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**Reflection of Gender & Reformation in Sharadaben Mehta's *Reminiscences: The Memoirs of Sharadaben Mehta***

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**Abstract**

The paper aims to focus on the social reformer Sharadaben Mehta's autobiography *Reminiscences: The Memoirs of Sharadaben Mehta* (translated from Gujarati into English in 2007) and contextualizes significant sociocultural reformations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Gujarat. Besides featuring the issues of child marriage and early widowhood, the paper highlights how various projects of female education improved the miserable plight of girls and women in the princely state of Baroda. It also concentrates on how Sharadaben Mehta formed multiple women's associations and participated in nationalist politics. By employing the concepts of 'autobiography' and 'the sociocultural context,' the study looks into the social reformer's experiences in the public sphere, which is embedded in her account.

**Keywords:** Autobiography, gender, reformation, sociocultural context, colonial Gujarat

**Introduction**

In the twenty-first century, autobiographies by women are being translated from their regional languages into English to acquire a wider readership. Translation of these narratives unravels the sociocultural taboos that advocate gender discrimination. These narratives serve as testimonies of gender and class as well as reveal "the self-vis-à-vis family, society and politics bearing witness to gendered subordination" (Sharma 4). Besides shaping history and culture, these texts contextualize the plight of women in the private and public spheres. Moreover, while hinging on different genders and social classes, these autobiographies are not a chronicle of "memories but a historical narrative" (Forguson 143). It is fascinating to explore pertinent gender issues and dynamics of sociocultural reformation through autobiographies written by social reformers as they provide their first-hand experiences. Set against the sociocultural backdrop in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Gujarat, this paper concentrates on the Gujarati social reformer Sharadaben Mehta's autobiography *Reminiscences: The Memoirs of Sharadaben Mehta* (translated from Gujarati into English in 2007 by Purnima Mehta Bhatt). Sharadaben Mehta "stands as a trailblazing figure in the history of women empowerment and social change in India" (Kothari). The paper also aims to highlight the sociocultural and political transformations and the condition of women in the context of colonial Gujarat.

### **Social Reform & Gender in Colonial Gujarat**

Gujarat underwent some significant social, political, and cultural transformations during the colonial period. In colonial Gujarat, men executed the lead roles in decision-making, whereas women had to accept them. "They (women) remain powerless on the periphery" (Thakkar 46). Towards the end of the 19th century, Gujarat, as a colonial state, became a hub of new challenges, dilemmas, hopes, aspirations, and diversity. The reformists from various regions of colonial Gujarat allowed their women to venture into public spaces. In Gujarat, the reformist agenda interacted with traditions and socio-political conditions while shaping the gender dynamics in both complex and transformative ways. In colonial Gujarat, the patriarchal society valued education for male children only, as well as marriage for women. On the other hand, people from the upper classes considered education nothing but the attainment of a degree. Hence, they sent their children to school to obtain a primary education. The social reformers paid attention to the miserable plight of widows as they had to take the help of the male members of their in-laws to survive. Furthermore, enlightened ruler Maharaja Sayajirao III of the princely State of Baroda undertook the noble task of improving women's condition by providing proper education and training (Bhattacharya 8). Maharani Chimnabai, the second wife of Maharaja SayajiraoGaekwad, offered financial assistance to various educational institutions in colonial Gujarat (Kakkar). The merchant classes dominated the sociocultural spheres of colonial Gujarat and took part in the reformation agenda. "Historically, Gujarati merchants have played an integral role in all aspects of society, and the same was the case with social reform, making it a multi-class and multi-caste project" (Bhalodia-Dhanani 88).

The first wave of women's association activity started in the second half of the nineteenth century (Cohen 172). In colonial Gujarat, women's clubs have been deeply entrenched in other forms of female association. Some female immigrants from the west coast of India founded the first Gujarati-speaking women's group- the Gujarati MahilaMandal (GMM), in 1930 to raise women's issues while retaining and transmitting the cultural practices. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) (1927) was an organization dedicated to the betterment of women and children.

In the early twentieth century of Gujarat, the nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi widely impacted the social reform movements about women. He not only advocated women's education but also opposed dowry, child marriage, caste prejudices, and the Sati system. In 1918, the national leader Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women to participate in the nationalist movement (Siddiqueand Bano283) because women possessed three qualities- sincerity, self-sacrifice, and non-violence. Women from different locales of colonial Gujarat started participating in the nationalist movement. They took part in the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Salt Satyagraha, and the Quit India Movement in Borsad and Bardoli of modern Gujarat. Mahatma Gandhi launched the first Non-Cooperation movement in 1928 and appealed to women to step out of their homes, conduct public meetings, and march in street processions. The paper aims to analyze the concepts of 'autobiography' and 'sociocultural context' before stepping into the textual analysis of the personal narrative written by Sharadaben Mehta.

### **Autobiography & Sociocultural Context**

In autobiographical writings, the narrators contextualize sociocultural and political movements that happened over a certain period, as explained by the trope of memory. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson commented, "The memory invoked in autobiographical narrative is specific to the time of writing and the contexts of telling" (25). The sociocultural context, including the intersection of class, gender, and historical moment, shaped the construction of autobiography. Personal narratives also attest to how the narrators chronicle an event "to explore a certain time period, or to enshrine a community, they are making 'history' in a sense" (Smith and Watson 14). An autobiography is not just a personal reflection but a cultural product, and societal norms impact how the narrators reveal their stories. The autobiographical stories are a selective reconstruction of the past (Nadeem 224) and are influenced by broader cultural, social, and historical contexts that shape the narratives. An autobiography within these contexts shows how an individual navigates, adapts to, and sometimes challenges the prevailing norms and systems. Teronie Donaldson observed that memoirs and autobiographies offer valuable personal insights into history and society, highlighting marginalized voices and providing a richer, more inclusive understanding of historical events. In the opinion of Kaur and Meenu, "When writing an autobiography, the author is not only concerned with the individual while recounting their own journey but also with the context, which is society" (458). While recounting individual experiences, autobiographical narratives reveal different cultural and social contexts, helping readers connect with the past and better understand societal values and changes.

### **Child Marriage, Early Widowhood, Female Education & Nationalist Movements in Colonial Gujarat**

In her autobiography, Sharadaben Mehta stated that marriage outside one's village was considered to be an act of defying the norms of patriarchal society. Her prospective marriage with Dr.Sumant Mehta was a contested issue, as noted in her own words: "In those days it was not customary to marry outside one's village; Mahipatram, who had been to England, was an outcaste and therefore my uncle and my father's entire family opposed this match. They harassed my father and mother in all kinds of ways" (Mehta 44). The autobiography narrates her perspective of marriage alliance while contextualizing the dynamics of marriage in colonial Gujarat. Furthermore, Sharadaben Mehta discussed the issues of child marriage and child widowhood in her personal narrative. Her autobiography is not just a personal reflection but a representation of sociocultural issues. She wrote that the "upper caste families, even the so-called enlightened ones," even talked about the marriage of a girl when she "reached the age of twelve, and if she was still unmarried, the relatives would start clamoring and harassing the parents" (Mehta 52). Sharadaben encountered such an unsavory situation when she turned twelve. The personal narrative records how her unmarried condition was a debated concern in the patriarchal society of colonial Gujarat:

Nevertheless, from the moment I turned twelve, my relatives started pestering and

criticizing them to their faces and behind their backs, saying that it was dangerous to allow a girl of my age to remain unmarried. (Mehta 52).

Sharadaben also revealed that child marriage was a common tradition in Kathiawar and Kutch. If the first or second wives of a person died, there was a demand for an older wife. The autobiography also reveals that the unmarried state of twelve-year-old girls attracted suitors from various places, as evinced in her account: "When it became known in Kathiawar that there were a couple of twelve-year-old eligible girls in Gujarat, my parents were swamped with applications, the stampede resembling the thousands of applications that pour in when there is a vacancy for a clerical position in the government" (Mehta 53). She strongly opposed child marriage because she perceived it as the most significant obstruction to women's education. Child marriages led to a considerable number of child widows, which were a burden to society. As Svati Joshi observed, "Sharadaben strongly believed that such young widows should not be forced to live a celibate life. They should be allowed to re-marry if they so desired" (26). She also advocated for the establishment of homes for widows and not as places in which they led a secluded yet protected existence far away from mainstream society. The autobiography notes: "They could develop and learn to be self-sufficient and acquire skills and knowledge that would enable them to contribute to society" (Joshi 27). Sharadaben Mehta also pointed out the miserable plight of child widows in colonial Gujarat in her autobiography:

Many child widows are living poor and pathetic lives, devoid even of the strength to raise their own children; they are utterly helpless and are dependent on their families. Unfortunately, they lack the independence to find their own work and thus live their lives in poverty. Besides the widows, many abandoned women also lead meaningless, empty lives. (Mehta 145).

Besides capturing child marriages and early child widowhood, the personal narrative contextualizes female education in colonial Gujarat. In her autobiography, Sharadaben Mehta referred to the enrolment of girls in college: "My sister was studying for the BA degree, and we were one year behind her. In my class, there were just two women students, a Parsi lady and me" (Mehta 56). Furthermore, she stated that there was discrimination between the standard of education imparted to students. As Mehta wrote, "While the standard of education in boys' high schools was of a high caliber, our own standards were mediocre, partly because of the absence of competition" (50). The autobiography narrates the struggles of Sharadaben and her sister to continue their studies in colleges, putting into perspective the prevailing education system in the princely state of Baroda. They were not able to "taste even a fraction of the benefits of college life that our male colleagues enjoyed" (Mehta 57). They obeyed following what they received as instruction since they neither associated with fellow students nor with professors. "As soon as the professor left the classroom, we followed him and spent our free time in a separate, specially designed room" (Mehta 57). They had to undergo sarcastic comments for which they were not prepared. In her autobiography, Sharadaben also revealed how male students harassed them by sending all kinds of anonymous letters. Even the male students continued

to "overturn our chairs, scribble annoying messages on our desks, and place poison ivy on our classroom chairs" (Mehta 57), which Shardaben and her sister had to endure. Sharadaben faced such an unsavory situation that intruded on her personal affairs: "We tolerated all this, but eventually, when the boys stirred up trouble and threatened to disrupt my marriage, I was deeply hurt" (Mehta 57). Despite such a hostile situation, Sharadaben did not lose her faith and steadfastly continued her work. Her autobiography highlights her sister Vidyaben's endeavor to get educated despite her marriage life and reveals how this inspired other parents to send their daughters to school. Sharadaben Mehta stated that it was best to inform the girls before they were tied down by marriage. "Vidyaben's case must be considered an exception; she had little choice in the matter, but others should not have to follow her example" (Mehta 70).

Sharadaben Mehta was committed to improving women's education, as narrated in her own words: "My goal in life was to serve Gujarat and, more specifically, the women of Gujarat, and so I was pondering over how to accomplish this" (Mehta 142). She founded a Mahila Vidyalaya for married girls and young widows to continue their education. The autobiography states that the institution "became the focus of everyone's attention because its curriculum was adapted to meet the specific needs of women and also nurtured nationalist sentiments" (Mehta 147). Furthermore, she played a significant role in establishing institutions for women, both schools and a women's university, and also worked for many years on the Senate of Bombay University and S.N.D.T Women's University (Bhatt 33). The personal narrative highlights the value of female education that led to the establishment of educational institutions.

As discussed in her account, Sharadaben Mehta's constant efforts with the formation of women's organizations raised her concern about the condition of women in the princely state of Baroda. "Compared to Ahmedabad, the environment of Baroda initially seemed dull and rigid, and this was because there was no place for women there. At least for men, there was an organization like the Officer's Club, though the common people did not have access to it" (Mehta 79). Her autobiography uncovers various nuances contextualizing how the ideologies of nationalism impacted the enterprising merchants of Gujarat to take part in the reformation project. The merchant class, along with social reformers, "attempted to eradicate the evils in society" (Mehta 126).

Sharadaben established Chimnabai Stree Samaj in 1915 to conduct social programs which invited both men and women. This activity center drew middle-class women out of their homes and provided them with a platform to experience unlimited freedom. As Svati Joshi commented, "There was no place for them where they could feel liberated from their domestic chores and also learn useful knowledge and skills" (16). Sharadaben Mehta recapitulates that women from different parts of India assembled at a conference in early 1927, which resulted in the establishment of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). Sharadaben Mehta was assigned the task of organizing the Women's conference in colonial Gujarat.

In her own words, Sharadaben Mehta uncovers the importance of women's associations and their roles in empowering women. "There had been a Ladies' Club in existence for several years, the purpose of which was to encourage an exchange of ideas among women of different classes and to promote art, but it functioned somewhat erratically" (Mehta 65). As narrated in her account, the Chimmabai Women's Association exhibited its noble task during the emergency times and brought forth a new awakening among the women of the princely state of Baroda. This institution "instilled in them a desire to serve others" and "helped build homes for orphaned women" (Mehta 137). Her personal narrative also referred to how the women in this association started collecting funds by visiting various communities during the Bardoli Satyagraha led by Sardarbhairu Vallabh Patel in colonial Gujarat.

The autobiography is not a personal account of Sharadaben Mehta but broadly provides insights into the history and society of colonial Gujarat. Her autobiographical self is embedded in the sociocultural and political contexts that were conducive to weaving the threads of her narrative. Furthermore, it was shaped by the understanding of historical and political movements. Like many social reformers of her times, Sharadaben Mehta was heavily influenced by Gandhian principles of non-violence and self-reliance. She actively participated in campaigns aligned with Gandhiji's vision for a reformed India, where social justice and equality were the cornerstones of national development. In her personal narrative, Sharadaben Mehta revealed that political life was turbulent in colonial Gujarat when Gandhiji appealed for non-cooperation. She further added: "This call for non-cooperation required the lawyers to abandon their law practice, the boycott of schools run by the government, the remuneration of government titles and other forms of agitation" (Mehta 194). The political climate was imbued with the spirit of nationalism and a growing penchant for independence. Gandhi called upon the women of India to engage in political activities, and in this respect, she responded to his call by joining the nationalist movement. As the epilogue of the autobiography states: "From 1930 until 1947, she remained active in the political arena" (Mehta 321). Gandhi appreciated her sense of commitment and leadership qualities and assigned her the responsibility of mobilizing women for the non-violent movement in colonial Gujarat. The personal narrative unveils Sharadaben Mehta's perspectives on historical events or movements that fashioned her narrative as it registers her involvement in nationalist movement: "Along with others, she participated in the boycott of foreign cloth and goods, the picketing of liquor shops, the promotion of khadi as a means of self-employment and self-reliance" (Mehta 321). The autobiography also states another nationalist movement, the Dandi Salt March led by Gandhi in late colonial Gujarat, where Sharadaben Mehta participated:

During the famous Dandi Salt March in 1930, women played a prominent role. She accompanied Gandhi from Baroda to Jalalpur, addressing women's groups, allocating work, and organizing women's volunteers, tasks delegated by Gandhi. (Mehta 321).

Through the retrospective mode of narration, Sharadaben Mehta contextualizes the issues of child marriage, child widowhood, the formation of women's associations, the

establishment of educational institutions and homes for girls and women, and the nationalist movements in colonial Gujarat. Furthermore, by using the trope of memory, the social reformer creates a sense of personhood in her personal narrative.

### Conclusion

The autobiography of Sharadaben Mehta discusses that it is not just the reflection of her first-hand experiences but her consciousness about the sociocultural reformations in the context of colonial Gujarat. Her personal narrative uncovers various pertinent issues relating to gender and reformation and the establishment of women's associations and clubs that aroused awareness about their rights. The paper also discusses Sharadaben Mehta's contribution to women's emancipation and their empowerment, as ascertained through her establishment of educational institutions for girls and homes for widows. While using the concept of 'autobiography' and 'the sociocultural context,' the study analyses how the social reformer Sharadaben Mehta contextualizes gender issues in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Gujarat. In this respect, the paper focusing on the social reformer's autobiography adds new scholarship to gender studies and life narrative research.

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