



AUTOBIOGRAPHY: A LIFE-TEXT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The autobiographical act is a result of pre-text. It arises from the autobiographer's own life which occurs before the text and which the autobiographer and the reader read as the text. The act of autobiography also becomes the pre-text for the construction of a self-image by the autobiographer and the reader, the latter reading the autobiographical text while considering her or his own life-text. The self-conscious and careful selection of events, people, and memories within an autobiographical text either "fictive" or "deliberate" re-orders the past and can generate more memories. The autobiographical act is a re-reading of one's past, a recognition that is self-conscious and selective, it becomes a re-vision, a re-writing of the past in the light of the present.

INTRODUCTION

There is a saying that God created people because he loves stories. Each individual has at least one book in him; it means that each person has one story to tell about his life, which will be of interest to other people, or at least to his immediate family. Every person has an urge to say something about himself. Perhaps the urge to write springs from a desire to search for one's own roots, to see the pattern of one's life emerge from the dense undergrowth of life's vicissitudes, understand it and thus gain new insight and deepening sense of identity. It is only by writing an autobiography a writer can express himself. An autobiographer can break open the doors to the life and create a place for himself and create a path to impress the world. In the beginning autobiography was regarded foremost a historical document and as such most attention was paid to the life narrated. Autobiography is a record of the life story of an individual. The writer describes various experiences which he has come across. The writer narrates his own story and writes about himself.

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Thus autobiography is a type of self discovery. *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines autobiography as: “The account of an individual human life written by the subject himself.” [1980 : 854] Thus it is an account of the author’s life written by himself. In this way the author establishes his own identity by interpreting the history of his own life. The first fully developed autobiography is the most influential *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* which was written in the fourth century (397-400A.D) This book is a type of spiritual autobiography. It gives us an insight into a Christian soul. It is an account of a crucial experience of the author’s anguished mental crises. The author discovers his self, his Christian identity and religious vocation. Autobiography can be written in various forms as letters, journals, memoirs and diaries. *Chambers’ Encyclopedia* defines autobiography as ‘a life narrative written by the author himself’, a definition which can be held to include such other forms of literary self-revelation as memoirs, journals, diaries and letters. [1950 : 843-844]

In a memoir, the emphasis is not on the authors developing self, but it is on the people and events which the author has come across. Most of the autobiographical works written by famous people like actors, administrators, politicians, doctors, judges, and sportspersons are in the form of a memoir. Due to their public relations, they meet various kinds of people and thus describe them. The term *memoir* was first used by John Evelyn in 1673. A private diary or a journal is a day-to-day record of the events in one’s life. Several times the diaries are written for personal use and satisfaction, with a little thought of publication or without any purpose of publication. In a diary, the author writes the events which occur in his daily life. Therefore the present is very important in a diary. He writes one incident after another, one moment after another. In this way a diary is a series of events. The writer goes on writing whatever he feels important at that moment, but the incidents ultimate long rang significance cannot be assessed at that moment. While describing the events, the writer also describe his feelings and reactions and also comments on the events.

There is a slight difference between the mode of autobiography and a diary. In an autobiography, the author overthinks on the past events whereas the diarist jots the present events. Examples of such diaries are Samuel Pepy’s and John Evelyn’s diary written in the seventeenth century. The most important diary, on the horrible experience of war is written by Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl* which was published after her death. For James Boswell, the diary is a ‘register of one’s life’ [Linda, Anderson. 2006 : 35] by which Boswell meant it was a place to return in one’s order to contemplate self. James Boswell used his diary as a source of information, just like a register, while writing the biography of Dr. Samuel Johnson.



A journal is a record of events just like a memoir. But the author sorts typical events and experiences for his journal. Mrs. Hester Thrale encouraged by Dr. Johnson wrote a private and prolific journal. She owes to her husband for helping her in keeping the journal. She called her journal *Thraliana* which was also a family book, a domestic history, giving the details of her children's birth, progress, ailments and deaths. The journal of Fanny Burney is an account of description of her father Dr. Burney. The journal of Dorothy Wordsworth was published after her death.

While writing diaries, journals and memoirs women writers along with domestic descriptions, record culture also, but they neither create nor analyze it. Due to diaries and journals, the autobiography can be placed in the category of the sub literary form, as it does not have a recognized set of literary convention. C. Jahgirdar examines the place of autobiography in the system of literature as follows : "Compared to other literary forms like the epic, tragedy, comedy, the novel and the lyric, the autobiography does not have a full fledged literary identity of its own. . . . The term autobiographical writings which includes diaries, journals, confessions, memoirs, reminiscences, sometimes even travelogues thus refers to a whole cluster of such literary genres." [Ame, Sinroja. 2009 : 222]

Autobiography is a biography written by the subject himself. It is very easy to write a biography. While writing another person's life, the biographer mentions the things which appear to the outward eye. Therefore, there is no need to probe into the mind of the person. Apparent things like personal letters, eating habits, the relations with family members, relatives and society may also be described to some extent. While writing a biography the details of the self cannot be traced. Therefore, Dr. Samuel Johnson prefers an autobiography to a biography. He said 'Every man's life is best written by himself' and he further stresses that : "The writer of his own life has at least the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth; and though it may be plausibly objected that his temptations to disguise it are equal to his opportunities of knowing it, yet I cannot but think that impartiality may be expected with equal confidence from him that relates the passages of his own life, as from him that delivers the transactions of another." [Prasad, B. 1999 : 236]

In a nutshell, an autobiography has a personal touch. The writer provides an insight to his personality. The reader can get a view of the mind of the autobiographer. From a biography the reader comes to know the various habits of the person. But an autobiography allows the reader to peep into the mind of the author. Thus an autobiography is always superior to a biography as Longfellow states : "Autobiography is a product of firsthand experience, Biography of second hand knowledge." [Prasad, B. 1999 : 236] While writing his own experiences, the author can easily write about his feelings and emotions, but while writing



about another person's feelings and emotions one has to depend on the other person, hence the reader gets second hand knowledge from a biography.

The term *autobiography* is commonly thought to have been coined by the nineteenth century poet Robert Southey in 1909 when he was describing the work of a Portuguese poet, Francisco Vieira. However, there is evidence of slightly earlier usage, at the end of the 18th century in a review attributed to William Taylor of Isaac D'Israeli's *Miscellanies*, where he ponders whether 'autobiography', though 'pedantic' might not have been a better term than the 'hybrid' word 'self-biography' employed by D'Israeli's. [Linda, Anderson. 2006: 7] According to Felicity Nussbaum, whatever the definitions may vary, by the 1830s the word *autobiography* had become a matter of established usage. Hence, the history of autobiography has been traced since a long time. Life and literature share an inseparable relationship in which literature is not only a reading material, but a part of a quality life that one would like to live along with proportions and relationships which one would like to share with others, what further differentiates one style or mode of literature from another is the shape, texture and mode of narration that determines the elements of form. The concept of writing an autobiography has started nearly two hundred years ago, but critical interest in the genre has started fairly recent. However, autobiography has been claimed to be a distinctive product of the Western 'Post-Romantic Civilization' which has spread to other civilizations in the modern times.

In the beginning, people wrote more about their families and family traditions. In the 17th century, due to the extraordinary political and social disturbances more and more people indulged themselves in writing autobiographies in order to record their own participation in important events. There was another class who came forward to write religious autobiographies in which the authors claimed a status within the church and among the general mass of Christians for the overwhelming majorities of such religious autobiographers where priests, ministers, elders or persons holding some other clerical office. The late Renaissance and the early Reformation period became the great ages of autobiographies, journals, religious and secular memoirs, political military and erotic or scandalous letters were frequently published.

John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief Sinners* (1666) and Richard Baxter's *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696) are good example of religious autobiographies. By the end of the seventeenth century the turmoil and instability of the times forced an intelligent introspective man to enquire into the sociological or psychological origins of his own and other's beliefs, and to see himself and his class 'both as an object and a subject in the social process.' [Amees, Sinroja. 2009: 13] An opposite response to social change can be seen in a more adventurous group of young autobiographers who abandoned their childhood homes to find a new role for



themselves. They entered vocations with scope for opportunities such as soldiering, astrology and international trade. Autobiographies of these young people had unusual titles as Paul Delaney cited : “One of them called his autobiography *Fortunes Uncertainty or Youths Inconstancy*-a typical expression of the mingled hope, fear and self doubt with which they faced the increasingly fluid social structure of 17th century Britain.” [Ame, Sinroja. 2009: 13]

The 17th century was rich in producing religious autobiographies. Whereas the 18th century was the dividing line between religious and secular autobiographies. The modern autobiography has a confessional mode, but at the same time, it keeps in touch with the growing needs of a new emergent concept of man-his individualism and specially his distance from the church and God. The urge to confess was still there, but God was not the listener any more. Now the autobiographer sought audience among his fellow men and familiarity with worldly affairs. Mazlish defined modern autobiographies as : “A literary genre produced by romanticism, which offers us a picture from a specific present viewpoint of a coherent shaping of an individual past, reached by means of introspection and memory of a special sort, wherein the self is seen as a developing entity, changing by definable stages, and where knowledge of the self links with knowledge of the external world, and both together provide us with a deep and true grasp of reality.” [Ame, Sinroja. 2009: 13]

Henceforth, the autobiographers began to take interest in the self and gave importance to self-examination. The late 18th and early 19th century autobiographers were highly self-conscious, made retrospective analysis of their own life. Among those autobiographies, the best are : Edward Gibbon’s *Autobiography* (1796), Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* (1781, 1788). Cardinal John Henry Newman’s *Pro Vita Sua* (1864), Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* (1907), John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography* (1873). In the Freudian psychoanalysis, the verbalization of the individual experience was considered therapeutic and that made the autobiographical form itself popular.

The idea of autobiography as expression became an accepted means for an individual to explore his personal identity. But later on the distinction between autobiography and fiction became more and more blurred as authors include themselves under their own names in novels and autobiographies. Marcel Proust’s *A’LA Recherche Du Temps Perdu* (1931), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1965) are the autobiographies where the author discovers his identity and vocation, not as a Christian soul but as a poet and an artist. Among the heavily autobiographical novels the best are Samuel Butler’s *The Way of all Flesh* (1903), D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* (1903) and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man*. Just like painting, sculpture, dance, singing or any other art, writing an autobiography is also an art. Autobiography is an artistic creation. For an autobiographer the factual truth is



subordinated to the truth about him, he presents to us a dialogue with himself; the narrative becomes an after motion of the man who seeks the innermost fidelity. He does not try to repeat the scene but gives it a new perspective. It is an enactment of the drama of the life of a man who tries to reassemble himself at a certain time in history.

Georges Gusdorf thinks that an autobiography is 'a document about a life' and its historian has every right to check its accuracy. But more than being a work of art, the autobiography is a harmonious image which the author desires to project. So, it is primarily valuable for its artistic excellence, its being fiction or fraud becomes irrelevant. Therefore the literary value of an autobiography is of far greater significance than its historical or objective function as Georges Gusdorf points out : "Every work of art is a projection from the interior realm into exterior space where in becoming incarnated it achieves consciousness of itself." [Sodhi, Meena. 1999 : 36] Therefore, as a work of art the autobiography is not only a focus on the authors life, but an artistic creation which employs all narrative devices and restrictions like accuracy, impartiality and inclusiveness.

Writing an autobiography is a difficult task. Many times writing an autobiography is not interesting because it narrates incidents which reveal the harsh truth of life. Writing an autobiography depends upon the incidents which have occurred in the past. It depends on the memory of the writer and he may take help of a diary if he has written it. The success of an autobiography depends upon the choice of incidents in the writer's life. At the same time there is a sequence in the choice of the incidents. Along with the choice of incidents the omission of unwanted incidents is also very important. It is difficult to select some incidents and reject some events which occurred in the past life. The writer thinks over the past events again and again, and he tries to give importance to some incidents in his life and highlights those events. According to A.O.J. Cockshut : "The whole procedure of writing an autobiography is an exercise in inner assimilation, which involves qualities like "articulateness, fidelity to experience, sensitiveness to small currents of feeling, and, above all curiosity". The practice provides self-knowledge to the writer, it being the primary motive of autobiography says Roy Pascal. This self knowledge "depends on perception, conceptualization and private, experience as well as narrative." [Sodhi, Meena. 1999: 36]

Hence, the process of writing an autobiography involves the process of selection, rejection, proper distribution of facts and emphasis on certain aspects of life. It requires brooding, contemplation as well as choice and arrangement of the matter. The choice of incidents depends on the mental condition of the writer and at the same time it depends on the view of the writer. The incidents may have occurred in the twenties or thirties but the author may write the autobiography at the age of fifty or sixty. At this age, he has a different view of the incidents. He uses new words and views at the old incidents with a new aspect and in this

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way a new experience may take place while writing an autobiography. Hence the autobiography is subjective and very little importance is given to the outside world.

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