



AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL UPSURGE OF WOMEN IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA

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Abstract

An Autobiography is not just a life story; rather, it is a reflection of an individual's self, which enlightens the minds of readers in different ways. Women use autobiography as a shelter to vent out their anguishes and bottled-up emotions. Penning down the emotional state is the exquisite way to liberate the self, and an autobiography does so. It encourages an individual to walk into the depths of their pain and come out jubilantly by endearing over their anguished self. Nayantara Sehgal, Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Shobha De and many more broke the conventional custom and voiced against the male chauvinism. The main themes of these writers were identity, equality and freedom. Their writing not only helped them to reconstruct themselves but also it became the voice of many women. Their autobiographies also inspired to break down the silence of those individuals who had long been silenced.

Keywords- anguishes, enlightens, emotions, pain, turbulence, self, voiced, male chauvinism and reconstruct

"I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femaleness and my femininity. And I want to be respected in all of my femaleness because I deserve to be." Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Media 77)

The term autobiography, itself depicts a life story written by the person himself/herself. It includes all the events of a person's life right from his/her childhood. All the events render the internal and external life of an individual. The fact is the soul of an autobiography; it recreates life through the imaginative transformations. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an autobiography is an individual's narrative of his/her own life. The word autobiography is the combination of three words "auto", "bio", and "graphe", where 'auto' means

self; 'bio' is the entire life of the individual unto the time of writing and lastly, 'graphe' implies the act of writing. Thus, an autobiography is a life story written by the person himself or herself, and the main objective of the autobiographer is to realise and to artistically recreating the self.

Women autobiographers in their autobiographies describe their womanly character and write about their triumphs, happiest moments, pains, sprints and predicaments. They also write about their dualism of self- the public self and the private self. Thus an autobiography becomes a medium through which women unbottles their pent up emotions. According to George Henry Lewes:

the advent of female literature promises woman's view of life, woman's experience: in

other words, a new element.... Woman, by her greater affectionateness, her greater range and depth of emotional experience, is well fitted to give expression to the emotional facts of life ...(Helsing et al 56)

The word 'Woman' itself signifies her role as a grandmother, mother, daughter, sister, wife, and aunt. She is the center and all the characters of the family revolve around her; therefore, with the sturdy shackle of supreme sacrifice, the society has bind women by considering them "embodiment of sacrifices, silent suffering, humility, faith, and knowledge." (Kartik 87) Primarily, no one likes to share their furtive side until and unless they were affronted. Women write because, for long, they were intimidated biologically, psychologically, and politically by society, the societal inhibitions in the life of women tend to bind them into collective identities. As a result, they lose their individuality and entire life they submerge into the ocean of self-doubt and face identity crises. To bring their predicaments before the public eye, women often chose the option of writing, considering readers as their true confidants.

The tradition of women's self-writing in India goes back to the Vedic age. During Vedic times women were given freedom for self-expression. Some verses of the Rig Veda were composed by female seers; they were exemplary in intellectuality and attained utmost spirituality. Brahmavadini Ghosha, Lopamudra, Akka Mahadevi, and Maitreyi were some renowned women writers. In post-colonial India Nayantara Sahgal, Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Shobha De, Dilip Tiwana, Sharanjeet Shan, Mrinal Pande and many more are the prominent names in the field of self-writing. They turned their pains and emotional turbulence into writing. They wrote about their anguishes, sufferings and how writing cured their deepest pain and transmuted them into valiant women.

Amar Jiban is a remarkable piece of work written in Bengali language by Rassundari Devi. It is considered as India's first autobiography written by a woman. The book recounts her endless tribulations. In the autobiography, she describes her devastated feeling as a child bride. She also

mentions in her autobiography her inclination towards reading and writing, and the evil viewpoint of society towards the literate woman. However, facing many difficulties, Rassundari Devi learned reading and writing. Suniti Devi's autobiography, *Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921) is the earliest autobiography of an Indian woman. Her autobiography depicts hidden inwardness of most of the Indian women of the nineteenth century. Her self-narrative deals with her concern regarding improving the woeful condition of women in Indian society.

With No Regrets: an Autobiography by Krishna Hutheesing is an account of reminiscences characterized as a modest portrait incarnated in a simple structure. Her autobiography is a full account of events from the freedom struggle. *The Unfinished Autobiography* by celebrated Indian Assamese contemporary writer Indira Goswami describes the plight of an upper-caste woman, adjusting according to the patriarchal society. Through her writing, she voiced against the unjust religious taboos in India. She shares her dilemma as a young widow and her exploitation by the cruel patriarchal Hindu society.

India Calling (1934) by Cornelia Sorabji is a significant piece of work. In her autobiography, she mainly writes her concerns about the worst conditions of women in Indian society and their emancipation. She also reveals gender discrimination in her autobiography both in India and in England, where she went for higher studies. Another renowned autobiographer Savitri Devi Nanda wrote her autobiography on the bank of Thames River. In her autobiography, *An Indian Girl* (1950), she writes about her childhood. She reveals her mother does not like her tomboish behaviour. She wanted Savitri to be more docile and homely like all of her cousins, so she sent her to the grandparents, whereas her father always encouraged her. He wanted to give her a good life by educating her. He understood the embarrassment of his daughter at her grandparents' house. Therefore, he took his daughter from there and admitted her to a convent school.

Twentieth-century male supremacy can be seen in *Indian Princess* (1953) written by Brinda. She

belongs to the royal family. At a very tender age, Brinda's father-in-law took her guardianship. Her autobiography is a tragic story of a helpless girl born and brought up in the royal environment, sent abroad for higher education. She never wanted to return India but had to. Her husband and in-laws wanted her to be docile and timid. Her condition worsens when, subsequently, she gave birth to three girls. She was abused and insulted by her in-laws for not bearing a male heir. She had to go through a painful operation for male heirs, anyhow the operation failed and her husband married the second time.

Binodini Dasi, a marginalized woman by class, gender and profession, is a legendary name in Bengali Theatre. In her autobiography, *My Story and My Life*, she portrayed the killed exuberance of woman and her chasing the excursion of proving her individuality. Durgabai Deshmukh, the renowned figure in literature, protested against practices like *purdah* and *devadasi* system that hinder the development of women. Her autobiography *Chin Taman and I* (1980) is an exemplary piece of presentation of her life.

Nayantara Sahgal, a novelist and columnist of high repute, belongs to the famous Nehru family. She has written two autobiographies *Prison and the Chocolate Cake* (1954) and *From Fear Set Free* (1962). Her first autobiography is a reminiscence of her family, political affairs and days spent at Anand Bhawan, Allahabad. In her second autobiography glimpses of Independence, political unrest can be seen. In *From Fear Set Free*, she confessed her innermost feelings. In the autobiography, her autobiographical account is truthful, confessional and picturesque dealing with her suffocation and quest for identity in marital life. She writes about the sad part of her married life for being from different family backgrounds. She pities herself to marry Gautam, "Had my marriage been arranged, I should not have married Gautam. ... The need for a common background is particularly significant in a country where provincial differences range over dress, food, language and customs". (Sahgal 36)

Amrita Pritam's autobiography *Rashidi Ticket* depicts the unexpressed aspects of selfhood. Later it

was translated into English as *The Revenue Stamp*. Love and pen were the two fostering factors of Pritam's life. She had to suffer a lot to search for her true love. However, she honestly and audaciously confesses her marital conflict, urges for true love, and the failure of love in Saheer's case and, at last, self-contentment in Imroz's love.

Kamala Das is one of the most legendary female writers of her time. Das' autobiography *My Story* (1976) has carved an outstanding landmark in the area of women's autobiographies in India. She has opened up new vistas of autobiographical writings. She has been considered as a writer who fought for the rights of women. The most significant point of Das' autobiography is her confessional tone. Confession acted as a friend in Kamala Das' life. In her distressful time, her autobiography uplifted her from all her mental and emotional turbulences. In one of her poem "Only the Soul Knows How to Sing" she wrote that confession played a curative role in her life,

If I had not learnt to write how would
I have written away my loneliness
Or grief? Garnering them within my heart
Would have grown heavy as a vault, one that
Only death might open a release then
I would not be able to feel or sense. (Das 108)

Shobha De is a flamboyant feminist; she has broken all the authorities of the societies. In her autobiography *Selective Memory: Stories from My Life*, she exemplifies women as epitomes of power; depicts her liberty, mental conflict, a broken marriage, identity crises and an environment of restrictions. De advises to utilize self-resources in the best manner and not to follow any norms blindly. She had written her life story in the confessional mode, which gives a sparkling record of what an ordinary but determined Indian woman can do.

Indian-American model and television personality Padma Lakshmi's autobiography *Love, Loss and What We Ate* is an extraordinary journey of her life from a humble kitchen to the judges' table of television show Top Chef. In her autobiography, she revealed intimate facts of her unsuccessful marriage to renowned author Salman Rushdie. In her interview with the *People* magazine Lakshmi said, "I

just wanted my own identity. I was making the transition out of one stage of my life and into another. But to do that, it required that I was not everywhere that he [Rushdie] needed me to be". (India Today)

The above women writers are towering twentieth-century Indian women. Though they revolted at individual levels, but they are proud Indian women as their motives are the same. The above autobiographers, namely Krishna Huthseeing, Nayantara Sahgal, Binodini Dasi, Durgabai Deshmukh, Amrita Pritam, Kamla Das and Shobha De, Padma Lakshmi cannot be termed as firmly, feminists. Their life stories do not voice a kind of protest, but a strong sense of recognition and acceptance of what they are. In their autobiographies, through confession, they exhibit their inner voyages and the persona beneath masks. To conclude, Helene Cixous words on this may be taken as the last word on women and self-writing:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text- as into the world and into history- by her own movement. (Cixous 875)

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