

Indian Women Autobiographies: An Alternate History

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Abstract:

An important aspect of autobiographies that makes the reading and study of such works relevant is that they can be studied as social documents and as insights into the ways in which individuals sought to present their version of “truth” as opposed to the point of view of a few select influential male members of the society which is commonly known as ‘history’. Especially, the autobiographies penned down by women take the readers on a journey of hitherto uncharted territories of female psyche which has remained neglected for the most part of our known history. In this sense, these autobiographical works act as an alternate history- a view of the world from a very different angle.

Key Words: self, society, interrelationship, marginalization

Introduction:

Every individual, at some stage of life, is fascinated by other people’s lives, for life-histories have a wide appeal. Life stories of one or another kind have been made familiar to us right from our childhood through oral tradition of story-telling or we have read them somewhere or seen them being enacted on stage or screen. They have been entertaining or admonishing us, encouraging and inspiring us too. Today, life-histories have made their mark and have come to be identified as an important genre. They include all kinds of modes and media where the experiences, memories, opinions etc. of an individual have been voiced. They may be in the form of biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, travelogues, essays, interviews given by an illiterate informant, and the hagiography of a bhakti saint etc.

History of life-stories in India:

In India, the study of life-stories, and especially, autobiographies, had remained neglected until recently compared to other regions. Since last a few decades, the study of autobiographies as genre has picked up momentum and is becoming one of the most popular forms of literature for modern readers. Despite all these facts, conditions in India were not considered as favourable by some Western critics for varied literary and critical approaches, particularly in the field of autobiographical narratives as women's studies. One explanation given for this belief is that caste is one of the most significant attributes of Indian society and the critics hold the view that gender, caste and religion dominate identities of people to such an extent that individual identity and the sense of selfhood have never been in the centre of Indian thought and behavior. One critic even argues that Indians can be understood better by using the term 'dividuals' rather than individuals. It was a general opinion that in India society was valorized, the individual was not. It is a fact that the approach to autobiographies in India is different from their Western models in conventions and modes of expressions, and one should not expect to find peculiar forms of individualism that emerges in the West, as a pattern of "collectivity" tends to prevail in Indian life and society. Stuart Blackburn, in his essay on Indian autobiographies entitled "Life Histories as Narrative Strategy", observes that in a country like India that possesses extraordinary historical depth, "...the felt need to tell a person's story is among the most powerful of cultural impulses" (203).

India is generally perceived as essentially a society composed of castes, religious communities, kinship networks and regional assertiveness. It is also believed that as a result of this, a sense of selfhood and personal identity is muted and is lost in the larger social and cultural entities. A study of autobiographies enables us to understand precisely the complex forces at work in modern societies and to concentrate more accurately on the major themes that dominate the sub-continent – gender, modernity, nationalism, ethnicity, social change, religion, family and interrelationship between self and society. Arnold and Blackburn observe in this regard:

Authors might attempt through the power of the written word to pre-empt history or to define it in their own terms, but they did not necessarily have the last word on this, and many Indian life histories owe more to ongoing social processes, to popular reinterpretation or the cultural accretions of generations, than to an actual life as lived or defined in a single work. (12)

Women Autobiographies: A history of becoming

Profound research has been carried out in the field of autobiographies in general and concerning the voice of women and the marginalized community in particular. Many critics of women autobiographies like Friedman, Georges Germaine Bree, Shirley Neumann or Heilburn have debated over the formation of women's autobiographies and checked the intensity of gender discrimination in it. There are several issues which have troubled the critics for a long time.

Caroly G. Heilburn raises the questions like, where the autobiography should begin, what would be the complexity of relationship of the subject with the mother, why does her marriage succeed or fail etc. Susan Stanford Friedman puts forth the problem of gender-discrimination even in creative writing, emphasizing that a man can think of himself as an individual, but a woman, who at every turn is reminded of her sex has no such luxury. She also opines that women develop a dual consciousness – the self as culturally defined and the self as different from the cultural prescription. Prof. Meena Sodhi opines that a woman can defend her selfhood and narrate the story of her life very boldly, but also mentions that though writing has never been regarded as an unfeminine accomplishment, women writers have faced more critical resistance than man. Referring to the theoretical issues confronted by women autobiographers, Conway inquires:

For the woman autobiographer the major question becomes how to see one's life whole when one has been taught to see it as expressed through family and bonds with others. How can she convey its authenticity when linguistic convention subsumes the female within the male? (4)

Gusdorf, an eminent critic of women autobiographical writing, is of the view that autobiographical work develops as the author develops, hence the process of writing becomes a quest for identity. Linda Anderson in her critical essay entitled "Autobiography and Personal Criticism", points out that autobiographies play a vital role by empowering otherwise marginalized groups and that they can be viewed as the history of a becoming.

With the passing of time, along with the conventions and customs of the Indian society, the focus, the moods and the modes of expressions of the Indian women autobiographers also changed. From the earlier themes of national and social relevance and the reticent mood of the writers, the genre has moved on to giving a voice to more private emotions and expressions of the innermost feelings and passions of the women. A few decades ago, the list of women autobiographers would remind us of the who's who list of political or social arena, but today even

a woman-next-door, if willing, pens down her life-history if it contains something of interest and inspiration to the reading public.

Since 1960s, a growing interest in women's writing and in 'the private, rather than public, history of oppressed groups' (Baer), the lost lives and voices of women have started coming to surface. Outlining the uniqueness of women's autobiographies, an esteemed critic in the field, Esstelle Jelinek, recognises that their works display three distinct features: (i) women's life-stories focus on the personal and private life of their narrators, rather than on broader historical or public issues. (ii) Their use of language, expression and style differ remarkably from their male counterparts. Instead of the exaggerated, idealized and self-confident style of the male writers, their writing display use of irony, humour, straightforwardness and understatement. (iii) Their autobiographies are fragmentary or organised in such a way that every chapter could stand alone and are often not chronological. For a woman writing an autobiography serves as a platform for 'the figure of the writer doing the telling', whereas history gives her a 'chance of finding other narratives, of rescuing herself from the bleak knowledge of what happened to her' (Anderson). Commenting on the difference between autobiography and history, Carolyn Steedman, writes in a later essay about her influential memoir *Landscape for a Good Woman* that "I am very eager to tell readers, close to the beginning of the book, that what they are about to read is not history. At the end, I want those readers to say that what I have produced is history" (45).

Autobiographies by women writers reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individuals concerned, but also of specific society, cultural, regional and tribal group that the writers belong to. This helps immensely in understanding and analyzing groups that are in some way marginalized and hence not normally heard, such as women, Dalits, disables etc. Today, in India, there can be observed a partial move away from the polished biographies and autobiographies of the 'great and famous' toward the rendering and analysis of more marginalized and subaltern sections of society. Analysing the change that can easily be perceived in the literary output by those in the margins as the relations between the two poles-the margins and the centre-has been redefined to a great extent after 1960s, Singh observes:

Various creative writers responded to the center and margin configurations in the society in their works. The creative and critical works by members of the marginalized communities and on the marginalized groups of our society e.g. minorities, women, dalits and tribals by others looked at various issues that deserves to be studied in depth and afresh (17-18).

The justification behind taking up the study and analysis of the autobiographies of women- whose culture has been termed as ‘sub-culture’ by some critics, and especially women who have been further marginalized either socially, physically, geographically or culturally- is that their lives are generally not accessible by other means and their individual voices which actually represent the plight of many other such marginalized groups are silenced by the more dominant forces at play. Critics even use the phrase ‘double discrimination’ for women of marginalized groups.

Conclusion:

Autobiographies by women examine in depth and focus thoroughly on the interrelationship of an individual and the society, how the gender of the writer has affected her life and social status, to what extent the caste or the culture play a role in shaping the individual’s life, whether the writer’s experience of being physically disabled or marginalized, any different from her male counterpart.

Even after valuable efforts and research in the field of women autobiographies, there still remains a scope, where the focus could be shifted from the well-known women figures like writers, artists, social activists etc. to women who would not have been otherwise known to the readers if not for the autobiographies they have penne down. These are the women who are eager to share the blessings and opportunities, as well as the blemishes and challenges of a life that they have been endowed with. That is the primary reason behind selecting the autobiographies under study in the proposed research.

Writing an autobiography is not an end in itself. But, they are of significant historical use. They are the printed material through which social reality can be examined. This aspect of historical understanding makes the study of autobiographies very significant. Especially, an analysis of autobiographies by women imbue an awareness about the problems of gender, disability, Dalit sensibility and other societal issues that women in India face in their day-to-day existence.

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