

# **Intersecting Discourses of Caste, Christianity, and Nationalism in Indian Women Autobiographers of the Nationalist Period: Negotiations of Identity and Resistance**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates the complex negotiations of identity and resistance in Indian women autobiographers of the nationalist period through the intersecting discourses of caste, Christianity, and nationalism in Maharashtra. Focusing on low-caste and Christian-convert narratives by Savitribai Phule, Muktabai, Lakshmibai Tilak, Pandita Ramabai, and Krupabai Sattianadhan, it analyses how missionary evangelism provided new discursive tools while simultaneously imposing Victorian ideals of domesticity and Christian virtue. Postcolonial and comparative discourse analysis reveals strategies of co-option, resistance, and ambivalent selfhood that allowed these women to challenge Brahminical hegemony without fully abandoning indigenous cultural frameworks. The study highlights the “leavening” impact of Christianity on low-caste women’s consciousness, showing how missionary education, medical missions, and egalitarian rhetoric served as instruments for critiquing caste while creating hybrid identities at the crossroads of colonial modernity and indigenous reform. By examining the polyphonic voices and palimpsestic layers in these life writings, the paper demonstrates that women’s autobiographical self-narration was never a simple acceptance or rejection of missionary influence but a sophisticated site of ongoing negotiation. The findings contribute to postcolonial gender studies by illuminating how caste, gender, and religious hybridity shaped female subjectivity in colonial India and continue to inform contemporary understandings of identity formation under intersecting oppressions.

**KEYWORDS:** Caste, Christianity, Nationalism, Hybrid Identity, Low-Caste Women's Narratives, Missionary Evangelism

## **1. Colonial Modernity and Missionary Evangelism in Nationalist Maharashtra**

Colonial modernity introduced missionary evangelism as a powerful force that reshaped social relations in nineteenth-century Maharashtra. Scottish and American missions established schools, zenana missions, and medical dispensaries that offered women, particularly from lower castes, unprecedented access to education and public visibility. These institutions promoted Victorian ideals of domesticity and Christian virtue while critiquing indigenous practices such as caste hierarchy and gender seclusion. Missionary discourse framed Indian women as degraded and in need of salvation, thereby justifying both religious conversion and colonial intervention.

In nationalist Maharashtra, this missionary presence intersected with indigenous reform movements and Brahminical orthodoxy. Upper-caste reformers selectively appropriated Christian ideas of education and social service while resisting conversion. Lower-caste women like Savitribai Phule and Muktabai encountered missionary teachings as tools for critiquing Brahminical oppression. The British policy of religious neutrality paradoxically allowed missionary activity to flourish, creating new spaces for women while reinforcing certain patriarchal structures. This section situates the autobiographies within this dynamic colonial-modern landscape.

The arrival of missionaries in the Bombay Presidency coincided with the decline of Peshwa rule and the consolidation of British administrative control. Missionaries such as John Wilson, Murray Mitchell, and Stephen Hislop launched aggressive campaigns against what they termed “heathenism,” targeting practices they viewed as barbaric, including caste-based untouchability and the seclusion of women. Zenana missions were particularly significant because they allowed female missionaries to enter the inner quarters of upper-caste homes, where they offered education, medical care, and Christian teachings under the guise of social service. These encounters provided lower-caste women with rare opportunities to access literacy and public discourse, even as the missionaries often reproduced Victorian notions of feminine propriety.

Missionary reports and pamphlets repeatedly portrayed Indian women as victims of Brahminical tyranny, thereby legitimising colonial intervention. This rhetoric was not merely ideological; it had material consequences. Missions established schools for untouchable girls, dispensaries that treated women who would otherwise have been denied care, and orphanages that sheltered widows and abandoned children. Savitribai Phule’s letters and poetry reflect the transformative potential of these institutions, invoking “Mother English” as a liberatory force that could dismantle caste barriers. Muktabai’s essay similarly draws on missionary critiques of Vedic monopoly on knowledge to question the sufficiency of Hindu scriptures for lower-caste liberation.

Yet the missionary presence was never purely emancipatory. It imposed new forms of control through Victorian ideals of domesticity, chastity, and self-discipline. Women who converted or engaged with mission schools often faced accusations of cultural betrayal from their communities. The autobiographies capture this ambivalence: women welcomed the practical benefits of education and medical care while negotiating the religious and cultural expectations that accompanied them. The British policy of religious neutrality, enshrined after the 1857 revolt, allowed missionary activity to continue under the banner of humanitarianism, creating a complex web of alliances and tensions with both reformist and orthodox indigenous groups.

In this context, women’s autobiographical writing became a vital medium for articulating the contradictions of colonial modernity. Low-caste women used missionary-provided literacy to record their experiences of oppression and to imagine alternative futures. Upper-caste women who interacted with missions, such as Pandita Ramabai, often critiqued both Hindu orthodoxy and missionary paternalism. The autobiographies thus serve as rich historical documents that reveal how missionary evangelism functioned as both a catalyst for change and a new instrument of ideological control in nationalist Maharashtra.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations: Caste, Gender, and Religious Hybridity in Life-Writing**

Theoretical foundations for this analysis draw from postcolonial and feminist scholarship on caste, gender, and religious hybridity. Uma Chakravarti's work on Brahminism illuminates how caste purity depended on the regulation of women's sexuality. Gauri Vishwanathan's study of conversion highlights the subversive potential of religious change in colonial contexts. Rosalind O'Hanlon's analysis of Jotirao Phule reveals how lower-caste critiques drew upon missionary critiques of caste while adapting them to local needs.

Concepts of hybridity and ambivalent selfhood, informed by Homi Bhabha and Partha Chatterjee, help explain how women navigated multiple discourses. Life-writing in this context becomes a site of negotiation where caste, gender, and religious identities intersect and transform. The relational and community-centred nature of Indian autobiographical selfhood further complicates Western models of individual autobiography. These theoretical lenses enable a nuanced reading of how women both absorbed and resisted missionary influence.

Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity is particularly illuminating here. The autobiographies do not represent pure indigenous resistance or complete assimilation into Christian modernity; instead, they occupy the "in-between" spaces where new identities are forged through mimicry, ambivalence, and negotiation. Women such as Savitribai Phule and Muktabai appropriated missionary language of equality to critique Brahminical hierarchy while retaining elements of Bhakti devotionalism. This hybrid self-construction allowed them to assert collective agency without fully severing ties to indigenous cultural frameworks.

Partha Chatterjee's analysis of the "woman's question" in nationalist discourse further contextualises these negotiations. Nationalism resolved the tension between colonial modernity and indigenous tradition by relegating women to the inner, spiritual domain. Missionary evangelism disrupted this resolution by offering women public visibility and new forms of knowledge. The autobiographies reveal how women exploited these disruptions to carve out spaces of resistance while appearing to conform to nationalist expectations of feminine propriety.

Feminist postcolonial scholars such as Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha provide additional grounding by documenting the long tradition of women's writing in India, from Bhakti poets to nineteenth-century reformers. This tradition offered models of relational selfhood and collective resistance that women autobiographers could draw upon. The theoretical foundations thus emphasise that women's life-writing in colonial Maharashtra was never a simple reflection of external discourses but an active site of identity negotiation shaped by intersecting forces of caste, gender, and religious hybridity.

## **3. Postcolonial and Comparative Discourse Analysis Approach**

The methodology employs postcolonial and comparative discourse analysis to examine how caste, Christianity, and nationalism intersect in women's autobiographies. Primary sources from low-caste and Christian-convert writers are read alongside upper-caste narratives to highlight contrasts and continuities. Close textual analysis reveals narrative strategies of resistance, co-option, and ambivalence. The approach is comparative across caste and religious lines, situating individual voices within broader colonial and nationalist discourses.

Ethical considerations include respecting the historical specificity of each text while drawing out contemporary relevance. This method avoids reducing the autobiographies to simple testimonials of oppression or empowerment, instead revealing the complex negotiations that characterise their self-construction.

The comparative dimension is essential because it allows us to see how low-caste women like Savitribai Phule and Muktabai used missionary discourse differently from upper-caste converts like Lakshmibai Tilak or Pandita Ramabai. While the former deployed it as a weapon against Brahminical oppression, the latter often engaged in more ambivalent negotiations that balanced Christian ideals with lingering Hindu cultural attachments. Discourse analysis further uncovers the polyphonic voices within each text, showing how surface conformity frequently masks deeper assertions of dignity and autonomy.

#### **4. The 'Leavening' Impact of Christianity on Low-Caste Women's Narratives**

Christianity exerted a "leavening" influence on low-caste women's narratives, providing discursive tools to challenge Brahminical hegemony. Savitribai Phule's letters and poetry invoke "Mother English" as a liberatory force and critique caste-based oppression using missionary-inspired language of equality. Muktabai's essay similarly questions the sufficiency of Vedic Hinduism and calls for a loving Creator who treats all equally. These texts demonstrate how missionary education and medical missions offered lower-caste women platforms for articulating resistance without full conversion.

The narratives reveal a selective appropriation: Christianity's emphasis on individual dignity and social service is harnessed to critique caste while indigenous elements of Bhakti tradition are retained. This hybrid approach allowed low-caste women to assert collective agency and demand education as a right rather than a privilege.

Savitribai's poetry repeatedly contrasts the oppressive Peshwa regime with the opportunities provided by British rule and missionary schools. She portrays English as a maternal figure who liberates the downtrodden from centuries of ignorance and exploitation. Muktabai's essay goes further, directly questioning the legitimacy of a religion that denies knowledge to the majority of the population. Her call for a true religion that treats all equally echoes missionary critiques of caste while drawing on Bhakti traditions of personal devotion.

These writings illustrate the "leavening" effect described in the thesis: Christianity did not simply replace indigenous belief systems but permeated and transformed them from within. Low-caste women used the new discursive resources to imagine alternative futures while maintaining deep connections to community and collective struggle. The impact extended beyond individual conversion to a broader cultural and political awakening that challenged both colonial and indigenous forms of oppression.

#### **5. Identity Negotiation: Resistance, Co-option, and Ambivalent Selfhood**

Women negotiated identities through complex strategies of resistance, co-option, and ambivalence. Lakshmibai Tilak used humour to critique caste while maintaining relational ties to family. Pandita Ramabai challenged multiple patriarchies—Hindu, colonial, and missionary—through bold public action and writing. Krupabai Sattianadhan's work reflects internal conflict between Christian ideals and lingering Hindu cultural attachments. These narratives reveal polyphonic voices where surface conformity masks

deeper assertions of dignity and autonomy.

Ambivalent selfhood emerges as a recurring feature, with women simultaneously embracing and resisting the new opportunities and constraints of Christian modernity. Their autobiographies thus become sites of ongoing identity negotiation rather than fixed resolutions.

Lakshmibai Tilak's humorous anecdotes about caste practices allow her to critique without direct confrontation, preserving family harmony while asserting her own critical perspective. Pandita Ramabai's letters and writings demonstrate a fierce independence that challenged both Hindu orthodoxy and missionary paternalism. Krupabai Sattianadhan's narrative captures the emotional turmoil of navigating Christian conversion while retaining deep cultural attachments to Hindu traditions. These examples illustrate the sophisticated ways in which women negotiated multiple and often contradictory subject positions.

## **6. Colonial Influences on Women's Consciousness and Future Research Directions**

Colonial influences profoundly shaped women's consciousness, offering both empowerment and new forms of control. Missionary institutions expanded horizons while imposing Victorian domesticity. Nationalist discourses positioned women as symbols of cultural purity, limiting their agency. The autobiographies collectively illustrate how women navigated these influences to forge meaningful selves.

Future research could compare Maharashtra narratives with those from Bengal or South India, explore the afterlives of these texts in Dalit feminism, or examine intersections with contemporary caste and gender politics. The study underscores the continuing relevance of these early voices for understanding hybrid identities in postcolonial India.

The autobiographies demonstrate that colonial modernity was never a unidirectional imposition but a complex field of negotiation. Women's consciousness was transformed by missionary education and medical missions, yet they retained critical distance from both colonial and indigenous patriarchies. Future scholarship could build on this foundation by examining how these early negotiations continue to shape contemporary Dalit and feminist movements in Maharashtra and beyond.

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