

Autobiography : Nature and History



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ABSTRACT

This paper contains the nature of autobiography and its elements. The fervor of autobiography is always self-centered true story of the author. The sense of autobiography from the ancient to middle time was mixed with the writing of systematic events which got stirred in Renaissance period in the West. Later on, the course of intimate writing about one self-started with the formal writing. The paper deals with the nature of autobiography which includes formal, informal, thematic, religious, fictitious, intellectual etc. and historical development of autobiographical writing in English. It has been presented here with the Indian style and current trend in autobiography writing in English by Indians eminent authors.

Keywords: Aesthetic, Essence, Depict, Account, Distortion, Annotation, Eminent, Deliberation, Spectacular, Fruitage, Blog, Logging, Humdrum

I. INTRODUCTION

In the phase of rapid development where human beings have become just like machines due to turning of the world as a global village, the only medium left out seems to be literature. Writing about life is one of the best medium to present human heart. Autobiography is a record of a person's life which presents many incidents of a person's private life. It works in two ways: one is as literature of knowledge and another is depicting the life of a person in aesthetic style. In order to understand the informative function of autobiography, one needs to understand its nature thoroughly so that the essence of an autobiography may be comprehended.

According to Oxford English Dictionary: An autobiography is

- "An Individual's account of his own life"
- "It is a biography of yourself"

- "It is biography, life-history, life story, life-an account of the series of events making up a person's life"

According to Collier's Encyclopedia:

"Autobiography, a form of biography in which the subject is also the author; it is generally written in the first person and covers most or an important phase of the author's life".

Mr. W. H. Donne writes in his grand work 'English Biography' "Autobiography, which is worth the name, is serious and truthful self-study".

All the above definitions explain that an autobiography is a life history written by an individual himself. It is a serious effort of an attempt of self-study which covers significant and systematic phase of an individual's life. Autobiography means 'the story of a person, written by him'. The term

'Autobiography' is not coined in very olden time; its origin is quite modern. Murray's New English Dictionary notes "...the first recorded use of the term occurred in 1809. Before this date, the autobiographical form passed under various names: life narratives written by the author himself, memoirs, journal, diary, biography by self, history by self etc".

Broadly, we can categorize three main kinds of autobiography which shows the nature of autobiography.

1. Formal autobiography
2. Informal autobiography
3. Specialized forms of autobiography

Formal autobiography:

"Offers a special kind of biographical truth: a life, reshaped by recollection, with all of recollections conscious and unconscious missions and distortions". There are many instances of formal autobiography found in ancient and middle ages also. Julius Caesar's annotations speak about him and for other things. In 5th Century A.D. the confessions of St. Augustine are very early and notable example of formal autobiography. In Europe autobiography marked its presence from the beginning of the Renaissance. The 17th Century showed richness in autobiography writing in England. The 18th Century marked many literary works in Europe and many autobiographies were written by the eminent writers like Benjamin Franklin, Edward Gibbon and Rousseau. Rousseau's 'Confessions inspired Wordsworth to write the Prelude' and Byron to write Childe Harold.

Informal autobiography:

Informal autobiography contains tremendously intimate writings about the author or writer which are not written for publication. Letters, diaries and journals are the form of informal writings which discloses the personal life of the author very deliberately. There are publication of collected letters of some renowned persons such as the volumes of W. S. Louis's correspondence with Horace Walpole, an

18th century man of letters (34 Vol, 1937-65) which makes clear about the deliberations of a person about his life and many private things are disclosed. In the early 20th century, the young Jewish girl Anne Frank wrote a diary about herself and the script was taken for a drama and a film to be played later on.

Specialized forms of autobiography:

Specialized forms of autobiography can be classified under four heads:

1. Thematic
2. Religious
3. Intellectual and
4. Fictionalized autobiographies.

Few autobiographies can be studied to understand the above four types which will make clearer about the specialized forms of autobiography. For example- Adolph Hitler's Mein Kampf (1924) and Richard Wright's Native Son (1940) can be called thematic autobiographies. St. Augustine's confessions and Peter Abelard's Historia Calamitatum in the middle ages and a few chapters of Thomas Carlyle's Sartor Resartus are instances of religious autobiographies. John Stuart Mill's Autobiography and Edmund Goss's Father and son (1907) are intellectual autobiographies. Fictionalized autobiographies are delicate leveled as novels. For instance, Samuel Butler's Way of all flesh (1903), James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man' (1916) and George Santayana's Last Puritan may be termed as fictionalized autobiographies.

History

Earlier, Indian writers were not very well versed with the importance of proper documentation and systematic documentation unlike the West writers. The genre and form of autobiography and biography were very much similar to the Indians before the British writer imprinted their writing styles after coming in India. However, the forms and techniques of informal autobiography or confessions may be seen and understood in the Vedic literature like *The Gambler's Lament*, *Rigveda* (10, 34.2), 1500 B.C. or in the Buddhist literature like Theragatha, 6th Century B.C. to 3rd century B.C.) Or in the later Sanskrit

literature like Bana's life given in the first few chapters of Harshcharitam (7th century A.D.) or in the Mughal literature like Babarnama, Tuzak -i-Jahangir etc. Such forms of informal autobiographies were tried to be written either to promote spirituality or to adore the autobiographer himself. The systematic development of autobiography in various languages including English in India can be traced from the second half of the 19th century.

The first piece of autobiographical writing in English by Indian may be taken as Raja Rammohan Roy's short autobiographical sketch (1833) which is a very realistic presentation of his life. Kashiprasad Ghose's letter published in James Lang's Hand book of Bengal Missions (1848) is of greater literary interest which presents the genre of the West. The first extensive autobiography was written by Lutufullah, a tutor in Persian, Arabic and Hindustani to British officers in 1857. Novelist Lal Behari Dey's Recollections of My school Days, serialized in the Bengal Magazine (1873-76), proclaims the superiority of English education to oriental learning. Nishikanta Chattopadhyaya's Reminiscences of German University Life (1892) and Rakhal Das Halder's The English Diary of an Indian Student (1861-2) were the only attempts of autobiographical writing by Indians in the 19th century.

In the first half of the 20th century there was the pursuit for freedom among the Indian leaders and writers. Those great Indian patriots who dedicated themselves to the freedom struggle wrote about their own experiences through autobiographies. Surendranath Banerjee's A Nation Making (1925) is an apology for moderate politics. Mahatma Gandhi's The Story of My Experiments with Truth (1927) written in Yeravada jail appeared first in a Gujarati weekly Navajivan. In 1940 it was translated into English by Mahatma's secretary, Mahadevbhai Desai. The story is often compared with St. Augustine's Confessions with all its pre-occupation with spirituality. Lala Lajpat Rai's The Story of My Deportation (1908) and Jawaharlal Nehru's An

Autobiography (1936) are two important autobiographies. Nehru's autobiography is a spectacular piece of self-analysis. It is a living record of the Indian history written in impressive language.

Other autobiographies of the period include social reformers like Swami Ram Das's In quest of God (1923), an educationist like G. K. Chatur's 'The last enchantment' (1933). Suniti Devi Maharani of Cooch Bihar was the first Indian woman to write an autobiography. Her book Autobiography of an Indian Princess was published in 1921. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit wrote three autobiographical volumes, like, So I Became Minister (1936), Prison Days (1945) and The Scope of Happiness (1979). Krishna Hutheesingh wrote With No Regrets (1944) and 'We Nehrus' (1968).

After independence, rich fruitage of autobiography writing may be observed which were written by eminent writers. Among the most outstanding of them are Morarji Desai's The story of My Life published in three volumes between 1974 and 1979 and M. R. Masani's Bliss was in that Dawn (1977). In 1951, Nirad C. Chaudhari's autobiography entitled Autobiography of an Unknown Indian set a landmark. It is a book of the highest linguistic and literary excellence. Among other autobiographies of the same period are: Face to Face (1963) by Ved Mehta, My God Died Young (1967) by Sasthi Brata, My Son's Father (1968), Never at Home by Dom Moraes. My Days (1975) by R. K. Narayan. Other women autobiographers like Nayantara Sahgal's Prison and Chocolate Cake (1954) and From Fear Set Free (1961), Kamala Das's My Story (1976) and Lady Dhanvanthi Rama Rau's An Inheritance (1976) are noteworthy. Furthermore, Amrita Pritam's Revenue Stamp and Shadow of Words (2004) are famous Punjabi autobiographies. Recently Shobha De's Selective Memories-stories from my life (1998) and Taslima Nasreen's My Girlhood Days are famous women autobiographies. In twenty first century we find master pieces like My country my life (2008) by Mr. L.K. Advani. Romancing with life (2007) is an ever

written full-fledged memoir of Bollywood's ever green star Dev Anand.

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Current Trends in autobiographical writings:

It has been rightly pointed out that in need a person searches for an innovative thing. With the availability of various medium of materials through internet and other sources, people started periodic web logging and writing their vies about themselves from which gradually the word 'blog' has been derived. The term 'blog' was coined in the late 1990s from the wordweb logging. The trend for blog gained popularity with the introduction of automated publishing services. 'Blog' helps mankind to reach the globe. It provides a wide range of information in a very compact form. It keeps every one updated. A blog is a type of website maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, description of events or other such material as graphic or video. The form of a blog is dependent on the individual who keeps it. They depict what is happening in a person's life and what they feel about the world around. Thus, blogs are a kind of hybrid diary and guide. Blogs often become more than a way to just communicate. They also have a sentimental quality. Personal blog is also referred to as 'micro blogging' which is extremely detailed blogging as it seeks to capture a moment in time. Sites such as Twitter, helps bloggers to share thoughts and feelings instantaneously with family and friends. This form of social media is a click away for the tech savvy new generation to maintain a human touch and step beyond their humdrum lives.

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