

Lives in Fiction: Autobiographies as Theoretical Narratives

Lekshmi B S

Guest Lecturer in English

University Institute of Technology

Mannar, Kerala

Abstract

The scholarly precept of biography as a tool to “elevate the soul seems to have run its course”. In the contemporary world, autobiographies and memoirs are more likely to attract public attention for abuse, addiction or other such acts which are of questionable value to the reader’s spiritual well-being. As conventionally defined, autobiography is the art of telling a story about one’s self. It is also a process of creating meaningful spaces for oneself to inhabit. Writing is a space which is used to project the self as a meaningful subject of inquiry. Recent theories of subjectivity have stressed this concept of the self as a construct of history and culture, rather than an innate phenomenon. Subjectivities are often closely bound up with notions of personal truth and identity. Subjectivity banks on our “past histories as that entity which invests our lives with meaning. Memoirs and recollections of the past, that give our lives authentication and meaning, become the rock on which autobiographies are built on.

Keywords: Memoirs, Subjectivity, Self, Consciousness, Identity, Selfhood, Imagination, Transcription, Recapitulation, Recollection, Representation, Confession, Exploration, Introspection, Trauma, Marginalization, Oppression, Sexuality.

From the Middle Ages till the latter half of the twentieth century, biographies and autobiographies had little importance in the hierarchy of generic gradations in literature. However, autobiographies have always captured the imagination of the reading public and profoundly influenced individual readers. Autobiographies that range from The Confessions of St. Augustine to Mein Kampf have altered the world of meanings in a very substantial manner. Both the texts use conversion (or propaganda) as a schema to structure their authors' life and writing. The archetype of this form of organizer of self and text is St. Augustine's Confessions. Often considered one of the firsts in the autobiographical genre, St. Augustine's book recounts his early life as a spiritual journey that mutates into a deep religious experience, a miraculous transformation of the physical self, the essence of which is in part

conveyed to the reader through a transformation in the text itself. He employs a technique of introspection and conversion at the end of Book 9, as Confessions shifts abruptly from the narration of Augustine's early life to an a temporal introspective exploration of spirituality. It is only recently that musings on the self, have come to be regarded as more than an innocuous, "natural" procedure of expressing the true self.

The veracity and truthfulness of autobiographies that had for so long been taken for granted have now come under the filters of doubt and interrogation. The emphasis on the "truthfulness" of personal history has come to be viewed as a product of the writer's conscious construction. Some critics point out that this ingraining of truth into the discourse of autobiographies and personal histories is not incidental in any sense, but rather an assumption upon which our society has chosen to operate. Critics also point out the specific ways and means by which our "selfhood" or identities are created. Identity and selfhood in modern times are derived from and shaped by our location in a specific historical "time" and "place", as much as by our own personal histories, which we live, experience and construct in our everyday lives. This very nature of selfhood in our society thus posits a distinct relationship between the self, its history, and the idea of truth". The perennially intriguing questions of who we are and what we are and how have we come around to exist, have always been dependent on the way we have relied on our pasts, memories and histories to account for the "presentness" of our being.

History has thus become a way of accounting for our "true" sense of self. The truth of who we are, how we came to be and why our present culture is embedded in our histories and thus defined by them. This relationship between self, history and truth resonates throughout autobiography. It is probably what makes autobiography unique, for nowhere else is the relationship between the "self" and "life" so powerful or more truthful. However, in the canonical establishment of a literary order, autobiographies have always been in the periphery; even achieving a formal generic status has been a recent development. From the reader's point of view, the autobiographical subject is always the writer herself. The "T" of the narrative is always the "I" of the proper name. However, later on we find philosophers like Michel Foucault contesting the authorial position of an autobiographical "T. Autobiographies also represent the author's history in a rather factual way, but critics refute this claim of "truth" in autobiographies and they point out that there is always a substantial amount of fictionality in the representation of facts.

One of the most common assumptions about autobiographical narrative is that it has its roots in the world of fiction and resorts to fictional devices. Autobiographies tend to unselfconsciously borrow the procedures of imaginative fiction. But as one critic rightly points out, using techniques of fiction does not automatically turn autobiographies into fiction. Perhaps, to be more accurate, the fear of narrative is the fear of the "fictionalizing process" that happens in the writing of lives. If autobiographies stick to the strictures of

fictional narratives, then why is autobiography not a mere transcription of life? The confessional mode and the author's authority over the truth make autobiographies transcriptions of life. Nonetheless, the autobiographical nature of writing claims to possess "superior knowledge of that past. Like Rousseau's or Augustine's Confessions, deliberate self-reflections are wrought with an intention of reconstructing a unity of life across time.

Autobiography is not a simple repetition of the past as it was, for recollection brings us not the past itself but only the presence in the spirit of a world we left behind. Recapitulation of a life lived claims to be valuable for the one who lived it, and yet it reveals no more than a ghostly image of that life, already far distant, and doubtless incomplete, distorted furthermore by the fact that the man who remembers his past has not been for a long time the sane being, the child or adolescent, who lived the past.

It is important to delve into the nature and history of Western autobiography in order to see how the autobiographical practices of the Eastern, African and other literatures stand apart from the mainstream Western genre. Autobiography as a genre became canonical in the West during the early Modern period, starting with the Renaissance, though writing about 'the self existed several centuries before that; to be precise, from the time of St. Augustine's Confessions (c. AD 398-400). The ideals of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment (18th century) inspired the development of the genre, and the notions of self-interest, self-consciousness' and self-knowledge became prominent in autobiography. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, narratives of an individual's spiritual quest were also common, such as John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666). The autobiographies of this period celebrated the autonomous, rational individual, the Cartesian "I" whose experiences were universal. Gradually, people turned more into interior landscapes or into introspection. Instead of God and spirituality, Western autobiography now moved into the private and public lives of the individual. Even travel. Which was a popular social practice during this period, can be related to the autobiographical instinct of self-exploration. By coming into contact with foreign people and lands, Europeans were engaged in the process of knowing and defining themselves. Autobiography, the product of the enlightened political processes from the seventeenth to the twentieth century's, was responsible to a great extent in creating the nature of the Western subject as an accomplished and exceptional individual. It made him superior to the non-Westerner and legitimized his thoughts and actions, including the colonial project.

Autobiography thus became a master-narrative of Western rationality, progress and superiority. In this manner, the genre of autobiography functioned as a tool to establish the hegemonic superiority of the West over the East. In this period, the autobiography was limited to the life-narrations of social and political leaders and heroes, whose lives alone were considered worthy of narration.

Broadly, this humanist perception of autobiography involved two presumptions: one, that a single, pre-existing author is present in the text; and two, that autobiography presented “truthful” facts. Since the mid-twentieth century, literary criticism has been dominated by post-structuralist and post modern approaches to the text. These approaches reject an essentialist view of writing, where meanings are permanently invested in the text by the humanist author. This is the period of the “Death of the Author,” and the notion of a single, fixed author/subject at the centre of autobiography has also been deconstructed. In other words, in the genre of autobiography, there has been a move from the centre towards the periphery in the latter half of the twentieth century. Apart from a “dehumanisation” of the author, there has also been an insistence on the existence of multiple subjectivities of the autobiographical subject, on the blurring of distinctions between fact and fiction in the autobiographical text, the possibility of using the autobiographical act as a resistance measure against power-centres, and so on.

One predominant characteristic of Subaltern life narratives are the ways in which they defy the Western idea of a central, unified self in a narrative. Neither is the subaltern self in the life stories a fluid fragmented changing self as in postmodern narratives. In subaltern autobiographical narratives, the very notion of the individual, therefore, stands defused and deconstructed. The subaltern consciously and avowedly identifies him/herself with the community, and his/her personal trauma and rebellion is that of the whole community. Subaltern auto biographies speak on behalf of their "silenced" communities, drawing upon oral traditions and a mythical, collective history. Subaltern life stories should, therefore, be contextualised with in the socio-historical processes of the community that assert the subaltern's occupation of a socio-cultural space, resisting the marginalisation and oppression that has been meted out to the community for centuries. Subaltern literary practices are less literary and more explicitly involved with sociology, politics, demography, class, and gender. They vehemently resist romanticisation and homogenization. Their attempt is to forge a separate identity and aesthetics of representation that neither conforms to nor promotes the mainstream traditions that have hitherto subjugated the Subaltern experiences.

Women writers have apparently found the autobiographical genre conducive to inscribing their inner selves into writing, but critics argue that women's autobiography does not represent a singular separate tradition; instead, it embraces multiple lineages. Many critics have explored the poetics and politics of these diverse forms of life writing. Critics claim that this realm has undergone critical neglect insomuch as the body of women's autobiographies has remained invisible from times immemorial. Women's autobiographical writings have gained critical attention only for the past three decades and they have seldom been taken seriously for "complex" academic researches or even for peregrinations inside the literary canon.

Those who took autobiographies seriously could confer value only to the male edifices of autobiographical writings and regard only male subjective experiences as valuable sources of cultural capital. However, of late, women's autobiographical writings are looked upon with lots of interest as they are seen as representing the long-repressed articulation of women's experiential selves. Autobiographies have also been pivotal for revising our concept about women's life issues: growing up female, coming to voice, affiliation, sexuality, textuality, the life cycle, etc. Through the resurrection of forgotten autobiographies, women have been "written back into history". Women's autobiographies also bring the dimensions of race, gender and caste into the genre. Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and *The Prime of Life* have interrogated, through the self, the very category called "woman" in the making of self-consciousness. Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* exposed the tragedies of the Holocaust, and *The Diary of Anais Nin* combined self-exposure and creative experimentation with writing.

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