

WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

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The term ‘autobiography’ comprises three Greek words *auto* which means *self*, *bio* which means *life* and *graph* which means *write*. Autobiography was not classified as a distinct genre within itself until the late eighteenth century. It was Robert Southey who coined the term in 1809 to describe the work of a Portuguese poet. Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines the word autobiography as, “*auto* means self and *biography*, the story of a person’s life”. Autobiography is, thus a written account by a real person about his/her life and situations. The genre of autobiography originated in its full form in the West. Quoting Lejeune the American scholar Linda Anderson in her book titled *Autobiography* writes that, “autobiography 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” (Linda2001:1). It means that autobiography should be about a real person, a real situation and real circumstances which develop the personality of that narrator in the process. Naikar defines the process of autobiography as the , “the whole process of writing an autobiography is an act of assimilation, which involves like articulateness, fidelity to experience, sensitiveness to small currents of feeling and above all curiosity. It is also a process of self discovery and examination in leisure as found in the west, as well as in India” (Naikar2002:34). An autobiographer selects only some prominent events from his life to reveal to the public by adopting the technique of thought filtration.

Autobiography is a type of genre in English writing which originated in the west and then spread to the East. Initially this form of writing was adopted by the male members of the society, on the contrary women were confined to the private domain wrote only dairies. Male writers had always been free to write about their life and get it published. On the contrary, women writers, who had been forced to be private if not silent confined their thoughts to dairies. The genre of writing about self has been practiced by people for centuries. Diaries are one of its kind but they are not meant to be published. In the dairies writers share their experiences as well as their desires with their loved ones. Dairies have proved to be a great source for understanding one’s own nature. Diary writing is one of the important practices in the west a favorite activity pursued by women. It is a reflection of their experiences and a deliberate strategy to escape into a protean form of subjectivity under the tyranny of patriarchy which silences and marginalizes their life and work. It is very difficult for women writers to write about their private life and get it published. As the writings of women were not considered to be substantial and worthy of reading, they were not printed. Pointing out the technicalities of writing, Sarojini Jain in her essay ‘Autobiography : A Literary Genre’ gives two reasons for not publishing the dairies.

According to her, “in the dairies and journals we usually feel the lack of two elements which are essential to the narrative act, selectivity and movement”(Jain1996:201). Madhubala a veteran actor had written dairy which was buried with her. It highlighted that though she was a celebrity but her personal life is confine in a diary.

In India, this genre gained momentum in the nineteenth century, when political figure has used it as a tool to spread their views to common men by writing about their experiences. Mahatma Gandhi in his autobiography *My Experiments With Truth* (1927) looks at his life plainly and simply guided by his dharma and principles. In his work, Gandhi looks at his secular endeavours as a leader of the nation and also in humility because Gandhi would not want to lose his grip and association with the common man in the country.

In the genre of autobiography the role of women writers cannot be overlooked. They are also a constitute of a society and they have their voice. Autobiography offers an alternate space, as Linda Anderson pointed out in her work *Autobiography*, “a place from which to contest their socially sanctioned position of silence and submission” (Linda2001:15). She further says “Difference” is the term that is used to replace the notion of gender identity as something innate, drawing attention instead to how ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are meanings produced within and through language. These are social constructs over and above the biological constructs” (Linda2001:15). Writing an autobiography is an act of ideology , as pointed out by Liz Stanley in the book *The Auto/biographical :Theory & Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, “that a reader reads autobiography for many complex reasons, but one of the most important is to, find out about other people’s live, one way of reading autobiography, therefore was to read it as biography” (Stanley1992:120).

When we ask the question who is writing about his life then the answer we get is writers, public officials, celebrities, sportsmen and people who are already in public space and hence are not uncomfortable in presenting facts of their life. Julia Swindells in *Victorian Writing and Working Women* talks about the women autobiographers and gives this answer that who speaks history she answered, “Who speaks for history?” goes the question. “The ordinary”, comes the answer, if it is not “the unique”, “the special”, “the famous”, “the great,” “the professional,” it must be “the ordinary”. And again, the suspicion is aroused that who is speaking for history is our “real historian,” defining and claiming “the ordinary” (Swindles1986:35). It is not a class who is using this genre of autobiography but it has evolved to a larger group of women who want to share their experiences.

In context of India the traces of autobiographical writing could be traced back to as early as 6 century B.C . The writings have been identified as those belonging to the Therigatha nuns in the form of *Muttas*. To quote an example , one of the poet writing about the self in *Mutta 22* says , “ So free am I, so gloriously free, free from three petty things – from mortar, from pestle and from my twisted lord” in *Women Writing In India Volume I*(Tharu1993:68).

India is culturally complex society where women of upper caste and lower class distinguished between silent and spoken. In the twelfth century, writers composed songs and hymns which dealt with various subjects like need for bodily love and passion, the foolishness of war and the spears that men left with to wage wars. Akka Mahadevi, a medieval Kannada poet, mutineer and mystic, challenged the patriarchal ascendancy of the world at large with her writings. Pawan Verma has translated her work. In the thirteenth century Janabai wrote autobiographical verses.

In the Mughal period *Humayun Nama* written by Gul Badan Begum. After Mughal British ruled over India and they brought education awareness in the masses. Influenced by the

West, the educated elite Indians became fascinated to write about their lives and desired to share their life's experiences with the public at large. A number of people including politicians, public officials, writers, judges, sportspersons and housewives have used this form to talk about their lives. There is so much attachment of an individual with the "I" that is very important to explore the same. This 'I' is a statement of the physical aspect of human nature which describes the feelings, emotions and experiences of the individual.

Indian literature in English is a product of last 100 years but in the genre of autobiography there are many male and female writers, who exhibited their talent in writing about their self like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Princess Brinda, Kamala Nehru, Vijay Laxmi Pandit and many others. The earliest publication of autobiography in English is that of Lutullah titled , *A Mohamedan Gentleman and His transaction with His Fellow Creatures* (1857).

It has been observed that a majority of writers in the genre of autobiography were men and there was a great dearth of women writers. As women were denied education the production of literary works by women was almost negligible. But in the eighteenth century, with reforms in female education and opening up of English medium schools for girls, women began to receive English education.

With the launching of the nationalist movement the educated women came out to participate in the political struggle and also began to write. There were women writers such as Bhabani and Jogeshwari, whose writings in the early nineteenth century questioned the patriarchal dominance of their husbands and showed the concerns of women for their own identity. Towards the mid nineteenth century more and more women began to write in English. Some of them, such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain , created a world of feminist Women writing In *Indiaideologies*. In *Sultana's Dream* she talks about a world dominated by women, a world which has imprisoned men in a male equivalent of zenanas (women's quarters).

In the twentieth century, women's writing advanced towards the expression of feminist statements combined with the political message. The autobiography of Vijay Laxmi Pandit and Krishna Hutheesingh are examples of autobiography with a political message. Tharu and Lalita in their voluminous work *Women Writing in India*, have mentioned that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a number of autobiographies came out initiating the beginning of a new genre of creative writing by women. These autobiographies , "are a personal testimony of the new sense of worth these women experience as 'individuals' whose specific lives were of interest and importance"(Tharu1993:160). The autobiography of an eminent stage actress Hansa Wadekar *Sangyate Aika* (1970) conveys an honest impression of the world of a professional woman whose career in television and stage segregated her as a class apart, yet subjected her to the same brutality and oppression of patriarchy.

In India women belong to elite class is not only penning down about their life but women from different region in their regional language talking about themselves. It is very interesting to note that women writers of Maharashtra used this genre widely as they were more keen and focused about describing their life, as women in India, have been traditionally considered to be good storytellers . Women in Maharashtra were enlightened about their self projection and they inspired the future generations. That is why it has been seen that the trend of writing an autobiography has been very popular with the Marathi women.

The beginning of the genre of autobiography by women in India in English began with the princesses of Cooch Behar. These women were well read and well educated and had an impact of the western attitude, where Diary as a form was already very popular. *The*

Autobiography of an Indian Princess (1921) by princess Sunity Devi of Cooch Behar , which is one of the earliest writing by an Indian woman. Princess Brinda of Kapurthala in her autobiography titled *Maharani The Story Of Indian Princess* (1953) narrated her life in the East as well as the West. Her autobiography is a story of dilemma in the mind of a western-educated Indian lady. Brinda concludes the life story by expressing that each one has to build his/her destiny. Women from the royal families, who were educated in the west and were influenced by western manners, customs and lifestyle realized that they were privileged and were public figures. The rise of autobiography in India is due to the impact of the western way of thinking. In the words of Meena Sodhi, “the effects of western thoughts and English literature was strong on the minds of the Indian people right from the days of Rammohan Roy” (Sodhi1999:173). K.R. Iyengar in his work *Indian Writing In English* (1985) discusses different movements and activities in India which benefited much from the Western influence , people and groups involved in religious awakening , social reforms, the new education , women's emancipation, literary revival , political consciousness were all profits of English education. A ‘new spirit’ seemed to have possessed India and its people which helped them in diverse activities.

Political fervour in India paved way for this genre in India. The autobiography of Gandhi and the politician Surdernath Banerjee reflect the idea that those who have a public image, would like to share their life and professional experience. This is done for the sake of the people who admire them and are eager to know about them. Very few women fall into this category. Hence the genre of autobiography marginalized them. In the nineteenth century, women in India were confined to *Purdha*; their lives were not considered worthy of reflection or discussion as they played a secondary role in the family and society. They were confined to the kitchen and rearing children and taking care of their husbands and families. They were members of a society and a culture where ‘I’ was not given significance but the family or the community was significant. Taking up autobiography writing therefore required women to enter the public space which was a challenge that few women could dare to take up. It is only in the twentieth century one finds the form evolving. The biggest constraint for all these potential women writers was the fear of talking about the ‘self’ truthfully as this would put them in the category of bad women because only bad women lived in the public sphere. In India it was the autobiographies of Gandhi and Nehru which were models for autobiography writing and the women writers were unaware of their predecessors in this genre. If one looks at the first real group of women’s autobiography, it is the actresses who were already in the public sphere who dared to talk about themselves and their lives more candidly like Hansa Wadkar *Sangte Aika* , Durga Khote *Me, Durga Khote*(1990), Leela Chitnis’s *Chanderi Duniyet*(1990) ,Leela Naidu’s *Patchwork of Life* (2010)and many others .

There is a major difference between the male and female writers. Male writers restricted themselves to talk about their public life, their achievements. Their main focus lay on their public image, and they give only a glimpse of their family. In other words these life writings are meant to propound their ideology On the other side when women write autobiographies they accentuate on their relationships because they are accustomed to thinking of themselves in relation to others, as somebody’s daughter, wife or mother. It also hinted that women’s life writing characteristically concentrates on private, or home life in contrast to men life writing , which often foregrounds the author’s activities in the public sphere. Male writer is conscious is his public gaze and women is balancing both her public and private domain.

Besides the male writers, female writers too, have talked about their professional life. Cornelia Sorabji's *India Calling*(1943) is the autobiography of a lawyer who waged a struggle against the suppression of women.

With No Regrets (1943) an autobiography by Krishna Nehru, sister of Nehru talks about her political life, her relationship with her brother and her sisters. She mentions about her participation in the Indian freedom struggle, and as Ranjana Harish has pointed out , “this book is an excellent record of Nehru’s life and their great contribution to India’s freedom struggle, but as an autobiography it fails to project the identity of its author” (Harish1996:45). Krishna Nehru restricted herself as a freedom fighter who is influenced by the persona of Nehru. Khoja girl Ishvani Pseud’s, *Girl in Bombay*, published in 1947 is an account of Ishvani’s rebellious attitude towards the society at large where women are severely restricted to rigid codes of conduct. Her feelings are well conveyed, “The girls were repeatedly told how to behave and what was expected of them. Good girls were not to move alone, not to keep their heads uncovered” (Ishvani1947:91). Ranjana Harish adds in *Women Autobiographies in India* “ In fact here she stands as a representative of the Khoja women’s collective self”(Harish1973:45).

In the 50’s and 60’s some prominent autobiographies were written. Dr. Savitri’s *The city of Two Gateways. The Autobiography of an Indian Girl* (1950), is an autobiography of a woman charmed by the love of learning. Due to her determination she studied well, became a doctor, rejected matrimony and decided to go abroad for further studies and to serve the humanity. From this we can understand that women were focused and could make up their mind though the times and the order of the society was different from the modern age.

Brinda’s autobiography *Maharani: The story of an Indian Princess* (1953), reveals that after becoming the Tika Rani of Kapurthala, she got her education from the West and learned the ways of princely life. This education widened her scope of thinking. Nayantara Sahgal’s *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), talks about her parents role in the freedom struggle ,her pursuit of knowledge and her reflection on Nehru her uncle before freedom and post freedom. She published the second part of autobiography titled *From Fear Set Free* (1962). wherein she talks about her married life and her struggle to maintain her household. In both the autobiographies there is a contrast in the manner of description as the former was focused around Nehru’s family and about her parents role in the Indian freedom struggle and in the second one she concentrated on her love and marital life and domestic problems. Some autobiographies are unknown, remote but still fascinating like Shoilabala’s *A Look Before and After* (1956), talks about her career and her personal life. Sita Rathnamal’s *Beyond the Jungle* (1968), is like a fairy tale story of a girl from Nilgiri hills. Her life in the woods and her decision to explore the world beyond the dense forest and her training as a nurse is a fascinating read.

There are many women autobiographies which were published in the 70s- Kamala Dongerkery’s *On the Wings of Time*(1968), Urmila Haksar’s *The Future That was* (1972), Kamala Das’s *My Story* (1976) one of the prominent testimonial . We find Kamala Das candidly talk about her childhood her fancies and her married life., Gaytri Devi’s *The Princess Remembers* (1976), Dhanvati Rama Rau’s *An Inheritance* (1977), Shubha Mazumdar’s *A Pattern of Life*(1977), Vijay Laxmi Pandit’s *The Scope of Happiness*(1979).

The autobiographies which were published in the 80s: Durgabai Deshmukh’s *Chintaman and I* (1980) Her father taught her to be ‘selfless’ and have a humanitarian approach towards life. She was quite aware of her womanliness. Renuka Ray’s *My Reminiscene* (1982). Vijayaraje Scindia’s *Princess : The Autobiography of the dowager Maharani of Gwalior* (1988), Shar-

Jeet Shan 's *In My Own Name: An Autobiography*(1985), Kamaladevi Chattopadyay 's *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces*(1986), Tara Ali Baig's *Portraits of an Era*(1988).

The famous works of 90s are Prema Naidu's *In love with Life*(1990), Indira Goswami's *The Unfinished Autobiography*(1990). It describes the problems faced by an upper caste woman who is expected to behave according to the set by the patriarchal society. Nayantara Sehgal's *Relationship : Extracts from a Correspondence* (1994).

In the 2000s the known works are Shobhaa De's *Selective Memory: Stories From My Life* (2000) ,Pooja Bedi's *Time Pass*(2000) , Leila Seth's *On Balance* (2003), Kamala Das's *Childhood in Malabar : A Memoir* (2003), Malika Pukhraj's *Song Sung True: A Memoir*(2004), Shardabehn's *Reminiscences: The Memoirs of Shardabehn Mehta* (2005), Lubna Kazim's *A Woman of Substance: The Memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mizra*(2005), Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006), Durga Khote's *I, Durga Khote*_(2006), Subbalakshmi's *Subbalakshmi: Fragments of a life* (2006) Neela Stayanarayan *One half One Full* (2007) Krishna Bose's *An Outsider in Politics*(2008) , Sister Jesme's *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun.*(2009), Kiran Bedi's *I Dare!: Freedom from Sabotage & The Gandhian Way: If I were the Police Commissioner*(2009) ,Vina Mazumdar's *Memoirs of Rolling Stone*(2010), Indrani Jagjivan Ram's *Milestone: A memoir* (2010), Leela Naidu's *Leela: A Patchwork Life* (2010) and A.Revathi's *Truth About Me:A Hijra Life Story.*(2010) . Padma Sachdev *A Drop in Ocean* (2010) Sushma Seth Stageplay *The Journey of an Actor*(2010) Prabha Khaitan's *A Life Apart: An Autobiography*(2013).Padma Desia *Breaking Out: An Indian Women's American Journey*(2013), Kathryn Hansen *Satges of Life:Indian Theatre Autobiographies*(2013) Mary Kom's *Unbreakable-Me*(2014)

There are two autobiographies which were narrated orally and translated by the translators .Marie Therese and Paul Rambali *I, Phoolan Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen* (1997) and Viramma, Josiane Racine, Jean-Luc Racine *Viramma :Life of Dalit* (2005)

There are many things which readers look for in an autobiography that are very significant for its shape. It has to include the major incidents of the person's life, employ a good narrative technique and possess a good language and diction. These enhance the readability and popularity of the autobiographical work. Autobiography is the hardest of all forms of literary art. It is unique because it is a retrospective account of the autobiographer's life. Autobiographer is not free to choose their material, they have to try and honestly present their life and work. Ranjana Harish in her paper titled 'My Story' writes, "While a writer is free to create a world of the future, the autobiographer must feel committed to cast her glance back over real history. She need not treat it factually, but she cannot avoid creating her autobiographical world as an intimation of the actual past, as she understands it or responds to it"(Harish:1996:219). The aim of autobiography is to highlight the external life of the writer and to illuminate the inner self. It is the genre by which he or she inducts the reader to their inner selves.

Autobiography has gained popularity because it is one of the democratic forms of writing, that it is open to all. This is the reason for a number of autobiographies that have been published with the passage of time. Self projection is the best way by which one can present the worth of the self image. In an autobiography, the writer shows his or her development in a chronological manner from childhood to adolescence, to his youth and then old age.

A significant point that needs to be observed is the age at which the writer pens down his or her life. For example, Durga Khote and Leila Seth wrote their autobiographies , when they retired from their career and had nothing substantial in hand to do . It was at that moment that they decided to explore themselves through their writing skills. Amrita Pritam wrote her second

autobiographical work *Shadows of Words* (2001) in her 70's which throws light on her reflections and reminiscences of life. Sushma Seth has also written in her elderly age .

There could be a number of arguments behind the writing of an autobiography. What that forces the writer to write about his or her "self". In the words of Sarojini Jain , " For some it might be an urge to articulate the historicity of the self, demonstrating their place in the cultural milieu, while for others self portraiture might be an aesthetic artifact or a personal account intended to convey a moral or leave a record for posterity" (Jain 1996:202). Writing an autobiography purely depends on one's memory, even if it is written only when the writer tends to reflect on their life. Basically it is the writer's choice of what (s)he wants to extract from his or her memory . An autobiography is more than just a retrospective account of one's life. It involves shaping of the past and imposing a pattern on a life to construct a coherent story of individual experience.

All these autobiographer have mustered courage to come out of their cocoon existence and talk about their experiences. Indian Women autobiographers have been exploring this genre to fullest. It is heartening to see that their number is multiplying every year. They are free and fearless to talk about their *I* in their own way.

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