

[Bowman on Lambert-Hurley, 'Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia'](#)

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The following book review from H-Socialisms may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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Siobhan Lambert-Hurley. *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia*. South Asia in Motion Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018. 296 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-5036-0651-7; \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5036-0480-3.

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Muslim Women and Autobiography

“How dare the Taliban take away my basic right to education?” eleven-year-old Malala Yousafzai asked her audience at the local press club in Peshawar in late 2009.[1] She was accompanied by her father, Ziauddin, for the journey south, and this opportunity to speak out about female education was just one of many that he supported and nurtured. Three years later, on October 9, 2012, following an exam and seated on a bus home, Yousafzai was shot by a Taliban gunman. Her documentation of the Taliban occupation of her home district of Swat in Pakistan combined with the prominence she held following a *New York Times* documentary had made her a target.[2] Her outspoken criticism of Taliban occupation, coupled with her focus on the educational rights of women and children, resonated across the globe as she received treatment in Birmingham, United Kingdom. A year later she released her autobiography, *I Am Malala*, to the world. Her story is now known by millions, and she has become the young face of women’s education and an ardent advocate of human rights.

Perhaps a key factor in the success of *I Am Malala* is the entrenched stereotype it sought to challenge. As an autobiography written by a Muslim woman focusing on her own agency, the book is at odds with the Western image and idea of both autobiography as a genre and Yousafzai as the author. It led people to ask, explicitly and internally, why there were not more female Muslim autobiographies from Southeast Asia, whether women had a clear voice, and how this related to their faith and their gender. Siobhan Lambert-Hurley’s *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia* seeks to answer these questions. Through this meticulously researched and joyfully readable book, Lambert-Hurley interrogates the idea of the supposed lack of female Muslim

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autobiography and the historiographical trends that have supported this notion. Her work acts to “continue the feminist project of decoding a gendered self, [and] focuses on autobiographical writings by South Asian Muslim women” (p. 2). Lambert-Hurley challenges previous assumptions that Muslim women do not write autobiographies at all. By recasting the genre away from tired Western traditions of the chronicles of great men and switching the focus toward women, her detailed source base illustrates quite clearly that Muslim women do, and have, written autobiographies for many years now. Even more important is what this revelation reveals more broadly about ideas of the self, religion, gender, and empire for the history of Southeast Asia.

Lambert-Hurley’s source material is one of the greatest strengths of her work, and the bibliography is awash with over two hundred autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, family records, and other writings of the self—and those are just the ones that made it into the book. By recovering voices written not just in English but also in Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi, and Malayalam, and then analyzing how scripting a text in a certain language affects the purpose and readership, Lambert-Hurley further expands her view of Muslim autobiography. Each chapter is full of these source documents, supplementing and often leading the text itself in its historical analysis. Her inclusion of the process of collecting this varied and impressive source base in chapter 1 is a welcome one and illustrates the detailed research undertaken within this text. It also highlights the sheer chance in some cases of discovering certain writings. Lambert-Hurley describes how in a house in Karachi she literally tripped over a box containing a memoir written by Nawab Sultan Jahan Begam of Bhopal from the 1870s. However, this possibility that other materials were not so lucky as to have been found does not detract from *Elusive Lives’* source base. Rather, it further demonstrates Lambert-Hurley’s point that these writings can be everywhere and points to the optimistic view that future work will use new documents as they come to light. As Lambert-Hurley puts it, “like all history, then, this one is ‘partial,’ ‘unfinished’”(p. 26). This, however, is not a criticism of her book but points to an opportunity for new studies. Indeed, that is how *Elusive Lives* should be seen as a whole; it undertakes original and groundbreaking work and sets the agenda for future historical research.

Structurally the book consists of five chapters arranged around the simplest questions that can be asked of Lambert-Hurley’s sample: what, who, where, how, and why. As Lambert-Hurley elegantly notes, “inevitably for a historian, *when* is woven throughout” (p. 21). This clear and well-reasoned structure helps give shape to her wide source base, allowing for detailed analysis of the material not just retelling of the women who feature in the book. It also enables a more thematic overview of female Muslim autobiography, asking the broad questions across varied geographies, decades, languages, and classes. Due to their depth, both in terms of source material and wider historical arguments, each chapter warrants a brief breakdown. As a result, I will outline each individually in this review.

Chapter 1, which I have already touched on, details the process involved in collating such a vast sample. It follows Lambert-Hurley on her journey from the British Library and the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Library and Archives to small coffee shops and family houses embedded in a chain of “go and ask so and so.” It acts as a rare insight into the seldom seen groundwork of the historian. It also illustrates her love of her work, a fact apparent in each sentence of *Elusive Lives*. Highlighting her organic approach, as opposed to sometimes tiresome systematic investigation, this chapter points to the flow of Lambert-Hurley’s research as reflected within the covers of her

book. It is also in this chapter that the Western tropes surrounding autobiography are parked for a broader and more progressive attitude toward the genre.

Chapter 2, “The Sociology of Authorship,” moves from “what” to “who,” and asks which women precisely wrote autobiographies and suggests some of the “why.” As she puts it, “I develop this constellation of authors, time, and motivation ... I relate *who* writes to *when* and *why*” (p. 59). Lambert-Hurley suggests that there are five broad categories that can be employed in assessing who wrote: “courtly women, educationalists, writers, politicians, or performers” (p. 91). Although not airtight, the few outliers who exist still fit into her broader argument of why it was these women who wrote. Naturally education and literacy played some part, but in wishing not to linger on this more obvious fact, Lambert-Hurley goes further, asserting that “not all women who *can* write *will* write autobiographically—and, furthermore, some who cannot will” (p. 92). Rather what sets these women apart was the desire to write and by writing to accomplish something: be it chronicling life in the Islamic tradition; viewing life as a lesson; or in the case of some, achieving a long-lasting legacy, perhaps reflective of their lives as being remarkable or at least progressively different. The chapter concludes by summarizing: “doing something momentous was, above all, the motivation to write autobiography—though what was deemed momentous was, at least in part, contingent on gender, religion, and historical moment” (p. 95). Thus in assessing who wrote female Muslim autobiography, through the varied writings of many women, Lambert-Hurley explains the most common historical ambiguity in research—why.

Similarly, chapter 3, “The Autobiographical Map,” points to how it is not just the central question of each chapter that is key, in this case the “where,” but how this can be linked with why women wrote and to what end. The process of writing autobiography, Lambert-Hurley argues, is influenced by location both in the religious denomination or sect of an area and the language and expression of a locality that is carried throughout a text. Both these factors shape how a text was written and, arguably more important, read. In summarizing this “autobiographical map,” she writes: “this chapter asks how geographical, linguistic, and historical locations shaped the stories that South Asian Muslim women wrote about their lives” (p. 98). The link between geography and religion is at times muddled, and as Lambert-Hurley points out, autobiographical production varied between Muslim locales across India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The emerging trend, however, was one that reinforces the points made in chapter 2: that urban and educated elites were far more likely to write autobiographies. However, while larger cities were generally hubs of writing, as probability would suggest, her example of Aligarh, a relatively small town but one with a strong academic milieu, underlines the importance of education and class rather than size and population as determining factors.

The role of language was also important in how Muslim women wrote and were in turn read. As Lambert-Hurley notes regarding the assumption that Urdu was the main language of the Muslim world, “to privilege Urdu in this analysis would be to ignore the historical complexities of South Asia’s multilingual environment” (p. 107). It would also obscure the contemporary motives in scripting an autobiography in a certain language, particularly post-Partition when Urdu was adopted as the official language of Pakistan and thus read as the voice of a Muslim majority. The example of the Tyabji clan of Bombay moving away from earlier regional languages to Urdu to develop cultural links to north Indian Muslims points to the importance of language. Similarly, language was linked to historical movements, such as the rising nationalist sentiment pre-1947. Lambert-Hurley posits that

“to write or publish an autobiography in Hindi (using the Devanagari script), in contrast, became indicative of an attempt to reach beyond the Muslim community to an Indian audience not differentiated by religion” (p. 110). Her example of Gandhian disciple Raihana Tyabji moving away from previous English, Gujarati, and Urdu to writing her memoirs in Hindi suggests the political agency that could be exercised by writing in a specific language. This awareness of the readership, or perhaps imagined audience in some cases, affected both why and how Muslim women wrote autobiographies. Lambert-Hurley concludes the chapter with an apt metaphor for this relationship. In comparing author and audience, she suggests “just as the audience plays an active role in receiving and interpreting the autobiographical act, so the author, in effect, *performs* her life with a particular audience in mind” (p. 123). What emerges from these observations, then, is one of the strongest chapters in the book that perfectly illustrates the deftness of Lambert-Hurley’s use of source material with wider historical points in an interesting and entertaining way.

Chapter 4, “Staging the Self,” further interrogates the notion that writing autobiographically is a solitary act. Lambert-Hurley introduces her goal stating “I again relate *context* to *construction*, but this time in terms of *how*” (p. 125). The chapter tracks how the production of a book can affect its message, audience, and purpose, and focuses on one specific example, that of actress Begum Khurshid Mirza. The importance of whether a text was written in a rich literary milieu, whether it was published as a whole or in serial form across magazines or journals, and how translators, editors, and other third parties played a part, are all crucial when analyzing autobiographies. Lambert-Hurley addresses all these in studying Mirza’s life story. This line of inquiry can be linked to the evolving sub-history of book history, and it is with this knowledge that the chapter can seem a little like a missed opportunity. The points Lambert-Hurley makes, such as how a reformist publisher could alter a text or how contrasting titles as suggested by editors could evoke differing messages, are well made but there is some disappointment that only one main example is used. A deeper look into specific publishing houses, possibly linking authors with the editing process of their texts via letters or other correspondence, would have enriched this chapter further. Perhaps it is my own penchant for book history that drives undue criticism here, and Lambert-Hurley still continues her powerful argument throughout, but across the book it is this chapter that left me wanting more. However, her conclusion with a metaphor, as with the previous chapter, stands as a firm and memorable takeaway. Developing the previous analogy of the performer and audience, Lambert-Hurley posits that “the very stage, or in fact stages, on which she [the author] performs her life story may be multiple, malleable, or even revolving. Autobiography thus emerges from this chapter less as an individual act of the self in performance than as a full theatrical production on tour” (p. 154). The detailed example of Mirza demonstrates this need to analyze autobiography not just as isolated documents but also as working and evolving pieces that are conceived of and developed often in dialogue with a host of other historical actors.

The final main chapter, “Autobiographical Genealogies,” centers on the Tyabji clan to fulfill Lambert-Hurley’s aim “to examine how autobiography’s form, style, and content may have been contingent on gender and time” (p. 157). This chapter, possibly due to its mini-history of the Tyabji family, is the most enjoyable to read—an achievement in itself considering how entertaining the other chapters are. The chapter follows many figures within the clan, but one, or rather two, can be briefly touched on here to illustrate the depth of this section of the book. The Fyzee sisters, Atiya and Nazli, both wrote pieces describing their travels abroad. Following the *akbhar* tradition, that of a loose family diary designed to capture interesting or memorable moments and preserve them for later generations

in the family, the sisters recorded journeys in a travelogue style. Lambert-Hurley suggests that this tradition made autobiographical reflections natural to Tyabji women and partly explains why they might later publish book-length works. However, it is the differences between the styles of Atiya's and Nazli's entries that make this example so interesting. Nazli's formal, well-structured reflections describe happenings with precise and regimented sentences. Atiya's entries, on the other hand, cast everyday happenings in casual language, expressing her interest in shop windows and attractive details, rather than train times and station names. The difference between the two sisters, yet the similarity in broader tradition and family, explains the diversity of female Muslim autobiography. It acts as a concrete example for Lambert-Hurley's wider point that this is a broad and multifaceted category of historical inquiry. The chapter illustrates both the variety of voices and their development, grounded in family and gendered roots. Tracking the family over generations highlights the changes in the Tyabji women's writing in style and content. For example, Lambert-Hurley notes how "a Tyabji generation born in the final decades of the nineteenth century may have written of more innocent intimacies within courtship or marriage. But the overt sexuality of the most recent writings—referencing premarital sex, adultery, conjugal intimacy, menstruation, and rape—would have been anathema" (p. 186). This development perhaps also tracks the change, albeit gradual, of attitude toward women raising such issues in the public sphere. It points to Lambert-Hurley's final concluding remarks in the coda, and with which she opened in the introduction, that of unveiling. Both literal and metaphorical the Tyabji clan's story, and more important that of the women of the family, acts as an example for the wider points raised in the book. It is an apt example on which to end.

In many ways, the coda brings *Elusive Lives* full circle, linking back to the introductory remarks on unveiling, as well as the figure of Jobeda Khanam whose quote opens the book. Unveiling need not be as overt and literal as Huda Shaarawi's notorious casting of her veil into the Mediterranean Sea in 1923, and the many examples Lambert-Hurley employs throughout the book suggest that a more subtle form took place across Southeast Asia. The Fyzee sisters' modification of their wardrobes while in England, suggesting as Lambert-Hurley coins it "a vacation from purdah" (p. 191), argues for this more gradual process. The scripting of autobiography, as shown under the key questions of *Elusive Lives*, points to the journey of unveiling, be it literal or more subtle. As Lambert-Hurley methodically analyzes what autobiography is, who wrote, where they wrote, how it was produced and published, and why, she always links back to the overarching focus of the historical importance these answers hold.

Elusive Lives is an excellent, wonderfully written, and spectacularly researched trendsetting book. Lambert-Hurley has produced a thought-provoking, historically important, and genuinely interesting work that will stand as a firm foundation for future work. There is another unveiling present in this book, and it is that of Lambert-Hurley unveiling the rich history of female Muslim autobiography. The purdah of these historically important voices is beginning to come to an end, and *Elusive Lives* is a vital part of this. To end, then, it is worth quoting in full her final point that, as in the introduction, links female Muslim autobiography and unveiling. It, better than I ever could, eloquently points to the wider importance *Elusive Lives* holds: "to write autobiography—to narrate childhood, marriage, domestic life, everyday rituals, trials, and tribulations, and perhaps even one's thoughts and feelings—is thus to transcend the most severe limits on bodies and voices alike: to break the silences, to move beyond the boundaries of permitted discourse, to make the unseen visible. It is, as I flagged in the introduction, *the ultimate unveiling*" (p. 192).

Notes

[1]. Rick Westhead, "Brave Defiance in Pakistan's Swat Valley," *Toronto Star*, October 26, 2009, https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2009/10/26/brave_defiance_in_pakistans_swat_valley.html.

[2]. Adam B. Ellick and Irfan Ashraf, "Class Dismissed: The Death of Female Education," *New York Times*, October 9, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/asia/100000001835296/class-dismissed-malala-yousafzais-story.html>.

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