of gendered subjectivity’ in the specific context of modernity (Watson and Smith 1992: xvi). In presenting a public self as oriented towards enlightened rationality transcending the contingencies of ‘desire, affectivity and the body’, these autobiographies represent its ‘other’ as embodied, non-modern, and belonging to affective domain of the private or domestic.² In other words, as Rita Felski has argued, what one finds here is a conflation of the modern with the masculine and an ‘equation of modernity with particular public and institutional structures governed by men at the cost of total elision of the lives, concerns and perspectives of women’ (Felski 1995:16).

In contrast to men’s autobiographies, women’s autobiographies offer a counter-public discourse by narrating women’s experience of modernity as different and by publicly staging such experience to reconstitute women’s subjectivities in ‘radically new ways’ (Sarkar 1993).

We have a vast body of literature today by feminist scholars which shows that by imagining an alternative modern selfhood, women's autobiographies differ from the conventional autobiographical form employed by men and challenge the elision of masculinity and modernity.³

One such autobiographical form that effectively negotiates a place for the 'modern woman' as a political subject in the modern public sphere is what Sidonie Smith has called as the 'Autobiographical Manifesto'. Writing about manifesto as a modern enunciative form of address, Janet Lyon, for instance, argues, that it 'narrates in no uncertain terms the incongruous experiences of modernity of those whose needs have been ignored or excluded in a putatively democratic political culture.'⁴ According to her, '...the manifesto is the form that exposes the broken promises of modernity... [they] chronicle the exclusions and deferrals experienced by those outside the 'legitimate' bourgeois spheres of public exchange' (Lyon 1999: 2,3). Similarly, the autobiographical manifestoes of women invoke 'identification around various experiences of oppression and exclusions from the central or centrifugal bourgeois public sphere and its ideology of universal subject' and imagines future possibilities of emancipatory politics. Further, through narrations of the experiences of the self, autobiographical manifesto of women, as Sidonie Smith argues, not only gives a call for new political collectivity but also brings about a "standpoint epistemology" of the experiences of modernity by hitherto marginalized (Smith 1993: 159).

Against the background, this paper attempts to excavate the possibilities and constraints of the autobiographical manifesto as a self writing form by analyzing the autobiographical writings of Muthulakshmi Reddy, a middle-class feminist from colonial Tamil Nadu. On a different register, it also engages with the inherent limits of modernity to radical politics.

II

Born to a Brahmin father and a devadasi mother,⁵ Muthulakshmi Reddy, the first woman medical graduate from the Madras Presidency (1912), was the first woman to be elected as a member of the legislative council in British India (1926-30). She became the first woman ever to become the Deputy President of a legislative council world over. As a legislator, she effectively campaigned for and brought in legislations to abolish the Devadasi system and child marriage. She also took up a range of welfare issues that favoured women. This included the medical inspection in girls' schools, exemption of poor girls from the payment of school fee,

maternity and child welfare, and medical aid to women. As a political activist, she lobbied for reservation of seats for women in various governance structures such as municipalities, District and Local Boards, and the police force. Protesting against the arrest of M.K.Gandhi in 1930, Muthulakshmi Reddy resigned from the Madras legislature but continued her political and public activities within the women's movement and also in the national movement.

Muthulakshmi Reddy began her political career by joining the women's movement in 1917 and, over time, she held various important positions in the Women's India Association and the All India Women's Conference. She became the president of Women's India Association in 1931 and that of the All India Women's Conference in 1933. She also edited the well-known multilingual woman's quarterly *Stridharma*,⁶ which promoted Indian nationalism as well as international feminism. It is her commitment to build the solidarity of women internationally, she traveled to Paris in 1926 to participate in the International Congress of Women and to Chicago in 1929 to deliver lectures on the women's movement and political citizenship. Despite being a committed nationalist, her influence cut across party lines. For instance, in 1937, when the nationalist Congress Party decided to contest election for the legislative councils, she was invited both by the Congress and the Justice party (which represented the interests of the non-Brahmins and treated the Congress as a party of Brahmins) to contest the election from their platform. However, she, given her political loyalty to Gandhi, chose to contest as a Congress candidate only to find that the local Congress leaders such as C. Rajagopalachari and S. Sayamurthi denied her a party ticket to contest the election. In 1937 she became the first Alderwoman of the Madras Corporation, a position that she resigned from in 1939 due to health reasons. Later in 1952, she accepted the Congress Party's offer of a membership in the Madras Legislative Council on the condition that the Congress in power would offer her a plot of land for a Cancer Hospital.

Muthulakshmi Reddy published her first 246-page autobiographical account, *My Experience As Legislator*, in 1930. It is a systematic documentation of her speeches and interventions made in the Madras Legislative Council from December 1926 until her resignation from the Council in 1930. It also provides accounts of her experiences and struggles of being the only woman legislator in a council full of men. She published her second autobiographical account, *Autobiography*, in 1964. It also gives us a detailed account of her public activities such as her membership in the British-run Social Service League, her honorary service as medical officer to the Widows' Home run by sister

Subbalakshmi Ammal, her work as the Joint Secretary of the Children Aid society, her association with various local women's organizations such as the Sarada Home and Women's Home of Service (Madras Seva Sadan), and her role in founding institutions such as Muslim Ladies Association and the Avvai Home. Interestingly, *Autobiography* is presented as a detailed documentation of her public activities with series of appendages of public events and personal accolades.⁷ Unlike her first autobiographical account, her second one gives details of her early childhood and 'domestic life'.

As she lays out in *My Experience*, her act of self writing was informed by a definite purpose. She writes,

In presenting this book to the public, I have two objects (sic) in view. The first one is to show to such of my sisters and others who still hold the view that women are created only for the home and men for the state, how women's activity could be profitably extended from the home to the city and how in the administration of the state as in the management of a household, women could co-operate with their men in promoting the well-being of that large family, the nation (Reddy 1930: xi).

First and foremost, this statement of Muthulakshmi Reddy seeks its audience in the community of women and identifies with them in the spirit of wider sisterhood. This is precisely what gives her autobiography the quality of a manifesto. It has a specific addressee and a message.⁸ Secondly, though Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that most women's autobiographies are about extended families, in Muthulakshmi Reddy's statement extended family becomes a politically enabling metaphor. This is a metaphor which unsettles the division between private and public, and treats the public domain as an extension of the domestic. In other words, the public is recovered here no longer as the domain of men but of women as well by defining citizenship rights and political subjecthood for women. Finally, the metaphor of nation as a large family opens us the space for affective qualities such as caring and nurturance, instead of the so-called enlightened rationality, as modes of conducting politics.

Within such a framework which foregrounds her role in the colonial public domain, she offers events from her life as an instance of how women could and need to become political subjects. Her appeal to women to take part in the public sphere is based on her understanding that the specific problems and concerns of women would otherwise not be articulated. For instance, while narrating her experience of participating in the International Conference of Women's Suffrage Alliance in Paris in

1926, Reddy insists on the need to recognize that 'women have grievances of some kind or other and suffer persecution, injustice and inequality of treatment' and that women's interests are different from that of men whose selfishness and claim to superiority 'inflict many hardship on women' (Reddy 1964: 42). Men being the source of women's problems, in her view, women's participation in public life alone could serve their interests. As she wrote, 'To see women from 42 countries both near and distant come to Paris to take part in the deliberations of the Congress, not for themselves, not even for the sake of their country, *but for those of their sex*, [emphasis mine] whether West or East was an inspiration indeed' (Reddy 1964 : 41).

Claiming women's interest as different from that of men, Muthulakshmi Reddy also argued that women's modes of political response need to be different and autonomous of male response to political events. Yet again, this is an invitation for women to occupy the modern public sphere. Her autobiographical accounts are replete with instances of her distinct response to colonialism as a woman activist in the public domain, in contrast to male nationalists. Reasoning why she accepted to serve on the Hartog Committee (an auxiliary body of the Simon Commission) even as male nationalists boycotted it, she averred that it was because of her appreciation for the colonial officials, Philip Hartog and Stratham, who 'had great sympathy for the women's cause in India' and that they were 'favourable to women's aspiration for more and better education and equal rights and equal opportunities'. Despite her pronounced anti-colonial politics, in various sections of her autobiography she acknowledges and appreciates the contributions of the colonial government and missionary women towards women's education and medical services (Reddy 1964: 37, 39, 96).

Muthulakshmi Reddy gives instances of how her political strategy was not fixed but contingent on the situations. For instance, when it came to male legislators, she kept herself above factions and parties as their favour is needed to get bills enabling women passed:

Very Often I would envy the gentlemen members when I see them sitting together in groups and parties and discussing matters of public importance. As I desired to be above all parties, I could not join any of those political groups and therefore I was left to myself and I had to get on as best as I could except in the cases of bills for which I could not but seek help of one or two, of the senior legislators in the council (Reddy 1930: 48).

It is precisely such a strategy based on the contingent which offered

her the space to be critical of nationalists even while being an ardent nationalist. For instance, in her autobiography, she readily and openly appreciates the Justice Party leaders, despite her strong loyalty to the Congress Party, for their support to her legislation on abolition of Devadasi system. In contrast, she severely criticizes much respected nationalist leaders such as C. Rajagopalachari and S. Satyamurthi.⁹ Narrating in detail how Rajagopalachari and Satyamurthi refused to offer a party ticket to her to contest the legislative council election and how the former, without consulting her, amended one of her bills, she writes, 'he [Rajagopalachari] is a reactionary in regard to social reforms, particularly in the emancipation of women' (Reddy 1964 : 105).

Significantly, for Muthulakshmi Reddy it is women's experience in the domestic sphere which can differentiate their politics from that of men. Reddy did treat conjugality and maternal duties as a heavy burden for women. Reflecting on her reluctance to get married even at the considerably late age for that time (she got married in 1914 at the age of 26), she notes, 'I did not want to become saddled with marriage and become subordinate to a man whomsoever he may be. I had seen in my place the ill-treatment accorded to wives by their husbands. So I did not want to be one of such victims of man's superiority and domination' (Reddy 1964: 18).¹⁰ What one notices in her second autobiography is the refusal to narrativise her experiences of conjugality and motherhood as merely personal and makes suggestions for viewing these as collective experiences of women who encounter modernity.¹¹

Yet, she privileges women's maternal role and motherhood qualities of caring and nurturing as important qualities that need to be extended to the public life. In both her autobiographical accounts, she invokes the motherhood image to define women's responsibility in the public sphere. For instance, while discussing her efforts to bring about reservation of seats for women in local administration such as the Municipalities, Reddy cites her arguments made in the Legislative council about extending women's responsibilities as wives and mothers to the public work:

In regard to the importance of women serving on these municipalities, I contend that the functions of a municipality are in a large measure the functions of a house...But what are the duties of a woman in the house? Her duty is to keep the house tidy and clean, to prepare food for her husband, to look after the children and to see that they get adequate medical relief and proper education....when the women are recognized as mistresses of the house, why not our City fathers consider them as such as in the

administration of municipalities (Reddy 1930:157).

Thus, she refuses to treat women's experience of conjugality and motherhood as merely personal or private and treats it as women's collective resource to reinvent a new politics. In other words, maternal duties are a burden *only* if they are tied to domestic sphere and women need to bring it to the modern public sphere.

To sum up the argument so far, Muthulakshmi Reddy's autobiographical writings incite women to become part of the public sphere by giving a series of reasons by positioning her own life as an instance. They include the need to articulate the distinct concerns of women in the public, the need to employ political strategies that are different from that of men, and the distinct women's domestic experience and affective qualities.

While Reddy's autobiographical writings, in their orientation as a manifesto, invite women to be part of the public domain, she also shows that it involves a refashioning of the self and involves sacrifice. Writing about her life as a legislator and a public activist, she writes,

...I had to read all the dailies both in vernacular and in English to be in touch with the views of all parties in the country... In addition, I had to participate in many meetings, to enlist public sympathy and support for my bills and resolutions...Further I had not only to be writing to the press to educate the public but also had to organize large women's meetings in support of my social and moral reform measures. I had to correspond with social and missionary workers in the districts. My correspondence increased to an enormous extent as I had letters from England, Geneva, America, and France in addition to local and provincial correspondence (Reddy 1930: 85).

Such repositioning oneself as a political subject required privileging duties to the public over the domestic or private demands. And this necessarily involved sacrifices of different kinds. For example, as Muthulakshmi Reddy was in the thick of working towards getting the act on the Suppression of Brothels and Immoral Traffic passed in the Madras legislature, she was caught in a conflict:

...on the 31st Day [the day allotted for the final discussion on the amendment to the bill], a dear and near relation of mine was taken suddenly and seriously ill. I had to tear myself away from his bedside and with indescribable pain and anguish of heart, I went to the Council that day... As my father was lying unconscious and

did not respond to my prayers, I had the consolation that very soon his spirit would bless me for having discharged my duty to the public! (Reddy 1930 : 201-202).

And the need to combine domestic and public responsibilities (after all, the public is an extension of the domestic in Reddy's argument) can also burden women who choose for themselves a political subjectivity in the public sphere. Talking about the need to balance her domestic demands and her career as a doctor, she writes, 'As a mother I had to look after my delicate baby day and night and as a wife I had to look after my domestic duties and as a medical officer I had to do justice to my profession. I found it a great strain as well as a hardship to go through all these duties... nobody could imagine the pain and suffering which a woman especially a wife and a mother, nay an educated and economically independent woman, has to go through especially when the husband is not very co-operative in the economy of the family' (Reddy 1964 : 22).

Yet, for Muthulakshmi Reddy, such alienation from the domestic sphere and participating in the public sphere rewards one with a new affective community of women transcending the narrow limits of domesticity. Of her own involvement with the international feminism, she wrote thus: 'My stay in England for one year and my delegation to the World's Conference of women which was held in Paris in June 1926 has brought me in touch with many able women workers and useful women institutions from whom I have been receiving many valuable literature on Health, education and Moral and Social Hygiene for which I cannot but be too grateful to those good and noble women of other climes' (Reddy 1930: 84). In other words, though repositioning women as a modern political subject in the public sphere involved sacrifices, there was also adequate reason for them to do so.

III

So far we have seen how Muthulakshmi Reddy has used her autobiographical writings as a means of not only constituting a modern subjectivity to herself but also inviting similarly placed other women to partake in the modern public sphere. While autobiographical manifestoes can open such space for radical politics, the very form of manifesto also simultaneously sets limits to such politics. Identity being central to manifestoes, they also function as an act of boundary making and hence of exclusion. Now let me turn to how such limits inform Muthulakshmi Reddy's autobiographical manifesto.

In her autobiographical writings, Muthulakshmi Reddy clearly

identifies educated women with 'respectable' social standing as the ones who could not only become 'cultured and modern citizens' serving modern public institutions such as the legislature but also could speak for the rights of other women (Reddy 1964 : 47). One needs to note here that both her autobiographical accounts were written in English and thus demarcating her audience as English-reading women. Muthulakshmi Reddy's position on which women could make a claim on the modern public sphere could be a result of many different influences. If her own class location as a privileged educated woman accounts for it partly, it could also be an outcome her association with Gandhian nationalism¹² which was grounded on so-called notions of women's respectability¹³ (Anandhi 1997: 209-210). Above all, it could be a result of the nature of the colonial public sphere itself that demanded certain competencies such as access to English as a way of gate-keeping the public domain (Pandian 2007). In any case, her manifesto strategy becomes one of what Sidonie Smith calls 'mimesis' i.e., miming the subjectivity of the universal man in order to proffer 'authority, legitimacy and readability' (Smith 1993: 17, 157). This is so despite the fact that she invoked difference as the basis for the need for women to participate in the public sphere.

In contrast to the educated women of respectability, she uses the ideals of 'sexual hygiene' and 'hygienic femininity' as moral categories to produce a discourse of difference to prevent other women from accessing modern public sphere.¹⁴ For instance, while discussing the Devadasi problem, Reddy continuously represents them as 'victims of traditions' who are 'ignorant of healthy living' since they have been trained only 'to lead an immoral life, to lead a life of promiscuity, a life leading to the disease of the mind and the body' and their bodies as oversexed ('set of prostitutes set up by their keepers') (Reddy 1930: 56). She also represents them as lacking in thinking abilities that, according to her, could be achieved only through modern education. Further, she characterizes Devadasis' counter-discourses¹⁵ which question the arguments of reform as 'unworthy literature' and claims their associations as 'bogus associations' representing the interest of women standing for backward traditionalism and obstructing the path of progress of all women towards achieving a modern subjectivity. For instance, while narrating how some devadasis resisted her efforts to get the Bill on Devadasi abolition passed in the Legislative Council Reddy in despair commented,

The people [The Devadasis] that had not the courage to oppose me openly in public began to work underhand and set up one or

two bogus associations to write petitions to Government and distribute unworthy literature to the public to prevent my bill becoming law (Reddy 1930: 58).

Most significantly, the devadasis emerge in her discourse as embodied in opposition to being rational, a characterization which men used to exclude women in general from the public sphere. According to her, they were 'propagators of social evil and carriers of venereal disease' (Reddy 1964: 44-45). It is important here to take a look at how Muthulakshmi Reddy consciously sublimates her sexual self in order to emerge as a modern political subject. All through her writings about her experiences of conjugality and motherhood, she makes continuous efforts to dislodge her self from the embodied, the sexualized, and the eroticized so as to seek a modern selfhood. First of all, she negates the body as embedded in the aesthetics of the self or in the structure of feelings. Instead, she medicalises it (as in her extensive description of the medical aspects of her deliveries) or de-eroticizes it by restoring it to certain pure motherhood devoid of sexual desire (Reddy 1964: 21-35). But, in the context of lower class and uneducated women such as the Devadasis, she presents them as embodied and disenfranchises them from the public domain.¹⁶

In short, she legitimizes the 'moral authority' of the few educated women ('only a few educated women of the land can speak, on behalf of our sex') like her, who are supposed to be capable of rational thinking, to speak on behalf of the entire womenfolk (Reddy 1930: 62, 160; Reddy 1964: 47). Thus, Muthulakshmi Reddy presents her claim (and that of similarly placed women) to modern selfhood as an 'intellectual and political vanguard at the forefront of history' and thus effectively represents the 'other' women and their varied negotiations with different aspects of the societal life as in need of reform.¹⁷

What is more, in recovering the educated women as an unsullied category not inflected by other identities, Muthulakshmi Reddy also denies space for the articulation other subaltern identities. Caste, which was squarely on the political agenda in the Madras Presidency during that time, is a case in point. All through her autobiographical writings, she tries to recover and present her gender identity as if it was independent of her caste identity.¹⁸ For instance, when she mentions about her European professor's curiosity about her caste background since she excelled in her medical studies, she evades an engagement with the issue and quickly moves to talk about her experiences of being the only Hindu woman in the medical college.¹⁹ Caste however finds its place in her autobiographical accounts as belonging to the unenlightened

others. They are either the yet-to-be reformed devadasis or her Yadhava neighbours who were illiterate and had many children. Indeed, she went on to describe the demand for separate electorates for the 'untouchables' by Ambedkar and others as a demand of 'narrow minded communalists' (Reddy 1964 : 66, 78-79, 101) .

In short, Muthulakshmi Reddy's autobiographical writings show us the limits and possibilities of autobiographical manifesto as a form as well as that of modernity as a political formation. While the manifesto form of autobiography uses life writing to 'represent a group to itself and invite similarly placed others to partake in its identity' (Pandian 2007: 2), the very fact that it is based on a bounded identity necessarily excludes. After all, identities not only forge solidarities but also erect boundaries. This is part of the reason why Muthulakshmi Reddy's politics, even while being radical in fissuring the male-controlled colonial public sphere, could not help othering lower class/caste women as embodied subjects unfit to be part of the modern public sphere and silencing subaltern identities such as caste. The other part of the reason flows from the very logic of courting modernity. As Rita Felski argues, '...the idea of the modern is deeply implicated from its beginning with a project of domination over those seen to lack this capacity for reflective reasoning' (Felski 1995: 15). These dictates of modernity allows only a limited space for Muthulakshmi Reddy to recuperate women as political subjects. To participate in the modern public domain, she had to recover women as capable of reflective reasoning. By treating education and social standing as the source of women's capacity to reason, she had to exclude vast sections of women from the modern public sphere. This is so despite her efforts to make qualities such as affect and caring as part of the public sphere.

To put it differently, the feminist politics of the early twentieth century represented by Muthulakshmi Reddy deployed discourses of modernity which, as Sanjay Joshi has argued, was 'fractured' and often contradictory. In the fractured modernity co-existed universal claims and particularist assertions, advocacy of liberty, equality and authoritarianism. Even as the middle-class feminists like Muthulakshmi Reddy challenged the modernity's gendered politics of exclusion, inescapably they too recuperated a different logic of exclusion in their articulation of a 'new public'. Thus the feminist modern 'remained trapped within the contrary, fractured, modernity' and its politics of exclusion and power (Joshi 2005: 94, 174).

NOTES

- ¹ This paper is part of my book project on the political biography of Muthulakshmi Reddy. I am grateful to the Graduate School of Development Studies (GSID), Nagoya University, Japan for the visiting fellowship (August- November 2006) that enabled me to pursue the project. In particular I would like to acknowledge the help of prof. Atsuko Ohashi and prof. Nakanishi at GSID, Nagoya University and Padmini Swaminathan, M.S.S.Pandian and the anonymous reviewer for their critical comments on the draft of the paper. Usual disclaimers apply.
- ² For a detailed discussion on autobiography as gendered construction of selfhood, subjectivity and body see, Siddonie Smith, *Subjectivity, identity and the Body : Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indiana University Press , 1993). I have borrowed the above argument mainly from Judith Butler cited in Siddonie Smith, P. 11.
- ³ For interpretation of women's autobiographies and its engagement with gendered identities, collective selves and modernity see, Estelle Jelinek, *Women's Autobiography : Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1980); Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenck , *Life / Lines : Theorizing Women's Autobiography* , (Ithaca and London : Cornell University Press, 1988); Shari Benstock (ed.), *The Private Self : Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, (Chapel Hill and London : The University of North Carolina Press, 1988) ; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds.) , *De / Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
- ⁴ Janet Lyon's argument about how the manifesto engages with the problems of modernity is important to note here: According to her, it reconceives citizenship and political subjectivity of the marginalized by recasting the enunciations of modernity such as universal freedom, autonomy, equality and inclusion. See, Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes : Provocations of the Modern*, (Ithaca and London : Cornell University Press, 1999) p. 40.
- ⁵ Muthulakshmi Reddy does not mention her mother's devadasi background. It is only through other sources one could gather this information. For instance, the recent autobiography of an erstwhile famous Tamil film actor, Gemini Ganesan makes mention of Reddy's mother, Chandramma as a devadasi from Pudukottah state whose marriage with the Brahmin man (Reddy's father) leading to the excommunication of the family. C.S.Lakshmi mentions an interview with Muthulakshmi Reddy's distant relative Siva Brinda Devi who had talked about the Devadasi background of Muthulakshmi Reddy. See, *Gemini Ganesanin Vazhkai Varalaru* (Gemini Ganesan's Life History) cited in V. Sriram, *The Devadasi and the Saint : The Life and Times of Bangalore Nagarathamma* (Chennai : East West Books (Madras), 2007) and C.S. Lakshmi, *The Face Behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature*, (Delhi : Vikas Publishing House, 1984)
- ⁶ *Stridharma* was started in 1918 as a journal of the Women's India Association. It had at least 550 regular subscribers. Under Muthulakshmi Reddy's editorship, the journal became a political forum to articulate the feminist/nationalist agenda.
- ⁷ It is important to note here that by attaching verbatim transcripts of her speeches and through various narrative techniques and rhetorical devices Reddy presents her autobiographies in a mode of 'truth telling' mainly to convey the authentic nature of her arguments and experiences and also to legitimize her speaking position.

- ⁸ Felski and Lyon observe how the feminist manifestoes constantly invoke the unitary “we” to offer it as authentic voice of women and articulate as gendered solidarity. See, Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London : Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 152 and Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes*, p. 7.
- ⁹ When the congress party was elected to the Madras legislature, C.Rajagopalachari became the chief minister and he delayed the introduction of the legislation for abolition of Devadasi system. While narrating this incident Reddy strongly critiqued him thus: ‘... Shri C.Rajagopalachari proved to be an opponent of social reforms in our society’. See, Muthulakshmi Reddy, *Autobiography*, p.73.
- ¹⁰ In her second autobiography, there is an extensive narration of tensions and conflicts in her conjugal life pointing to how Reddy refused to consider the new domestic ideals upheld and practiced by the reformed household as self-fulfilling for women. See, Muthulakshmi Reddy, *Autobiography*, pp. 19, 20, 24, 27, 28.
- ¹¹ Her text here attempts to offer what Nancy Harstock calls as ‘a stand point epistemology’ of women’s experiences and suggest possibilities for treating such ‘private matters’ as public issues that ought to form part of women’s struggle. Nancy Harstock cited in Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, p. 159.
- ¹² It is interesting to note how her second autobiography is structured with sequencing of events etc to speak for her commitment to Gandhian nationalism and how she makes a conscious attempt to represent it as an ‘emancipatory politics’ for women. For instance, the section entitled “My First Meeting With Gandhiji at Madras” (she mentions this as an ‘auspicious moment’) is immediately followed by details of women’s meeting with Gandhi with the title “ The Beginning of Emancipation” though in the previous sections of the book she narrates in detail the wide variety of struggles launched by the women’s organizations to emancipate women and how she herself was enlightening Gandhi on issues of reform for women. For details of how she constructs Gandhian nationalism and women’s right, see Muthulakshmi Reddy, *Autobiography*, pp. 50-53.
- ¹³ The fact that a large number of Devadasis participated in the national movement and that they were in the forefront of the struggles did create anxiety among the middle- class women political activists who often resorted to the campaign of ‘sexual morality’ in public participation in order to distinguish themselves from the “others” and also to invisibilise the latter’s public activities. For details on the propagation of politics of respectability by the women nationalists in Tamilnadu, see, Anandhi.S., ‘Sexuality and Nation: ‘Ideal’ and ‘other’ Woman in Nationalist Politics, Tamilnadu, c. 1900-47’, *South Indian Studies*, no.4, July- December , 1997, pp. 209-210.
- ¹⁴ While reviewing Mina Loy’s *Feminist Manifesto* (1914), Janet Lyon observes how Loy manipulated the manifesto form to bring in the narrative ideal of republican motherhood even as it contested the anti-individualist representations of ‘woman’. Similarly Reddy manipulates her autobiographical manifesto to challenge the nationalist representation of women as representing tradition and ideals of modern domesticity and at the same time invoked similar images to debar a section of women from participating in the public political activities. Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes* p. 6
- ¹⁵ It is important to note here that the devadasis and their associations asserted their right to citizenship through the discourse of art and aesthetics and thus vehemently

discounted Reddy's discourse of sexual morality as the basis for public participation and citizenship. See, Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran, *Muvalur Ramamirthammal's Web of Deceit: Devadasi Reform in Colonial India*, (New Delhi : Kali For women, 2003) P.34 and also V.Sriram, *The Devadasi and the Saint..*

- ¹⁶ Having denied devadasis the right to the modern public sphere, Reddy constantly laments about women of 'education, 'real culture' and 'character' not coming forward to take to the public work. Reddy reflects thus : 'When I look round (sic) for help and sympathy for any of the above national –building and even relief measures, the educated free women are so few that I have to lament in despair at our sad plight' (Reddy 1930 : 63). She also raises concern about wives of government servants being prevented from taking part in active political life through denial of franchise etc (Reddy 1930 : 98) and this concern needs to be noted in the context of middle-class women's anxiety about the participation of devadasis in the national movement.
- ¹⁷ Commenting on middle-class women's politics of inclusion and exclusion, Rita Felski remarks that "Within this scenario, [middle-class women fashioning themselves as political vanguards] women of other races and classes were often depicted as primitive and backward, yet to be awakened to the light of feminist consciousness". See, Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p. 149.
- ¹⁸ For a detailed discussion on how the upper caste male representation of modern self-identity silenced caste and invalidated its presence in the public discourse see, M.S.S.Pandian, 'One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public sphere' (SEPHIS – CODESRIA : Amsterdam / Dakar : Vinlin Press, 2001).
- ¹⁹ In another instance, she mentions about the protest against her admission into the boy's college. But does not make mention whether the protest was due to her mother's caste background or her gender identity. Throughout the autobiography Reddy does not make mention of her mother's lower caste identity (Isai Vellala caste to which most devadasis belonged to) but represents her as a "pious, pure and Religious and loyal [wife]".

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