

Chapter 1

Delineating Autobiography

Meaning, Definition and Scope

Autobiography, the word has been derived from three Greek words meaning ‘self’, ‘life’ and ‘write’. The term coined by Robert Southey in 1809, is a self-conscious revelation of one’s experiences, life, personal beliefs, likes and dislikes. The style of writing called autobiography is as old as the history has been recorded. The critics and scholars have attempted to define autobiography in their own ways and also have tried to draw parameters that help in considering this style of writing to be as one of the literary genres. Some define autobiography in narrow terms, and refuse to accept some factual details of a personality to be included in the purview of an autobiography.

E. Stuart Bates has offered a definition of an autobiography as “a narrative of the past of a person by the person concerned.” (Bates 2) The factual accounts which amount to be the revelation of a personality are not intended to be a part of autobiography. Some translations and some that are edited are also difficult to be classed as autobiographies. It is also difficult to draw the strict lines of an autobiography because the writers like Maupassant have written an autobiography of the future.

Fiction and Autobiography

Autobiography is a chronological sequencing of the truth concerning the author’s self. Recording of the truth concerning the author’s own life is a highly subjective

matter. But sometimes the words do not coincide exactly with the memories and with the emotions expressed in the autobiography. So the fictional elements are bound to be traceable in an autobiography. Therefore, no water tight compartments can be drawn to separate an autobiography from a fiction. Writers like Bates do not find any dividing line between an autobiography and a fiction. Serge Doubrovsky, a French author, has found a sub-division of the genre of autobiography that deals with fictionalised self-accounts. This sub-division is created due to the blurring of fiction and truth in an autobiography. Serge Doubrovsky wrote about the holocaust. His books are based on his own life but are written in a fictional manner.

Through his own experiences of life, an autobiographer attempts to rebuild a society before his reader – a society in which he was born, brought up and of which, he now records a saga of his struggles, if any, against the inherent constraints of that society. The autobiography becomes a manifesto of an author's ideology which he wishes to propagate. It is not a stream of bitter/happy consciousness but, in a way, the emotions that the author recollects in tranquillity. Gandhi, in his days of passivity, that is imprisonment, recorded his thoughts and experiences which he believed could be expressed the best during the years of his imprisonment.

The author of an autobiography tries to establish a rapport with his reader. The relationship of the author and the reader is based on synchronised thoughts – a sharing of memories, experiences, assumptions and emotions occurs which the reader might also be nourishing in his own life at a certain point of time. The reader offers a fertile ground in which the author traces a large potential for the

acceptability of his own thoughts and experiences. The visuals from the life of the author arouse in the reader, because of the inherent commonality and identical nature, those emotions, the purgation of which would give the reader a relief that he might have endeavoured to seek from a work of art. It is at this point that the blurring of borders between an autobiography and fiction starts. Thus an autobiography, as a genre without fictional elements, does not stand scrutiny in its connotative values. It is a literary genre that a writer writes by keeping himself on the centre stage as a protagonist, sharing with his readers his emotions, moods and experiences adding to them the aesthetic elements.

There may be a variety of drives and urges that an autobiographer feels within – to pour out his life and his thoughts to the world. A person holding on to spirituality throughout his life would want to share his thoughts with those engaged in spiritual quest. A revolutionary would open to the world the conflicts and struggles, both external and internal, leading to his story of success or unsuccess. A freedom fighter would scribble the struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed and would try to vindicate before the world the fight that he and the band of his followers waged against the unlawful oppressors.

A Reader's perception of an Autobiography

It is interesting to know what makes a reader turn towards an autobiography instead of reading purely fictional work, or is it the fictional element that a reader tries to trace in this subjective work of literature. It needs to be explored whether the reader is inclined towards knowing a life for the historical interest or to know the development of a personality through times or reads an autobiography for purely artistic reasons. There is no denying the fact that the autobiographies

written by the popular figures attract readership. Sometimes, it is an urge of the reader to know the uniqueness of the socio-cultural and historical milieu in which the author's self had developed. The self of the author becomes the medium through which the reader peeps at the socio-cultural melange at a point of time in history. There is an involvement of the reader's self that attracts him to delve deep into the emotional and personal life of the author. An author-reader relationship is established; the author is the narrator and the guide who tries to establish a concurrence of his own memories and perceptions, with those of his reader.

The Levels of Truth in an Autobiography

An autobiography is located in the life-history of an individual rooted deep in the contemporary social conditions through which his life had once cruised ahead. An autobiographer's claim is the presentation of truth that became, in his own versions, an integral part of his life. This objective presentation of truth centres round his self. In a work of fiction, the narrator, in spite of being integrally attached to the elements of the story, poses to be detached from it. A work of art in its different forms is the manifestation of the personality of its creator. A painter, a musician or a literary artist – all create their own self, overtly or covertly, in their works. In literary art, if a writer tends to be objective, he is hardly able to achieve objectivity in full measures. He painstakingly, tries to dissolve his personality in order to produce a verisimilitude of complete detachment from the characters, situations and the places that are presented there. But the impress of the writer is discernible when the reader moves forward through a work of art. In a creative work, the writer looks at the world himself and becomes a medium of conveying

his impressions of the world to his readers. An autobiography prepares the writer to become a subject of his own objective analysis.

John Milton, Kamala Das and John Keats in their poetry, D. H. Lawrence in his fictional narrative and Charles Lamb, in his essays have presented a subjective account through a mask of objectivity. But an autobiography enables the writer to project his own self, his thoughts, and his life, and allows him to establish an emotional repertoire with the world around him through a narrative produced in his own voice. A tentative image of the author may be present already in the mind of the reader. This image becomes more vividly manifest in its different colours and hues through the narrative provided by the author himself. The reader gets an opportunity to analyse, confirm and compare the truth provided by the author himself, with those facts which the reader receives from other historical sources available to him. This comparison enables the reader to test the veracity of the facts and press upon those elements which appear to him fictional. But still the confusion remains whether to attach fictional values to an autobiography or not. Rajnish Mishra points out:

An autobiography cannot be predominantly fictional. Here 'predominantly' is used because its level of fictionality can never be ascertained. The truth value of an autobiography is very difficult to determine. Attempts are made to do so, on the basis of two kinds of evidences: internal and external. External comparison of facts in autobiography with those in the 'real' world is the easiest and the most common mode of establishing its level of factualness. Autobiographies of those phases of the

autobiographer's life that are public in nature can be judged very easily, but those of more private phases or spheres can't be judged externally. Their level of fictionality can never be established with certainty at all. Yet, one less satisfactory and less accurate way to do something like that is internal structural coherence in the placement and relation of facts and events. This kind of check is similar to the one made in case of pure fiction. Various units of the plot falling in, like the pieces of a big jigsaw puzzle, make a plot convincing, interesting, engaging and successful. An autobiography, after all, is a story. It has to follow the flow of fictional truth – the truth that demands and gets that willing suspension of disbelief from the reader that makes its existence sustainable. It is, then, the kind of truth that is established internally that also functions in case of autobiographies. The internal far outweighs external, as far as the sustaining of reader's interest is concerned in stories (as in fiction, as against those in newspapers and magazines). One learns about facts through history, that's a kind of narrative too, and from current history reservoirs. For that one does not go to an autobiography. (Mishra 10-11)

Objectives of an Autobiography

For the creation of an objective form of literary art – drama or novel, an artist gives a free play to his imagination. Though writer's own experiences, moods, observation, perceptions and emotions are integrally attached to the story element,

yet it is the endeavour of the writer to give it a semblance of detachment from his own personality. W. H. Hudson, in the introduction of *An Outline History of English Literature* remarks:

Every great writer, it has been well said brings one absolutely new thing into the world – himself; and it is just because he puts this one new thing into what he writes that his work bears its own special hall mark, and has something about it which makes it unlike the work done by anyone else. In the detailed study of any great writer this essential element of individuality is the chief feature to be considered, and in an historical survey, no matter how slight, it must be carefully noted too, for otherwise we cannot learn why such a writer counts as he does in the literature of his nation. (Hudson 1-2)

A careful analysis of any work would throw hints that any work of art is an attempt by an artist to project his self under the mask of objectivity. An autobiography removes this mask of objectivity and is a declared attempt of the writer to project him or herself. Self-portraiture in a particular social and historical milieu is the volition of an autobiographer. The writer in an autobiography has the liberty to construct his own self in particular situations. He records how his own persona developed in a cultural, historical and social environment, and how the individual's character developed passing through various psychological conflicts that he had to encounter while facing the challenges of life. An autobiography, thus proves itself to be a literary genre, that enables the reader to make an in depth analysis of the human character.

A study of contemporary history and culture

Literature is the mirror through which one can see an image of a society. Generation to generation, societies grow; each age has its own particular characteristics that determine its movements of growth and distinguish it from the other ones. The moments in the life of an autobiographer stand a testimony of the moments of the age in which he lived. The life which is constructed in an autobiography becomes a screen on which we witness the movements of the contemporary history, the social conditions and the cultural milieu. The gradual changes, which an age (corresponding to the life span of the individual) goes through, are authentically conveyed to the reader through an autobiography. Even the static systems of a society can be studied because an autobiography generally covers a life span growing from childhood to adulthood ranging from 30 to 50 years. The thinking of the individual, the currents of the age and the forces which work on the individual personality are aptly conveyed through an autobiography. The life of the individual becomes a document of the contemporary society and history of the times. The reader gets an opportunity to study the past imaginatively and sympathetically.

However, we cannot credit an autobiography to be a complete and authenticated document describing vividly the contemporary social and historical conditions. We have to make allowances for a relapse in the memory of the writer. He may not be able to recall each and every incident of his life unless it is most striking for him. Moreover, sometimes the writer may not consider an incident to be included in his autobiography as he may consider it to be kept away from the purview of the design of the work. Such an incident may otherwise be very

important for a complete understanding of the contemporary society and history. Therefore, an autobiography helps in the understanding of the age and society but still it is not a complete and ultimate work of history.

A medium for propagation of an idea and search for selfhood

It is through an autobiography that a writer communicates directly with his readers. He uses this genre as a medium of self-expression and as a medium for the communication of his ideas. The writer asserts himself and conveys his philosophy through an autobiography. This document helps in disseminating the important social or nationalistic issues that may help the writer in asserting his self hood in a particular social or national construct. The pre-colonial writer, who fought against the colonial forces by standing at the forefront, could find this genre as the most convenient vehicle to convey to the minds of his readers, his innermost thoughts and vindicate his own actions before the people for whom he had fought. The women autobiographers could bring to the surface the inner struggle and a quest for identity for the women who always felt themselves as subjugated and marginalised. A man's autobiography may be found to be dealing with his struggle, his achievements, his success and his philosophy of life. But a woman's autobiography deals with a search for identity in a world comprising of her parents, her siblings, her spouse and the society in which she grows from her childhood to womanhood. A woman autobiographer, as an observer, is keen on exploring the family constraints, the social issues, the customs and the beliefs that are the significant points of a particular society.

While asserting the self-hood, the woman writers assert woman's identity. Their autobiographies are a reflection of the contemporary social fabric, the social

history, the condition of woman and woman's perception of the world around her. This genre for woman autobiographer fulfils the objectives of upholding a woman's cause and dissolving the boundaries which assign distinct prerogatives to a man from a woman in a society. Through an autobiography, a woman allows herself to be heard across the social, cultural and geographical boundaries.

As the feminine philosophy is convincingly guided by the woman autobiographers, so does the struggle against Dalit oppression aptly gains momentum in Dalit autobiographies. History is witness to the prevailing strict boundaries that have been drawn to decide a Hindu's caste identity. The very birth makes an individual have a particular place in the hierarchy of the social order. The personal and individual traits of a man are of no importance; only the caste factor identifies a man. The growth of an individual has to face the serious challenges of the restrictions and limitations imposed by the caste system. Endowed with talent but inferior by caste, the individual is relegated to the background. The potential of the individual and that of the society at large is seriously affected by the social sanctions which are the off-shoot of the caste system. Above all, religion also gives sanction to the suppression of talent if it crosses the boundaries of caste.

History is either silent or is not so vociferous regarding the plight of the Dalits in Indian social set-up. There is no explanation of the psychological trauma that the Dalits had to pass through because of the caste indiscrimination. No voice had the loudness to shake the senseless society out of its slumbers and to enable the Dalits to realise their self and dignity, before Dr. Baba Saheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar raised his voice forcefully against the exploitations of the Dalits. To this

voice, the Dalit autobiographies have given a great impetus and have helped in bringing about a change in the perceptions of the society. The reality for the Dalits is changing. It was earlier perceived as the handiwork of Destiny but now it is being realised that it is an issue between an oppressor and the oppressed. The Dalit autobiographers make the world see the life of a Dalit from close, and make everyone realise that the unjust social system has done havoc upon the innocent psyche of the Dalits. The wily act of the upper castes to keep the Dalits powerless, unprivileged and deprived of an identity is promptly resisted by the autobiographies of Dalits. The writers make the world see a true picture of their lives – growing from childhood to adulthood – the lives full of abject misery, poverty, neglect, exploitation, deprivation and inequality. This presentation of reality shakes the very foundations of the senseless casteism and enables the Dalits to assert their selfhood. The *Jhoothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki shows the treacherous and selfish efforts of the upper castes to prevent a Dalit from getting educated and the consistent resistance of a Dalit to come out of the narrow world of indignity created for him by the upper caste people. The traumatic experience that the author had to undergo all through his life is the experience of not the author alone but the Dalits in general. The autobiography of Valmiki brings out the pain and anguish of all the Dalits, and the senseless exploitation of these Dalits, done by the swarnas in the name of caste and religion. Here, the autobiography transcends the limits of the study of a single life but it presents a study of the historical wrongs done, in the name of castes, to a whole class, the Dalits.

It all depends on the author's intention as to what objectives does he want to achieve from his autobiography or what aspect of the life does he want to project or from what perspective does the author want his readers to see his life.

Sometimes, an author centres on one part of his life and deliberately avoids talking about some other parts, and sometimes it may also be so that the author's memory is at a loss. Because of the varied objectives that the author may have, the forms of the autobiographies may also vary – thematic, religious, intellectual, fictionalised, and historic and so on. A thematic autobiography deals with a particular theme like childhood, relationship, truth and so on. An inner urge to trace and recognise the Truth prompted Gandhi to pour out from his heart all his experiences which enabled him to realise the force of this great 'calling'. Theme of Mandela's autobiography dwells largely upon the internal and external conflicts which a freedom fighter faces. It is written from the perspective of a freedom fighter that turns everything to a revolution if something falls in the way of realising the self-dignity. An autobiography is religious if the author wants to project his own life beginning from a spiritual quest to the spiritual attainment. A political autobiography fulfils the author's objective of projecting his self in the backdrop of his political life and struggle.

Forms of Autobiography

Autobiography, as a literary genre, is the revelation of the self, consciously done in the written form by an author. There can be different manifestations of an autobiography, in which the author can make a recollection of the truths of his life. These other forms are also the recollections of the author himself, but these are the forms which the author does not intend to publish.

Letters

If we move higher on the scale showing the forms of autobiography that make a self conscious revelation, letters occupy an important place. In the 18th century,

letter writing was considered as a pastime and as an art. Lady Mary Wortley Montague, Earl of Chesterfield and Horace Walpole are the well known writers of Letters in the British Literature. Lord Chesterfield addressed his letters to his son, giving him guidance in good manners. Horace Walpole's Letters show the details of the politics, scandals and personalities of the contemporary age. His collection of letters is a curious example of the recreation of the author's self and of the world around him. The *Paston Letters* reflect the daily life of an English family during the Wars of Roses. The names of Mozart and that of the poet Lord Byron can be added to the list of letter writers who revealed themselves through their letters.

Diaries

Diary writing is a popular mode of recording the major events of the author's everyday life. The writer keeps a record of important events from his own life. These writings include in them, the events involving the writer, his reactions to different situations, his impulses, his thoughts and his perceptions of the world around him. The experiences, recorded in her Diary from the life of the Jewish girl Anne Frank herself, in 20th century are worth mentioning for their intensity. Samuel Pepys, the Diarist of 17th century England recorded the major events of the world around him like – the Restoration, the Great Plague and the Great Fire. His Diary is an entertaining book holding a historical value because of the details of the society which he minutely captures in his Diary. Pepys gives a vivid account of the habits, the fashions, the manners, the coffee-houses and the play houses of the contemporary world. For a student of history, Pepys' Diary proves to be a reliable document – the one to be used for authentication, comparison and verification. John Evelyn's Diary is also a record of the events which we come to know from a

royalist's point of view. These diaries make an in depth revelation of the innermost thoughts of the writers. Pepys, for example, has recounted in his diary, his personal life, like his domestic troubles, his jealousies and his disappointments.

Journals

Another form of writing in which the author intends to project himself is Journals. The note books written by Leonardo da Vinci exemplify the author's attempt to reveal his own self. Dorothy Richardson has also recorded her personal experiences in her 'Journals'. Similarly the recoding of his flight from Russia with Napoleon done in a Journal by the French foreign minister Armand de Coulaincourt is a presentation of the personal thoughts and experiences of the writer himself.

Memoirs

Instead of projecting the self, the author, in a Memoir makes a record of his observations and experiences of the people, the places and the events around him. In an autobiography, the centre is the 'self' of the writer whereas, in a memoir, the experiences and the events that happen around the author and even the author himself being involved in these experiences and events, are more important.

These are autobiographies that usually emphasise *what* is remembered rather than *who* is remembering; the author, instead of recounting his life, deals with those experiences of his life, people and events that he considers most significant. (The New Britannica, 189)

In a memoir, the author analyses or interprets the events, instead of describing his self, as in an autobiography. The memoirs of Edmund Ludlow and Sir John Reresby present an account of the English Civil Wars of 17th century. As the

writers of Memoirs, the French Writers have moved ahead of the English writers. Duc de Saint-Simon, in the early 17th century in his memoir, presented a beautiful account of the character of Louis XIV. The memoirs of Giacomo in 18th century, those of Hector Berloz in 19th century, provide beautiful accounts and musical life around them respectively. In modern times, the name of Sir Osbert Sitwell can be placed among the eminent memoir writers.

Formal autobiography

This form of self-revelation is an attempt by the writer to reshape his life on the basis of his conscious and unconscious recollections. Self of the author is at the centre stage; the author makes his own choices of omissions and distortions. It is his own choice of the perspective which forms the thematic base of his autobiography. History and socio-cultural facts from the cotemporary world are the background in which the life in an autobiography develops what a historian or a biographer fails to notice, is presented truthfully by an autobiographer. Formal autobiography is the recreation of a life done with the help of memory.

Historical Overview

Autobiography is an ancient genre and the credit is normally given to the West for the creation of this genre. So far as the interest in individual life is concerned, the Western literature has taken lead over the Chinese, the Islamic or the Indian literatures. Anything close to autobiographical genre, in Chinese literature, is found in 2nd century BC. Ssu-ma Chien's *Historical Records* in which he has written about himself. The Indian literature in the past has shown its deep concern for the spiritual values and for the exploration of mystical existence of the supernatural powers. These subjects do not have in them anything related to an interest in individual life. In China, Japan and India, the form of autobiographical

or biographical literature, comparable to that of West appeared mainly in 20th century. It is like pulling in the fold of autobiographical literature to include the Letters of Cicero from the 1st century BC. The *Commentaries* by Julius Caesar dwell largely on the pursuits of Roman military, and little about Caesar himself, yet it can be taken as the earlier form of autobiography. The *Confessions* of St. Augustine in 5th Century AD and *Letter to Posterity* by the Italian poet Petrarch are different phases of this genre before it evolved into its present form. These are the earlier forms which though different from the present form, are the primitive phases which show the interest of the writers of middle and ancient ages in the development of an individual life.

Moving ahead of the already prevalent forms, we notice the first example of autobiography emerging out in 15th century, written by Margery Kempe, an old woman of England. She had no knowledge of literature. She has presented an account of her life and her religious experiences. She reveals her personality to her readers and also the impact she make on her fellows. Margery develops her 'self' in her work through a series of scenes and dialogues.

In 15th century, the Humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini was elevated to the papacy, as Pius II after an election. His autobiography named *Commentarii* records his career up to his election as Pius II. The twelve succeeding books record his experiences, the contemporary society, his own character, contemporary politics and the Vatican City. His autobiography shows the mark of a new beginning in the world of literary art. With this beginning of an advanced form of autobiography many other subsequent examples can be traceable corresponding to different ages. An autobiography of Italian physician and astrologer Gironimo Cardano and the adventures of the Sculptor Benvenuto Cellini in Italy are the examples of the

portraiture of self in 16th century. In 17th century, we have an autobiography of the English historian Lord Herber. The autobiographical genre is represented in 18th century through the work of Colley Cibber's *Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber, Comedian*. The autobiographies of later periods are represented by the authors of different temperaments and represent different societies. There is an autobiography by the great historian Edward Gibbon. Another autobiography, produced in a different vein, is written by the talented Benjamin Franklin, an American. He mainly talks of his success in his work. J. J. Rousseau, the revolutionary in his *Confessions*, makes an introspection of himself. In Romantic Movement in England, Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Byron's *Childe Harold*, Cantos III and IV, are the attempts by the poets to work on their respective selves.

On the basis of the purpose behind writing an autobiography, there can be different forms, which broadly fall under four heads – Thematic, Religious, Intellectual, and fictionalised.

- Thematic Autobiographies may include Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Nelson Mandela's *A Long Walk to Freedom*.
- Religious Autobiographies include *Confessions* of St. Augustine, *Historia Calamitatum* by Peter Abelard, Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, John Newman's *Apologia*, Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, and *Autobiography by a Yogi* by Parmahansa Yogananda.
- Intellectual autobiographies may be grouped as *Autobiography* of John Mill, Edmund Gosse's exploration of his relations with his father in *Father and Son* and George Moore's *Hail and Farewell*.
- Samuel Butler's *Day of All Flesh*, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and George Santayana's *Last Puritan* are the examples of

Fictionalised autobiographies. These are disguised as novels but are the revelations of the 'self' of the authors themselves.

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