

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS FEMINIST PRAXIS: RETHINKING POLITICAL INQUIRY IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA

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Abstract

Autoethnography as a methodology challenges the epistemic hierarchies which continue to shape political inquiry in postcolonial India. It locates the lived experience of a researcher as a site of political meaning-making and thus reconfigures the relationship between the personal and the political. This paper draws on Patricia Hill Collins's idea of the "outsider within," Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist epistemologies, and Carolyn Ellis's notion of the evocative self in order to situate autoethnography as both a methodological and political intervention. Women's experiences, when narrated with a degree of self-reflexivity, mostly in the events when they are also marked by intersections of caste, class, and community, reveal the underlying forces of patriarchy and state structures that are inscribed in the everyday lives of women. This paper thus aims to use Indian feminist scholarship as an analytical tool to establish how the method of autoethnography is powerful in its reclaiming of subjectivity as an epistemic resource. Furthermore, this methodology often foregrounds embodiment and reflexivity as tools of resistance for the voices that remain unheard. Beyond its methodological innovation, the paper also throws light on the wider implications of autoethnography as a research methodology for women studies in India. The paper's core argument is that autoethnography serves as a decolonial method capable of democratising feminist knowledge creation, thereby broadening the methodological horizons of political science.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Feminist epistemology, The Personal as Political, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Feminist theory.

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Introduction

Feminist scholars have historically aimed to develop knowledge that is both contextually grounded and accountable, challenging the continued impacts of colonial ways of knowing. Traditional research in the field of social science was often based on positivist ideas, detaching itself from the lived experiences of the people who were being studied. This resulted in the erasure of objectivity and neglect of affective components of human lives, such as emotion, embodiment, and positionality (Haraway, 1988). In sharp contrast to this traditional methodology, autoethnography, as a research tool, places weight on the researcher's personal experience, treating it as a crucial source of knowledge. This leads to a profound transformation of personal narratives into political meaning-making, thereby revolutionising the whole concept of who has the authority to speak and how truth is constructed.

This paper categorises autoethnography in feminist research as a praxis in which theory and lived realities meet to argue that when the self is located intersectionally within structures of gender and caste, knowledge-making becomes an act of resistance. Through reflections on the "outsider within" (Collins, 1986) and critiques of Euro-American feminism offered by postcolonial thinkers such as Mohanty (1984), the paper situates autoethnography as a decolonial feminist methodology.

In the Indian context, this is understood in the constant critical negotiation that feminist researchers undertake to balance the inherent tension between Western academic frameworks and indigenous feminist thought. It has been evidently argued by feminist scholars in India that dominant epistemologies are mostly of colonial inheritance and are based upon Eurocentric traditions, which remain inadequate in fully capturing the lived realities shaped by caste, kinship, religion, and nation. Situating the significant works of Nivedita Menon (2004) and Uma Chakravarti (1993) in this context demonstrates the manner in which patriarchy reveals itself not merely as a social structure but as an epistemic force. Patriarchal ideologies often shape what qualifies as legitimate knowledge, whose voices are heard, and whose experiences are rendered invisible, often silenced. These pioneering works foreground the interconnected nature of gender with caste and nationalism, showing how historical narratives, legal reforms, and political imaginaries are produced through deeply gendered and caste-based assumptions.

The work of Autoethnography is to extend this critical feminist lineage by situating the researcher within power-laden contexts, contexts sedimented in nature. Autoethnography reclaims lived experience as a valid site of theorisation. It exposes the power dynamics that operate within everyday contexts, which are otherwise normalised or overlooked.

Feminist Epistemology and Autoethnographic Method

At its core, autoethnography differs from traditional ethnographic methods and often serves as a literary tool. It utilises the lived experience of a researcher to interrogate the existing social and cultural structures (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The difference lies in its dissolution of the researcher–subject divide, as the researcher also reflects on their own personal narratives. This methodology prioritises affective forms of knowledge, comprising emotions, embodiment, and reflexivity. Feminist scholars have laid emphasis on this openness to state that knowing cannot be divorced from living. They call out the non-neutral nature of objectivity to situate it within bodies and relationships (Code, 1991).

Carolyn Ellis (2004) argues for an evocative autoethnography that involves connecting memory, narrative, and feeling to the wider political structure. She further solidifies her argument by stating that the power of autoethnography lies not in universality but in resonance. The power that it holds can be understood in its ability to throw light upon the shared conditions of power. However, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) emphasises that self-narration transforms only when part of collective struggle. For women and marginalised groups, writing about oneself is a way to claim visibility amid histories of erasure.

Critiques of autoethnography often argue that it raises concerns regarding self-indulgence amongst the researchers and lacks academic rigour. The goal of feminist epistemology is to address these criticisms by redefining the very understanding of what academic rigour entails. Academic rigour should be defined in terms of degree of relationality and reflexivity. Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of *situated knowledges* is profound in this context. According to her, knowledge is always partial, accountable, and embodied. Feminist autoethnography should embrace this stance and assert that the researcher's partiality is not a sign of weakness but a strong methodological resource. Reflexivity should be the touchstone on which academic rigour is tested, rather than detachment.

Feminist Political Inquiry in Postcolonial India

The women's movement in India rose to prominence in response to the failure of state institutions to deliver gender justice. In the period of 1970s and 1980s, there was a sudden surge of feminist scholarship that began to interrogate kinship, structures and studied family systems as sites of both subjugation and contestation (Kishwar & Vanita, 1984). Most important works in this strain was that of Uma Chakravarti (1993) who questioned the Brahmanical patriarchy which is deeply embedded in Indian societies by tracing how caste determined women's labour and sexuality. Another pioneering work is that of Nivedita Menon (2004)

who problematised the category of “woman” itself, she revealed its construction through power and ideology. Menon argues how invoking a single “woman” often masks differences related to caste, class, sexuality, and location, which can reinforce exclusions even within feminist movements. By challenging this seemingly fixed category, her work broadens feminist analysis to include diversity, plurality and contradictions.

The key tension that surfaces is how feminist knowledge can remain both theoretically rigorous and politically grounded. The answer lies in the works of Indian feminist scholars who resisted universalist claims and emphasised context-specific and intersectional analysis that took into account caste, class, religion, and language (Rege, 2006). But what remained untouched even in these academic circles is the question of the researcher’s own voice. This also happened because researchers who were documenting the everyday lives of their women subjects hid their own positionality behind a veneer of professional neutrality.

Autoethnography has the potential to revitalise this feminist concern with positionality by turning the researcher’s self into an analytic ground. The Indian feminist project which underscores the importance of the slogan “*the personal is political*,” can be renewed through this methodological innovation that blurs the boundary between self and field. Instead of distancing herself from the communities she researches, the feminist autoethnographer incorporates her own story into the social fabric she examines. This approach highlights the politics involved in both writing and being written about. In postcolonial India, this novel approach also unsettles the hierarchies established by the colonial legacy of knowledge production, where objectivity often masked racial and gendered hierarchies.

Autoethnography as Decolonial Feminist Praxis

The decolonial potential of autoethnography as a research tool lies in its outright refusal of universality. Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1984) seminal critique, *Under Western Eyes*, warned against the Western feminist lens that tends to homogenise “Third World women.” She is the foremost advocate for a politics of location that situates analysis in specific historical and cultural contexts. Autoethnography embodies this very approach through its focus on lived, embodied knowledge. It thus challenges colonial epistemologies and resists abstract theorising; in this manner, autoethnography is in itself an act of resistance.

For example, when a Dalit woman scholar shares her academic experiences, she not only details personal struggles but also exposes the Brahminical frameworks that operate within public institutions such as universities. The self becomes an archive of caste history, showing how exclusion manifests through daily interactions,

silences, and absences (Rege, 2010). Likewise, a Muslim feminist discussing surveillance and belonging reveals the interconnected nature of nationalism and gender in modern India.

Through such narratives, autoethnography is a clarion call to reclaim subjectivity as epistemic agency. In contrast to colonial anthropology, which was written by the coloniser, autoethnography allows those historically studied to write from within their contexts. This inversion has deep political implications as it shifts epistemic authority. Furthermore, it showcases embodiment and affect as vital methodological arenas. Emotions like fear, shame, or defiance serve as analytical entry points, exposing how power is maintained in private spheres of life.

Reflexivity also becomes a form of resistance. Feminist researchers in India must confront caste, regional, and class privileges that influence access to voice and legitimacy. By explicitly acknowledging these privileges, autoethnography challenges the universalizing tendencies of both Western and urban Indian feminism. The method thus exemplifies what Mohanty (2003) describes as transnational feminist solidarity, based not on sameness but on shared struggles against domination.

The Everyday as Political Site

One of the most important contributions of autoethnography is its transformative capability to redefine the political. Indian political science has traditionally focused on state institutions, electoral behaviour, and policy making. Feminist scholars have expanded this domain to include the family, sexuality, and labour as political sites (Menon, 2012). Autoethnography goes much further, locating politics in the everyday lives of women.

Daily experiences become a text that reveals how power is lived and sustained. For example, when a woman negotiates her presence in a public bus or university meeting, she navigates multiple systems of regulation, such as gendered surveillance, caste privilege, and moral policing. Autoethnographic reflection can expose these layers of control and agency simultaneously. Through this lens, the everyday is not outside the political but is constitutive of it, forming the bedrock on which political structures are created.

Methodology and Ethics of Writing the Self

To write autoethnographically is to deal with the dilemma of revelation and responsibility. When one writes autoethnographically, it raises ethical questions at every step. The feminist researcher remains in a constant fix: How can one write about family or community without reproducing harm? How much of the self should be disclosed? Feminist ethics offers partial answers through principles of care, relationality, and accountability (Tronto, 1993).

Feminist autoethnography differs from traditional research ethics, which prioritises anonymity and detachment. Instead, it values emotional honesty and contextual truth. Vulnerability in this situation is seen as a sign of integrity rather than weakness. Sharing personal stories serves as both mode of survival as well as resistance. In Indian academia, where caste, class, and language hierarchies remain entrenched, such writing is bound to face professional criticism. Therefore, focusing on the self is a conscious political choice that challenges the prevailing norms of objectivity.

Feminist auto ethnographers frequently face this paradox by incorporating language via idioms, translation, and memory. This creates a decolonial linguistic approach that highlights the tension between mainstream academic discourse and actual Indian experiences (Spivak, 1988).

Implications for women's studies in India

The implications of feminist autoethnography extend beyond methodology into disciplinary transformation. For social science research, it demands a rethinking of what counts as data and argument. Rather than privileging statistics or formal institutions, it recognises narratives, emotions, and silences as sites where politics unfolds. It also broadens notions of political agency: resistance is understood not merely as protest but as survival, negotiation, and care.

For gender studies, autoethnography democratises feminist theorising. It opens academic space for marginalised voices to theorise directly from lived experience. Rather than being subjects of study, they become producers of feminist theory. This epistemic shift aligns with Sharmila Rege's (2006) call for a "Dalit feminist standpoint," where experience and reflection merge into collective consciousness.

Moreover, autoethnography fosters pedagogical innovation. In university classrooms, writing the self encourages students to connect theory with lived experience, dismantling hierarchies between researcher and participant. It transforms feminist education into a process of self-discovery and social critique rooted in empathy rather than detachment.

Conclusion

Autoethnography, as feminist praxis, transforms both the method and meaning of political inquiry in postcolonial India. It displaces the myth of neutral knowledge and replaces it with embodied, relational, and accountable knowing. By centring the "outsider within" (Collins, 1986) and extending Mohanty's (2003) call for decolonising feminist thought, autoethnography reclaims the personal as an epistemic site of resistance.

In a society with multiple hierarchies, this reflective storytelling has transformative power. It reveals how caste, patriarchy, and state authority are embedded

in everyday life, while also empowering individuals to act within these systems. The approach's strength lies not in asserting universal truths but in forging a connection between theory and lived experience, self and society, emotion and analysis.

As Indian academia seeks more inclusive and decolonial approaches, feminist autoethnography offers both a perspective and a vocabulary for reimagining research methods. It prompts scholars to see knowledge creation as an ethical and emotional process, involving ongoing negotiations between vulnerability and authority.

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