

## Autobiography as a Literary Genre

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Autobiography, one of the most important and popular forms of literature in twentieth century, is used as a means of 'self expression'. The readers show great interest in autobiographies because they are eager to know the personal life of autobiographer, ups and downs in his life, his ideas and beliefs, his heart and mind, and his passions and prejudices. Even the author writes his autobiography because "it offers an ideal scope for satisfying that human urge and quest and curiosity about human nature."<sup>1</sup>

There are numerous definitions of the term 'autobiography' in dictionaries and the books of literary terms; but it is difficult to find an all-inclusive definition from the available sets of definitions throwing light on the exact nature and aspects of autobiography. **Online Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary** defines the term 'autobiography' as 'a book about a person's life, written by that person', whereas **New Webster's Dictionary of English Language** defines it as 'biography or memoirs of a person's life written by himself'. The author of an autobiography is interested in narrating his own history and in doing so he recollects the dispersed incidents of his life and presents them in a comprehensive and artistic sketch.

M.H. Abrams in his **A Glossary of Literary Terms** and Lee T. Lemon in his **A Glossary for the Study of English** offer similar definitions emphasizing the 'role' of the author in writing his autobiography. **Encyclopedia Britannica** focuses on the principles of self-scrutiny and self-analysis and deliberate selection and artistic homogeneity in an autobiography:

"It (autobiography) must attempt to survey, in retrospective mood, a considerable portion of life, if not an entire life, and it must take the form of an ordered narrative, with deliberate selection and shaping of material (though not constructed as fiction) to compose an artistic whole. Above all, its underlying principle must be scrutiny of the self, with outside happenings, persons encountered, and observations admitted primarily as they impinge on the consciousness of the person on whose character and actions the writing is focused."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in an autobiography, the author is free to record only such events of his life which he considers important. He is free to resort to a method of selection. Emphasizing the importance of artistic creation of truth in autobiography, Wyne Shumaker says, "Autobiography is the professedly 'truthful' record of an individual, written by himself..."<sup>3</sup> The author chooses to write an autobiography for he wants to narrate the 'truth' of his life. But while narrating the truthful events of his life, he has freedom to choose certain incidents and omit the others. To make his narrative interesting and at the same time authentic, he presents the selected material artistically in his autobiography.

Compared to the above-cited definitions, the definition given by Pascal Roy is more elaborate. He says:

“It (autobiography) involves the reconstruction of the movement of a life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived. Its centre of interest is the self, not the outside world, though necessarily the outside world must appear so that, in give and take with it, the personality finds its peculiar shape.”<sup>4</sup>

This definition focuses on the ‘self’ of the writer rather than the outside world. Though the circumstances in which that ‘self’ is formed have some place in an autobiography, it is the ‘self’ which gets primary importance. In other words, in an autobiography, the ‘self’ is presented in relation with the circumstances and not vice versa. Pascal Roy also hints at the arrangement of events in such a way that it may help to reconstruct the personality of the author.

As a form of literature, autobiography has its own distinctive characteristics. Primarily, autobiography is an eye-witness record of one’s life written by the author himself. Although autobiography shares some features with other types of writing like memoir, confession, diary, journal, travelogue, letters, and biography, its main focus is the man himself who writes it to portray the growth and development of his personality. D.G. Naik in his **Art of Autobiography** declares:

“It will be seen, therefore, that a perfect autobiography is neither a memoir nor a reminiscence, nor a diary, nor a confession if these do not aim at self-revelation; these are usually prompted by motives other than the aesthetic motive and therefore fail to be the work of art although there be an autobiographical element in them.”<sup>5</sup>

The autobiographer sticks to the facts of his life and creates the picture of his past life in his autobiography. The subject-matter of autobiography is the history or the life-story of the author. Yet an autobiography is not like history in its presentation of the past. The historian has no choice but to narrate the factual events of the past in chronological order. On the contrary, the autobiographer selects only those events which help him to establish the growth of his personality and drops other artistically less meaningful ones. Thus autobiography becomes a creative blending of facts and fiction, which needs to be analyzed and interpreted carefully to avoid misunderstanding of the main concern.

Autobiographical novel is also a distinct literary form from autobiography proper. In such a novel, there is just a co-relation between the experiences of the author and the experiences of the character. It shares more characteristics of the form of novel rather than that of an autobiography. It is more a work of fiction and like all other fictional works, it is coloured by the imagination of its author.

Until recently, biography and autobiography were not clearly differentiated from each other. Rather it was believed that autobiography is a special form of biographical literature. But now, a number of critics of significant stature have illustrated that these two forms are distinct from each other in their literary motives and aspects as forms. The motive behind writing a biography is to create a memorial of the hero. A biographer presents or tries to present the detached, impersonal account of the personality of his hero and exercises his faculty of imagination to make it more interesting. On the contrary, the autobiographer creates his own faithful portrayal. Another important difference between biography and autobiography is that the

former is a complete picture of the life of the hero. The biographer begins his story from the birth and ends it with the death of his hero. On the contrary, autobiography is not complete work because in it the narrative comes to its end before the death of its hero.

A diarist writes down his experiences in a chronological order. He records his experiences at a particular moment and goes on adding to them his further experiences at different moments in his life. It seems that a diarist is interested more in the chronology of events rather than the events themselves. Although a writer of an autobiography is interested in narrating the events of his past, he does not give more importance to the chronology of events. In fact, past is not so much important for the autobiographer, but the review of the past in the present context is vital for him. Secondly, a diarist is not interested in creating overall view of the character and the life of the hero, but an autobiographer presents before the readers the overall growth and development of his character. A diarist gives more importance to an event at a particular moment in time. That particular moment is very much important for a diarist, whereas an autobiographer is concerned with the long-ranged significance of that event.

Reminiscence and memoir are autobiographical in nature but they are different from the autobiography in their purpose and content. The main purpose behind the writing of an autobiography is to draw a faithful and first-hand portrayal of the hero, whereas the author of a memoir is interested in contemporary events and other persons. So naturally, it lacks the element of self-centeredness and introspection. On the contrary, an autobiographer is introvert and gives more importance to the growth and development of his own self. In this regard, M.H. Abrams says:

“It (autobiography) is to be distinguished from the memoir in which the emphasis is not on the author’s developing sense, but on the people he has known and the events he has witnessed...”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the writer of a travelogue is more interested in the contemporary events than that of the growth and development of his own personality.

There are a few similarities between confession and autobiography. Like autobiography, the main purpose of writing a confession is self-revelation. The writer of a confession tries to draw his own faithful portrayal and while doing so, he reveals his own self to the readers. The writer himself is the hero of the confession and so the subjectivity becomes an essential aspect of his narrative. Similarly, an autobiographer is also subjective in his approach. The difference between a confession and an autobiography lies in the fact that the former has a more religious connotation, while the concept of autobiography is secular. The writer of confession stresses the moral and intellectual matters of his life but an autobiographer does not confine himself to moral and intellectual matters only. The writer of confession does not hesitate to disclose certain matters of his life to the readers which are not to be told even to a bosom friend, while an autobiographer remains reserved in such matters.

Autobiography is a very difficult form to handle because it is not just a story of one’s own life told in a straightforward style nor is it a creation of imagination pure and simple. Though imagination plays some role in the creation of autobiography, it is truth which plays a vital role. Even the readers are also interested in the truth in autobiography and take it for granted that autobiography is a truthful record of the author’s life. In this connection, Susie Tharu writes:

“...(there is) a pact between the reader and the writer, one committed to tell the truth, the other authorized to take the text as truth not fiction.”<sup>7</sup>

It is expected that the writer of an autobiography should present truthful record of his inner and outer life. He should be very honest in presenting his merits and demerits. But sometimes it happens that the writer is lost in vainglorious accounts of his life and the truthful events are neglected. Revealing one's own life in a truthful manner is really a very difficult task. It is possible that he may be tempted to use more glorious terms to present his personality than it actually deserves. But such things are possible only with sub-standard autobiographies. The autobiography proper is free from such defects.

While presenting a truthful account of his life, the autobiographer also presents a truthful account of his society. It is true that in an autobiography, the real centre of attention is the self of the author; but while creating a portrayal of his personality, it becomes inevitable for him to present the society that has shaped his personality. That is why an autobiography is regarded as one of the most authentic records of the society in which the author lived.

As an autobiography is the life-story of its author, it becomes subjective in nature. But it is not a simple, straightforward story of the experiences of the author; rather it is self-scrutiny and self-analysis. The author takes an objective view of him and presents his self-portrayal. He plays a dual role - one of the writer and the other of the protagonist. Though in reality, the writer and the protagonist are one and the same person, they become two different persons in autobiography. As the protagonist of his autobiography, he expresses his own feelings and thoughts and as a writer, he remains detached from the life of the protagonist. Thus, autobiography becomes a very skillful combination of subjectivity and objectivity.

## References:

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