

THE GENRE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract:

The Greek word 'autobiography' has the roots self + life + to write. Hence, autobiography is a self-written account of oneself. William Taylor used the word 'autobiography' for the first time in 1797 in the English periodical *The Monthly Review*. He felt the word was a hybrid thing and pedantic. The romantic poet Robert Southey used it in 1809. However, the genre of autobiography is an ancient one. Autobiography has such forms like diary, journal and memoir. Roy Pascal thinks autobiography differs from journal which is periodic self-reflective mode of writing, while diary is about day's recording. Autobiography is a review of a life from a particular moment in life. Autobiography takes stock of one's life from the moment of composition. While biographers generally rely on a wide variety of documents and viewpoints, autobiography may be based entirely on the writer's memory. The memoir form is closely associated with autobiography but it tends, to focus less on the self and more on others during the autobiographer's review of his life.

Key Words: *Autobiography, pedantic, memoir.*

It is said, "Autobiography is subjective in nature. Still it can help the writing of the other non-fictional things as it can recreate history." (*Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* 231)

The ancient times witnessed spiritual autobiography, and often in verse form. A spiritual autobiography is a demonstration of divine intention through encounters with the Divine. For example, St Augustine's *Confessions* (6th century BC) endorses his religion.

Unlike the memoir, an autobiography focuses on the life and times of a man or writer. Julius Caesar's two memoirs with the word *Commentarii* can be autobiographies too. Leonor Cordoba (1362-1420) wrote the first autobiography in Spanish. The English Civil War produced two autobiographies of Sir Edmund Ludlow and Sir John Revesby, while Cardinal de Retz (1614-1679) wrote the first autobiography in French. Fictional autobiography signifies novels about fictional characters. Such characters use first person narration, speaking for themselves such as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, and S.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Robert Nye's *Memoirs of Lord Byron*.

Autobiography through the Ages:

The ancient autobiographies were also called apologia, oration and confession. John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* is an example. The pagan Libanius (314-394) called his autobiography as *Oration I* (374). St Augustine (354-430) called his autobiography as *Confessions*. Peter Abelard calls his autobiography as *Historia Calamitatum*. The early autobiographies include Leonor Cordoba's *Memoirs* (Spanish), Babur's *Baburnama* (1493, Persian), Benvenuto Cellini's (1500-1571) *Vita (Life)*.

It is often claimed that the earliest known autobiography in English is the early 15th-century *Book of Margery Kempe*, describing among other things Kempe's pilgrimage to the Holy Land and his visit to Rome although it is, at best, only a partial autobiography and arguably more a memoir of religious experiences. Captain John Smith wrote his autobiography calling it a *Journal*. Other notable English autobiographies of the 17th century include those of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1643, published 1764) and

John Bunyan (*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 1666). Jarena Lee (1783–1864), was the first African American woman to have a published autobiography in America.

The 18th and 19th centuries autobiographies were authored by Rousseau, William Hazlitt, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, Henry Adams, J.S. Mill, Cardinal Newman, and others. The 20th and 21st centuries autobiographies are James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life* (1979), and there are verse autobiographies too. The British bequeathed upon Indians western literature and ideas. Hence, our own literati attempted autobiographies. As regards autobiography, besides works like Surendranath Banerjea's *A Nation in the Making* and N.G. Chandavarkar's *A Wrestling Soul* which have already been mentioned, an early notable attempt is Abdul Latif Khan's *A Short Account of my Public Life* (1885).

Indians, often did not distinguish both autobiography and memoirs. D.K. Karve's *Looking Back* (1936) and N.C. Banerji's *At the Cross Roads* (1950) are memoirs. Barindrakumar Ghosh's *The Tale of my Exile* (1928), B.K. Sinha's *Leaves from My Diary* (1946), Dhan Ghopal Mukherji's *Castes and Outcastes* (1923), Mulk Raj Anand's *Apology for Heroism* (1946), R.K. Narayan's *My Days* (1974) are interesting and illuminating.

Mention may be made of religious autobiographies of Swami Ramdas (*In Quest of God*, 1923), Purohit Swami (*An Indian Monk*, 1932), and Sitanath Tattvabhushan (*Autobiography*, 1942); scientific autobiographies of P.C. Roy (*Life*, 1932); educationist's of G.K. Chettur (*The Last Enchantment*, 1933), of a jurist Chimanlal Setalwad (*Recollections and Reflections*, 1946) create enough interest in this regard. Women also wrote autobiographies. Mention may be made of Vijayalaxmi Pandit's *So I became a Minister* (1936), Krishna Hathee Singh's *With No Regrets* (1944), Sunita Devi's *Autobiography* (1921), Cornelia Sorabji's *Home to India* (1945), Isvani's *The Brocaded Sari* (1946).

M. K. Naik thinks that "The late 20th century production of autobiographies is fertile." (Naik 146) Nirad Choudhuri's *Autobiography of an Unknown India* is a classic case. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (*Life and Myself*, 1948), K.A. Abbas (*I write I feel*, 1948), Dom Moraes (*My Son's Father*, 1968), Ved Mehta (*Face to Face*, 1963), Sashi Batra (*My God*, 1967), Aubrey Memon (*The Space with the Heart*, 1970), Prabhakar Machwe (*From Self to Self*, 1977) are the early examples. Mention should be made of autobiographies by such journalists Sachchidanand Sinha (*Recollections*, 1950), A.S. Iyengar (*All Through the Gandhian Era*, 1950), K. Rama Rao (*The Pen as my Sword*, 1960), Prema Bhatia (*All My Yesterdays*, 1972), Frank Moraes (*Witness to an Era*, 1973), K. L. Gauba (*Friends and Foes*, 1974). Musicians Ram Gopal and Ravi Shankar, academicians D.S. Sharma, and D.C. Pavate too wrote autobiographies.

There are autobiographies by politicians such as Mirza Ismail (*My Public Life*, 1954), M.R. Jayakar (*The Story of My Life*, 1958), N.G. Ranga (*Fight for Freedom*, 1968), A.K. Gopala (*In the Cause of the People*, 1973), Morarji Desai (*The Story of My Life*, 1979), A.S.R. Chari (*Memoirs*, 1975), C.D. Deshmukh (*The Course of My Life*, 1975), V.V. Giri (*My Life and My Times*, 1976), Telo de Mascarenhas (*When the Mango Trees Blossomed*, 1976), M.R. Masani (*Bliss*, 1977), K.M. Panikkar (*Autobiography*, 1978), and M. Hidayatullah (*My own Boswell*, 1980). There are memoirs of diplomats like Sadaf Ali Khan (*Thanksgiving*, 1959), K.P.S. Menon (*The Flying Troika*, 1963), M.R. A. Baig (*In Different Saddles*, 1967) and A.B. Pant (*A Moment in Time*, 1974).

There are self-accounts by jurists such as M.C. Mahajan, M.C. Setalwad, M.C. Chagla, R.V.M.G. Ramarau, and others. Sir M. Visvasvarayya wrote *Memoirs* (1951). There are accounts by writers like S.K. Chettur, O. Pulla Reddi, and Krishna Sodhi.

Women too wrote autobiographies thus: Savitri Devi Nanda (*A City*, 1950), Brinda Maharani of Kapurthala (*An Indian Princess*, 1953), Nayantara Sahagal (*Prison and Chocolate Cake*, 1954), Sita Rathnamal (*Beyond the Jungle*, 1968), Kamala Dongerkery (*On the Wings of Time*, 1968), Kamala Das (*My Story*, 1976) Maharani Gayatri Devi of Jaipur (*A Princess Remembers*, 1976), Durgabai Deshmukh

(*Chintamani and I*, 1980), and Hazari (*An Indian Outcaste*, 1951).

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