

Autobiography: Concepts and Connotations

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... generated at the end of the eighteenth century but still powerfully present in the middle of the twentieth, each individual possesses a unified, unique selfhood which is also the expression of a universal human nature. For Olney, for instance: 'the explanation for the special appeal of autobiography . . . is a fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries' (qtd. in Anderson 5).

Autobiography has been recognized as a distinct western literary genre since the late eighteenth century. Though autobiographies have been written since ages yet autobiography as a genre has been recognized and read from a different perspective in the twentieth century. The well-known critic of autobiography James Olney believes that an autobiography deals with the "self" of the author. According to him there is a shift from "bios" (the life of the author) to "autos" (the author's self) in modern autobiography (Sodhi 24). It is a "narrative of the self". It is believed to be a personal, impartial, candid confession of the writer addressed to a larger audience with the purpose of attaining a new identity. The "self" of the author is reconstructed while writing an autobiography and it gets altered in a new light. According to Lejeune it is a "retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" (qtd in Anderson 2). An autobiography facilitates the author to self-examine and re-create his own self in a new light. This self-analysis and self-introspection transforms the author's selfhood and makes him more mature. There are also "key turning-point moments" in an author's life and his life is shaped by them. It may also be possible that after these "key turning-point moments" the author's life is transformed. These moments, according to Denzin, may be very insignificant like Augustine's stealing pears from a pear tree and his guilt feeling for the theft. (22) The author makes a confession of his guilt through his autobiography.

Written between the years 397 and 400 A.D., Saint Augustine's *Confessions* is considered to be the first example of great autobiography in Western Literature. As George Misch says, the *Confessions* is the first book "to represent plastically the coherence of human existence in the mother-earth of his story" (Pascal 23). Though it was written much earlier but the form was identified later in the eighteenth century, when D'Israeli employed the term "self-biography". The term "autobiography" was coined by the nineteenth century poet Robert Southey in 1809 and the modern critics regarded the term "autobiography" more apt and suitable in comparison to the other terms used for life-writings (Anderson 7). In Indian philosophy, too, the "self" has been given great importance since the Vedic and the Upanishadic times. The Upanishads lay emphasis on the inner and true self and preach man to know his true self. The Socratic ideal "know thyself" becomes the base of the Indian philosophy (Sodhi 28). Autobiographical work helps the man to unravel the dark inner recesses of the human being and look beyond the mundane reality of the world.

Autobiographical literature is generally confused with the genre of autobiography. Authors often refer their life stories as autobiography but there is a difference between an autobiographical work and in an autobiography. In fictional works like novel,

drama etc. the author's self merges with the characters, he creates, but in an autobiography, he expresses his own self and lays stress on his individuality. An autobiographer goes through a process of self-evaluation and attains a transformed self. Diary, journals, memoirs, letters and reminiscences are all manifestations of the writer's self. However there are minute differences which distinguish them from one another. A diary is a day to day record of a person's life. In comparison to diary, a journal is more elaborate and the writer has a plan or an idea of what use will be made of his record. Differentiating between Diary and journal, Sarojini says, "Unlike journals, which usually have specific objectives, diaries normally mirror the attitudes, feelings and thoughts of individual days and moments without regard to what has gone before and obviously without knowledge of what is to come" (200). The importance of diary keeping lies in the fact that it helps the author in recalling his past events because at a certain standpoint when he decides to write an autobiography he may or may not remember all the events of his life. He may miss something which has been worth incorporating in his autobiography. Apart from that, it gives authenticity to an autobiography. Differentiating between diary and autobiography Roy Pascal says that autobiography "is a review of a life from a particular moment in time, while the diary, however reflective it may be, moves through a series of moments in time" (3).

Another manifestation of the writer's self i.e. memoir is quite similar to autobiography. It is difficult to distinguish between an autobiography and memoir or reminiscence because every autobiography has an element of memoir and every memoir has an element of autobiography. Both are based on "personal experience, chronological, and reflective". The difference lies in the writer's attention, which is more focused on the author's "self" in an autobiography in comparison to a memoir or reminiscence. However, Sarojini makes a distinction between the two and says:

Both are based on personal experience, but there is a general difference in emphasis. The memoirist concentrates on recording public events and lays but little stress on the 'self'. . . . He is, therefore primarily, concerned, with public men and matters—the political luminaries and social winds of change. It differs from pure autobiography in its focusing point.

The illumination of the self is but incidental. The essential difference between the two genres lies in the amount of external life that is described. The memoirist makes it his intent and purpose; the autobiographer uses descriptions of external life to illumine his inner self. (201-202)

Therefore, memoir is the compilation of fragmentary events into a coherent narrative. It is a compound of remembered experience as individually felt or perceived, combined with externally verifiable historical events. Autobiography includes "developmental narrative" which orders both time and the personality according to a purpose or goal; thus the looser, more chronological structure of the journal or diary could no longer fulfill this higher function of autobiography (Anderson 8). In short, autobiography is a reconstruction of the movement of life in which the centre of attention is the "self" not the outside world. It deals with the "inner life" of the author rather than the external world. Autobiography gives us an "inside view" in contrast to the public portraits of the author. Roy Pascal writes, ". . . autobiography is a shaping of the past. It imposes a pattern on a life, constructs out of it a coherent story. It establishes certain

stages in an individual life, makes links between them, and defines, implicitly or explicitly, a certain consistency of relationship between the self and the outside world" (9). Even a common event acquires meaning when viewed in the perspective of a whole life. So the life events described by the author in his autobiography are significant in the sense that they help him in reaching to a definite stage in his life.

As an autobiography is based on the writer's life, and the subject matter for his autobiography is derived from his life events, he does not have much scope for the alteration in those events. He has to be true and honest while writing an autobiography. However, the New Critics considered it a fallacy to look for the writer's intention behind the text but the genre of autobiography celebrates the writer's intention, which is supposed to be honest and which then "guarantees the 'truth' of the writing" (Anderson 3). The author's imaginative faculty of the mind is utilized while writing a novel or some other literary genre but there is less use of his imagination in autobiography. However, truth in autobiography is often manipulated by the autobiographer. The writer writes about his past life from a certain standpoint and what he writes is not what he was but what he thinks he would have been. No autobiographer can tell the complete truth in the autobiography and can describe the whole truth of the past. An autobiographer is like a historian who narrates the history of his life. But historian is also a human being and whatever he writes gets filtered through his consciousness, so there has to be some fictional element while describing the truth of his life. Hayden White, in his essay "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact", says that even a historian can not give the factual truth and a historical text itself becomes a literary work. He writes:

The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play. (White 1715)

In this sense, autobiography, too, employs all sorts of narrative devices which are utilized to produce any artistic work. Roy Pascal writes, "Autobiography means therefore discrimination and selection in face of the endless complexity of life, selection of facts, distribution of emphases, choice of expression" (10). For Derrida, the use of language in writing an autobiography is important because for him language deconstructs the genre of autobiography. He says, "... there is no clear window into the inner life of a person, for any window is always filtered through the glaze of language, signs, and the process of signification. And language, in both its written and spoken forms, is always inherently unspeakable, in flux, and made up of the traces of other signs and symbolic statements. Hence there can never be a clear, unambiguous statement of anything, including an intention or a meaning" (Denzin 14). If this is to be believed then the genre of autobiography will stop attracting the interest of the readers in the authors' life stories. However, the fact is that an autobiography is still considered to be the true account of the author's life. The reason is that even though the description of the incidents of the author's life may not always be factually true but "it always is true evidence of their personality" (Pascal 1). The raw material of the writer's life events will neither be acceptable nor desirable by the

reader. Pascal also says, “. . . where a lie is the result of a calculated intention to appear right or important, damage is done to autobiographical truth. But when, . . . , we see them from the beginning as ‘exaltes’, when the whole sweep of their lives has something extravagant, inventive, Quixotic about it, when their imaginations determine their behaviour as well as their accounts: then we take their inventions, their distortions, as part of their being, as their truth, which is in fact revealed in their autobiographies with greater candour than we find in many more ‘truthful’ works” (82-83). Memory plays a significant role in writing an autobiography and re-collecting the events of the past. Memory performs the sifting process. The recollection or recapitulation of the events depends on the use of creative memory, which reshapes the historic past to make it necessary for the present as this present is the inevitable outcome of that past (Sodhi, 20). Pascal, too, says that the “later experiences will sift the past and determine what was important and worth talking about from what merely seemed important then, will therefore give the author his coherent theme” (69). For Roy Pascal, even the finest and greatest autobiographies rely on memory like the finest parts of Rousseau’s autobiography are those for which he has no documentary sources. He says, “Memory can be trusted because autobiography is not just reconstruction of the past, but interpretation; the significant thing is what the man can remember of his past. It is a judgement on the past within the framework of the present, a document in the case as well as a sentence” (19). The author’s mind is not a C.P.U., from which the records can be retrieved as they were saved. He re-produces the record of his life with the help of his memory, which is never definite and is always in flux.

In the present scenario, any lay man starts compiling the events of his life and calls it an autobiography but Linda Anderson differentiates between “serious autobiography” and “popular commercial autobiography”. She says that a “serious autobiography” is written by those who are capable of “sustained self reflection” and it is distinguished from “popular commercial autobiography” written by pop stars as it lacks “integrity” and debases the “self” by commodifying it (8). If we take a look on the best autobiographies, either by men or women, we find that they are all by people of some great rank or high achievement. For e.g. the autobiographies by Saint Augustine, and Rousseau in the West and Indian autobiographies by M. K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, are considered to be the autobiographies of high seriousness. Laura Marcus says that autobiographies are written by the people of “lofty reputation” or people who have something of “historical importance” to say (Anderson 8). Thus, the best autobiographies are written by the men and women of some great public achievement.

Women have written autobiographically for many centuries, and have felt the need to express their inner self but their works remained invisible. Domna C. Stanton says, “The subject . . . female autobiographies, memoirs, letters and diaries – represents one of those cases of maddening neglect that have motivated feminist scholarship since 1970. This body of writing about the self has remained invisible, systematically ignored in the studies on autobiography that has proliferated in the past fifteen years” (qtd. in Smith 3). Women’s autobiographical works were seldom taken seriously for the purpose of study before the seventies and women’s autobiographies were “not deemed appropriately “complex” for academic dissertations, criticism, or the literary

canon". Their autobiographical writings were considered "too windy and unreliable . . . to be worthy of critical investigation" (Smith 4). The critics of autobiography such as Georg Misch, Georges Gusdorf, William Spengemann, who took it seriously as a genre, focused their attention to the autobiographies of great men and didn't pay heed to women's autobiographical works. The status of women's autobiography, both within and outside the academy, has changed dramatically in the last two decades. It has become a prominent tool for self-expression as well as self-assertion. Women's autobiographies are called to be the "stirring narratives of self-discovery". The readers of women's autobiographies have considered them as "'mirrors' of their own unvoiced aspirations" (Smith 5). They expose their "real self" to the larger world and assert themselves politically and personally. With the development of the contemporary critical theories like feminism, post colonialism and post modernism, the genre of autobiography is viewed in a new light. Smith and Watson say, "If feminism has revolutionized literary and social theory, the texts and theory of women's autobiography have been pivotal for revising our concepts of women's life issues – growing up female, coming to voice, affiliation, sexuality and textuality, the life cycle" (5). The autobiographies by prominent western women writers in this era paved a way for a new trend for e.g. Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, and *The Prime of Life*. Apart from that Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* was considered to be the "life writing of high seriousness". African American women writers and their autobiographical works such as Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* explored the "complex legacies of racial and sexual exploitation". Angela Davis wrote her life story *An Autobiography* to expose the height of racism in the United States. Feminist critics have pointed out that an extensive women's literary tradition had existed for centuries especially the marginal genres like memoir, journal, diary and many other modes of personal autobiographical writings but they were not given due recognition.

There is a marked difference between male and female autobiography. While men distance themselves in autobiographies and focus on their professional lives, women's autobiographies are more personal. Women autobiographers generally deal with their domestic problems or their relationship to their parents, spouse, and children. In comparison to the male autobiographers, they are more private and intimate in nature. Though women's autobiographies are personal in nature yet they represent a particular group which is socially and culturally oppressed. Paul John Eakin says that "there is no place for the self – especially that of a woman – apart from community in the narrowly circumscribed moral universe of the village patriarchy;" (257). This sense of connectivity with their community does not let them express themselves completely to their readers. According to Elbaz, "the eye of the other directs the eye of the author" (Denzin 18) in a woman's autobiography. Women's autobiographies deal with the emotional aspect while a male autobiography deals with the intellectual set up of the author's mind. The narrative of a woman's autobiography is often non-linear and fragmentary. Though, these are the common features, which are found in every woman writer's autobiography but the socio-historical and cultural factors, which govern the life of a woman, are specific to a particular time and place. Chandra Talpade Mohanty says that the Third world women writers should not be considered a monolithic group by Western women writers. Keeping in mind the views of Mohanty, this fact can be

applied to the autobiographies coming from non-western women writers, which have distinctive features. In the present times, there are various theoretical texts for reading western women writers' autobiographies but there is a lack of any such theory that can be applied to the non-western women writers' autobiographies. There should be separate criteria to read and analyze non-western women writers' autobiographies.

The criticism of women's autobiography as a genre is hardly two decades old even in the West. The late eighties saw a breakthrough in studies of women's autobiography in West. Estelle C. Jelinek's *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (1980) is the first anthology of essays in the field of women's autobiography most on twentieth century literary autobiographers in the British and American traditions. In this collection, she has discussed about the diverse kinds of analysis for reading women's autobiography such as the historical, the social, the psychological, the ethnic, rhetorical, poststructuralist and Jungian analyses. Sidonie Smith's book *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (1987) is also a landmark in the criticism of women's autobiography. According to her, "any theory of female textuality must recognize how patriarchal culture has fictionalized 'woman' and how, in response, women autobiographers had challenged the gender ideologies surrounding them in order to script their life narratives" (12). An American critic well versed in the French Feminism and the French literary tradition Domna C. Stanton's collection *The Female Autograph* also talks of women's autobiography. Her lead essay "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" discusses why women's lives were suppressed in literary history and proposed a new nomenclature of "autogynography" for the separate genre of women's autobiography. Carolyn G. Heilbrun's *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988) is considered to be a valuable resource for examining the lives of women in the West. Though, the theories propounded by these critics are applied to the women's autobiographies from the East but a western critic can not have that sense of association which a non-western feminist critic may have. If we take the example of Indian women, they had written autobiographies since the late nineteenth century in hiding but the late twentieth century has brought women writers, who have written autobiographies in English as well as in vernacular for e.g. Amrita Pritam's *The Revenant Stamp* (Punjabi), Ismat Chughtai's *A Life in Words: Memoirs*, and Indira Goswami's *An Unfinished Autobiography* (Assamese) in vernacular and Kamala Das' *My Story*, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya's *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces* in English. In India, women had been taught to annihilate their self but today, this self annihilation has been overtaken by self-analysis, self-evaluation and self-assertion in women's autobiographies. Today, Indian women are more vocal, independent, self-assertive, expressive and self-conscious due to the impact of feminist theories. Still, there is a need for a distinctive autobiographical theory, which can help analyzing Indian women's autobiographies in Indian context.

In the early eighties feminist theorists began to draw upon the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in order to sort through the particular dynamics of the young girl's entry into language and thus of women's relationship to the symbolic order of words. Lacanian theory has influenced the reading of women's autobiographies too. The three French feminists Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have responded differently to Lacan's theory. The rereading of Lacan and Freud by Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva has been important for the reading of women's autobiography. They provide a way of understanding the complexity of

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female positioning as a split subject within the symbolic order and its logic of representation. They provide terms for understanding how the female subject mis/recognizes herself as a coherent subject. They encourage readers to look for gaps and silences in texts (autobiographies) to read away from coherence – in fact, to become skeptical about such previously accepted notions in autobiography theory as the linearity of narrative and a unified concept of selfhood. Lacan considered the “mirror stage” critical to the subject’s entry into language. An autobiography functions as a mirror in which the writer reflects his own image and the “self” becomes apparent. According to Lacan, in the mirror stage the child looks at his image in the looking glass and “sees its image as an other”. On the one hand, this image gives back to the child the idea of a coherent identity. On the other hand, the child mis/recognizes itself as a unified subject. For Lacan, the idea of the coherent, autonomous self is a fantasy. Therefore, women’s autobiographical writings are often fragmentary. They do not have a linear narrative and coherence in their life stories. There is always a feminine self which governs them. Their desires are suppressed and they are forced to hide and restrict their female sexuality. Hélène Cixous, in her essay, “Laugh of the Medusa” has urged women to resist their silencing and encouraged them to write in a language that would be writing of and from the body so that women can celebrate their body through writing (76). In their autobiographies too, women do not express themselves as openly as the genre demands. Their autobiographical writings are governed by social, historical and cultural factors. When we talk of the idea of “self” in relation to women, it is constructed on the basis of “sexual difference”. Defining the self-as-desire, Denzin writes, “Desire is that mode of self-consciousness which seeks its own fulfillment through the flesh, carnality, sensuousness, sexuality, and bodily presence of the other” (32). This is generally acceptable in the case of women’s autobiographies because though they talk of the idea of self-revelation, yet their desires are suppressed. They are often ashamed of talking about their female sexuality. Therefore, the idea of self-revelation remains unfulfilled in their autobiographies. Their voices have been suppressed for so long that when they start speaking it is incomprehensible. Woman’s writing is “eccentric, incomprehensible”, and Patricia Waugh says that “... if such writing is difficult, frustrating to read, it is because the feminine voice has been repressed so long, and can only speak in a borrowed language, that it is unfamiliar when it is heard” (335). However, women writers of the late twentieth century are more confessional, expressive and assertive in tone in comparison to the earlier writers.

A deeper study of women’s autobiographies unravels the inner recesses of feminine psyche. The recent women autobiographers have subverted the concept of marriage such as the writers like Indira Goswami, and Kamala Das for whom marriage is not the ultimate end of life. Indira believed in true love and its ultimate end was not marriage. Defining about the true love, once, she said “For me, the object of this love isn’t marriage alone. This love isn’t limited to physical love alone.... As if this heart is like a river, as if it merges into an endless sea. This is that sea which has no end” (Gogoi 238). Women write autobiographies to assert their individuality. It is a metaphor of survival for them. By writing autobiographies, they are purged of their sorrows and miseries. There are writers like Ismat Chughtai and Taslima Nasreen, whose life stories entitled as *A Life in Words: Memoirs* and *My Girlhood Days* respectively, are fierce and aggressive in nature. They break the concept of meek and docile Indian woman who

feels powerless. Instead of that they have tried to defy social norms and practices and opened the gates of freedom for other women as well.

Thus, an autobiography is a kind of personal revelation and its main interest lies in conscious or unconscious portrayal of the self. The best autobiographies are those which depict the inner journey and inner struggles of a person. It helps writers to confess and express their thoughts and feelings which they can not express in front of others. The genre of autobiography transforms the author's self and gives him an insight to view his life from a wider perspective irrespective of any public consideration. It is a journey from ignorance to knowledge and from darkness to enlightenment.

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