



The Scope and Significance of Autobiographies in Edifying the Inner Self

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Abstract Autobiographies of women are more than a genre. They are sterling life narratives of individuals who marched by the beat of their own drum in order to drive their convictions home. Indian women autobiographies are more than a literary milestone as they signify the efforts of women to move from the margins to center. The self narratives chosen for the study here embody the resilience of women who walked out of the shadows to find their share of rightful place under the sun. The writers chosen from the different regions of India in a forty-three year time span before and after Indian Independence are not only examples of multiculturalism that India is home to but are motivational founts to derive an inspiration. If the autobiographies of great women are made part of the curriculum, the students will be treated to a healthy food for thought. The young and impressionable minds will learn to respect the other gender and grow with a healthy mindset.

Keywords autobiographies of women, stories of self-reliance and motivation, social documentaries, rich cultural diversity, inspiration to students, emotional nourishment

Introduction

The exploration into the inner self is a rewarding experience. The inward journey yields immense satisfaction as it navigates the different contours of the Self and its evolution over a period of time. Though the study of literature offers a wide scope to establish the connect with Self, it is basically in the genre of autobiography that the Self finds its best manifestation. The story is ever fresh in its appeal as it is cast on the canvas of life. It is rightly said, “Sarva sastra prayojanam atma darsanam.” Autobiographies unveil the self in all possible forms and hence provide appetising food for thought to mull over Me, Myself and Mine in both the individual and societal context. It is this special appeal in the exploration of Self that drew me into the study of autobiographies and the value quotient they hold in shaping the self.

I made an attempt in this paper to draw upon a few selected autobiographies of Indian women and their significance in holding a sway on readers’ imagination as powerful narratives of social zeitgeist. A good story belongs to the readers and it creates ripples far enough to transcend time and territory. What K.R.Srinivas Iyengar states about the influence of literature can well be applied to the autobiographies of women.

“Literature has been the means of giving form and utterance to the hopes and despairs, the enthusiasm and apathy, the thrill of joy and stab of pain in a nation’s history as it moves from freedom to slavery from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence, and again from independence to the tasks of reconstruction involving further experiences of success and elation or failure and frustration.” [1]

The scope and significance of literature in a ‘nation’s history’ could as well be attributed to the genre of autobiography in giving utterance to the hopes and despairs and enthusiasm and ennui of a person’s life. It is invigorating to note that the narratives bristle with undying optimism and make their way to the chosen destination against all odds. The battles might not have always been won, but they convey a powerful message that life lived to uphold a few ideals is worthy by any measure.



Autobiography or self narratives as they are often referred to, delve into the personal life of the narrator and record the impressions, influences and intricacies in moulding the persona in a given social, cultural and political context. The real life stories unfold a retrospective world lived and experienced by the autobiographers and let the readers into the hallway inhabited by the narrators and the influences that shaped them. Linda Anderson cites Lejeune's definition of autobiography as "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" [2]. The connect with the self and the exploration into the inner countries of one's being is a fascinating journey not only for the rewards that wait at the end but for the stimulation it provides during the course of the travel.

Women in India who took to education in the western sense of the term mastered English language with ease and penned autobiographies, among other genres of writing. According to

RCP Sinha "The western tradition with its premium on the individual intimated to the Indian mind a new awareness of the private self with its penumbra of memories and desires. The tradition- bound ethically oriented mind felt a surge of liberation and immediately a new vista of self- expression opened up before it.... It is highly interesting to observe that the extrovert culture of the west succeeded in turning the Indian mind inward and directing it on its path to the exploration of the inner psyche." [3]

Rasa Sundari Devi, Lakshmi bai Tilak, Pandita Rama Bai were popular autobiographers in regional languages of Bengali and Marathi. But it was in 1921, the first autobiography in English was written by Maharani Sunithi Devi. It was the beginning of more than a literary milestone. For Indian women, who were so far shackled by custom, mastered English language with grace and gave fluent expression to the literary stirrings. Feminism and feminist consciousness struck root in the growth of women autobiographies. Though initially, the Self in the narratives hovered rather tenuously, it gradually began to assert itself firmly with the passage of time. Over a course of time, inhibition evolved into independence and taboos of yesteryears became stories of triumph. The narratives became more inclusive, taking in their stride life stories that ranged from glorious to more prosaic. It is the emergence of the personality over circumstance that makes the stories special. The genre of autobiography began to lend voice to the hitherto muffled feelings and the writers began to experience a therapeutic release while verbalizing their experience.

The self-narratives I chose are from different parts of India thus raising a toast to the diversity of Indian culture which is known for its multiculturalism. The life narratives, in a chronological order read from Cornelia Sorabji (India Calling, 1934), Savitri Devi Nanda (The City of Two Gateways- Autobiography of an Indian Girl, 1950), Nayantara Sehgal (Prison and Chocolate, 1952), Amrita Pritam (The Revenue Stamp, 1976), and Kamala Das (My Story, 1977). I adopted a biographical approach to attempt an understanding of the social and cultural mores of the day. My interest in their stories is as much for the motivational element as it is for the literary significance they hold. The women autobiographers selected for this study are chosen from the pre independent and post independent era of India. A time window of forty-three years is chosen beginning with Cornelia Sorabji's narrative published in 1933 to the publication of Kamala Das' autobiography in 1977. In the process, I gained an insight into the influences that shaped and charted the course of women's lives and how they took to pen to ideate their individuality and independence.

India Calling [4] by Cornelia Sorabji is about the life of the first woman barrister of India who fought her way to establish her legal presence and provided legal help to the women. The Parsi lawyer had earned the sobriquet of Portia, (a character in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice) for her legal acumen. Cornelia had to fight her way through to get admissions into the best colleges of the day despite her academic brilliance. The resistance to her admission is deeply rooted in gender bias. All through her career, she fought many battles to secure the rightful share of women in matters of legal inheritance. Her autobiography describes her academic accomplishments, her happy and secure childhood 'dappled in sunshine', the gender bias she suffered both in India and in Britain and her professional commitment in providing legal support to the purdahnasheen women, women in veil.

A City with Two Gates, An Autobiography of an Indian Girl [5] is a story of a daughter from an aristocratic family, Savitri Devi Nanda. She narrates her life in the palatial grand parental home in Lahore, the condition of



girls in their families, her pursuit to study medicine and her travel to England with the unflinching support of her progressive thinking father. Staying in the established social parameters, Savitri Devi carves an identity for herself as she moves out of her city of two gates into the wider western world.

Prison and Chocolate Cake and From Fear Set Free [6] are the two autobiographies of Nayantara Sehgal of the illustrious Nehru family who holds a mirror to the political and personal goings on of the day with a lucid stroke of her creative pen. A sensitive observer of the pre and post Independent India, she gives a ring side view of the political developments of the day which mostly birthed in the legendary Anand Bhavan of Allahabad. The patriot and the political thinker vie in her writings as she describes the political and personal trajectory of her life.

The Revenue Stamp [7] by the Jnanapeeth award winner Amritha Pritham is another narrative where the self is bruised because of bias but seldom buckles under silos and straitjacket approach towards life. She resurrects the social time as she winds her way into the early memories of her school teacher, mother, Spartan father and the influence of the Sikh guru culture at home. Gifted with exquisite poetic language, she wielded her pen to paint the social customs of the day where women were often given a raw deal. She portrays her life in fluid prose and champions for the life of dignity for human beings and especially for women.

My Story [8] is a sensational life narrative of Kamala Das whose vituperative pen spares none of the unjust practices meted out to women. An iconoclast of traditional norms, Kamala Das does not mince words in upholding the dignity of women. KRS Iyengar aptly sums up her personality when he says, 'Das has a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions, to articulate the hurts it has received in an intensive man-made world.'

Autobiography as a genre lends a wealth of insight into the persona of the author along with the social landscape of the day. The cultural constructs read like a sub text and the personal life stands hinged to the social, historical, cultural pegs of the day. Every author is a product of the social influence of the time but women bear the influence in a pronounced way owing to the social constructs. The nonlinear, media res writing in most of the women autobiographers is because they deal more with the social consciousness and in the process, the strong autobiographical self, as advocated by the western critics is not groomed. Nevertheless, the writings of women provide a wider social space and have archival significance as a rich repertoire of contemporary history and culture.

Conclusion

The autobiographies of women writers stand for feminine resilience and the doughty warriors they have been. Cast in flesh and blood, these narratives are not fanciful imaginations, and thus provide a rich and nourishing food for thought. If students get the exposure to read the autobiographies, the books become motivational for the young minds and inspire them in a positive way. As schools are second home, children need to be taught to respect the other gender. Access to the autobiographies will provide scope for a healthy attitude towards others, thus paving way to gender sensitization. Autobiographies accrue multiculturalism, motivation and gender sensitivity among the young. As the library door in the Thebes reads, good books are a medicine for the soul. If the autobiographies in general are made a part of the academic curriculum the students arrive at a better understanding of self and other self. Any good book is a recipe for a rewarding life and the more the students get exposed to reading inspirational autobiographies, the better is going to be the emotional nourishment for their well being.

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