RE-NARRATING THE SELF
A reading of Gayathri Prabhu’s memoir *If I Had to Tell it Again*
• “If I had to tell it again, I would do it like this” (Prabhu 33),

says Gayathri Prabhu, quarter of the way through her memoir *If I had to Tell it Again*. As the title suggests, re-narration being the only way of narrating for Prabhu, her memoir is an intrepid unfolding as well as questioning of the links between narratives and the self.

* This is a story of her life in dialogue with her father, his story, and their difficult love for one other.

* The fragmented memories of unsafe footing in the worlds of girlhood and adulthood, clinical depression, and passionate love and pain within the spaces of family are presented in a dismantled and fragmentary narrative.
Prabhu’s unabashed narration of the stories of depression, abuse, difficult love and shame within the intimate space of family is unprecedented in India.

Gayathri Prabhu’s memoir is a reflection on the art of autobiographical writing - remembering, breaking silence, and telling and retelling stories. It has a meta-memoir voice.
This paper reads this memoir as a meta-autobiographical writing through the following questions.

• what is the nature of the narrative when retelling is the only way of telling?

• What is the nature of self when its connection to the world is only through narratives?

• Narrative in Prabhu’s memoir, though disordered in itself, is in the form akin to how she takes part in the world. How does one re-narrate a self when the self is not a free floating agent, but has been given a script in the social and historical milieu?
This paper will argue that writing about self, for Gayathri Prabhu, is a project of rewriting the existing discourse about self. This paper reads this book as an interrogation of the limits of the project imagined by the terms ‘memoir/autobiography’ in the theories of self and narrative, and places this memoir among life writings from south Asia.
• The word overwriting is emphasized by south Asian scholars in their arguments about women’s autobiographies in India, as the autobiographical works were “destabilizing the normative, and re-inscribing social rules” (Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 21). Life writings of men in India concentrated on their public achievements, and hardly spoke about their private life. It is often noted that writing about one’s private life was not considered to be highly respectable, and the concept of private life was very ill formed (Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 10).

• Indian nationalism, in its effort to construct itself in opposition to western nationalism, posited its moral compass on the inner/domestic realm. (Chatterjee 133). Since early nineteenth century, women are seen as a keepers of the spiritual realm/domestic realm, and hence the protectors of Indian nationalism. Therefore, the equation between women and domestic realm is much complex than it is in the west.

• Though women’s autobiographies were marked by their domesticity, talking about domestic life has a complicated long history of censorship. Prabhu’s memoir, though is contemporary, reflects the history of autobiographical
Weaving the Gaps

Prabhu writes,

There are holes in this story and it looks like a sieve. Not because I forget, but because the holes fascinate me more than the woven strands around them. He was the consummate weaver, the finest story-teller I knew. And I was the gatherer of the gaps, the unspoken. He loved to talk, and he knew how to work an audience. His stories dot my childhood like wild flowers across a meadow. I remember them all. It made me want to tell stories too. It made me a writer. He was unprepared for the seriousness with which I withdrew into the cave of my craft, blinds pulled down to the lights of his world. (23)
Gayathri Prabhu’s narration has to work in and against the tapestry of her father’s story. Though overwhelmed and influenced by the stories told by the father, for her, as a “gatherer of gaps,” the story resides in the untold. To weave in and against the pre-existing story, she works within the gaps, the silences, the ignored and the un-emphasized.

By claiming it to be a sieve, it overthrows the commitment to present a whole or comprehensible picture of one’s or others’ lives. It deceives the curious ears. It doesn’t break what Lejeune calls “autobiographical pact,” but exposes the limitations of the autobiographical project imagined by “autobiographical pact” by making an autobiographical pact with her readers about a story of gaps.

Philippe Lejeune’s *On Autobiography* is one of the important works on narration of self, in which he defines autobiographies as “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4).
Virginia Woolf’s concept of non-being. Woolf emphasizes on the unimportance given to the self in illness, though it constitutes an important part of one’s life. She writes, “Often when I have been writing one of my so-called novels I have been baffled by this same problem; that is, how to describe what I call in my private shorthand – “non-being” (11). Prabhu’s memoir blurs the lines between the being and the non-being owing to depression and abuse. The sieve-like nature of the narrative is enhanced by the state of non-being captured in words. She writes, “The story of depression is hard to tell, always in fragments, hard to cast in words...” (9). Through writing, she makes sense of the fragmentary memories and experiences. The non-being that this memoir expresses not only further complicates the questions of identity in the autobiographical pact, but also broadens the project of autobiographical writings.
Private Corners and “Indecent” Stories within the Space of Family

- Prabhu’s memoir begins with the death of her father. She writes, “There is his corpse, lying on the floor, people constantly milling around, talking about his untimely unfortunate death, while I stare at everyone in dry eyed annoyance” (6).

- It unabashedly breaks the folds of modesty in narrating a story of lives within a family. The “dry eyed annoyance” is a constant palpable presence throughout the memoir, showing irreverence to the stagnant sanctity of familial relationships.

- The silences in the father’s story are the place where her story begins, resides, and thrives. Giving words to the experiences that are not accorded space or violently misrepresented in the existing stories of her father, becomes a rite of passage to understand the self.
In this memoir, the self is invariably linked to the narrative woven by the other, her father. It is about liberating her narrative from her father’s, while paying homage to their deep sense of togetherness. Her narration of self is an act of undoing the way her story has been constructed by the other. She says, “If I wrote all I knew about my father, nobody would believe me. He had told his story so many times and with such virtuosity that my version can only be a feeble echo” (29). The word echo is important to understand the structure of her narrative. This memoir is built like a spiral, in concentric circles. At no point in the memoir are we at the same point, but we do come back to the same reference point when the re-narration takes place. She weaves her story around her father’s version, while also returning to the same events at different points in time, like an echo.
While Prabhu’s memoir is an intense and intimate narration, which is rare to find in Indian context, it is aware of its place in the literary and cultural milieu. She writes, “I sit to write. A million eyes watch. Faces materialize as I type. “ (124). It exposes the presence of an outside gaze, and its influence on the process of writing itself.

It is in the space of modesty, censorship, judgment, and unhealthy curiosity that the autobiographical works are written and read. Prabhu’s memoir is intertextual as it is reflective of the burden on the literary tradition of autobiographical works that it is also part of. It admits the paralyzing effect of the curious society on the writing of the memoir.
While this is an intensely personal narrative, it is also important to read it as a life history that is fighting against the odds of social shame around depression, desire, and abuse. It envisions to ground the emotional and social realities through an intensely personal story. Hence, it is able to gently blend in the meta-memoir voice within the narrative, often emphasizing the need to tell personal stories.

Writing is an honour to the lives lived. Prabhu notes, “That is why, to be silent, I tell myself, would be to collude with the collective denial and discomfort about mental illness. I learnt this about child abuse as well- [...] Otherwise, the shame is muted and the muted stays shameful, slowly snuffing out one’s spirit. This is why one writes memoir” (131). Narrative is a form in which self is liberated from shame and disgrace. Breaking silence is also about breaking the rhetoric of shame.
The Leap within the Memories

“Every storyteller has to leap, at some time” (Prabhu 48), says one of the characters in the play within the memoir. A play titled “Leap” is placed in the middle of the memoir. The play itself is a leap within the memoir in terms of form and the voice. The memoirist is released from her own voice and perspective in the play as she brings in the voice of the father and the illness, the two of three characters of the play.

Architecture of this play. As a daughter remembering the narrative that lay splattered between her and her father, a father who “revelled in repetition, in amplifying details to the elastic limits of credibility” her writing has a spiral structure (Prabhu 9).
“The Leap” is a space of ethical conundrum. In the play, the father responds to the daughter’s story by saying, “It is completely unsympathetic to the father.” There is a sense of justice that we can see in the play, in being able to imagine and hear what the father would have said. The play is a playing field of her ethical questions and the negotiations of these conundrums in the act of writing. Fictional space liberates her from her own voice and moral burden.
One of the characters in the play argues, “We don’t remember at all. We bead words, call it a memory. Writers are such cheats [...] You can never get it right, and I have learnt to forge ahead, to get it wrong, but in the right tenor, like crossing between lives. (Prabhu 46-47) “The Leap” foregrounds Prabhu’s vision about the life writings. It presents Prabhu’s acute awareness of the drama of memory.
Self is innately linked to the narrative/story telling in this memoir. The right tenor of the telling is significant for the writing about the self, rather than what must be told. Since this memoir leaps out of the truth claims, yet is truthful through the right tenor, self can only be uncovered and accessed through the narrative of gaps.
Works Cited


