



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

THE THEME OF EXPLORING SELF IN INDIAN WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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Abstract

Autobiography is a distinct genre in Indian literary scenario. It is a narrative account of one's own life. Every novel contains autobiographical elements. But Autobiography is different from novel and biography as well. Journalists, politicians, social reformers, historians wrote Autobiographies with different perspectives and attitudes.

Women also started writing Autobiographies but with different characteristics. Women Autobiographies are fragmented and circular. Eagerness for independent existence is reflected in women Autobiographies. Women writers in India used the genre of Autobiography as a form of self-expression. They used it to describe their experiences in the patriarchal, colonial, and postcolonial society. Some critics argued that women autobiographies are only about their personal life and they lay emphasis more on the emotional aspect. But the Autobiographies of some women writers also deal with the theme of socio-political, economical and religious aspects.

Women writers convey the conflicts and yearnings of the women and reconstruct their own psychological, emotional, social and cultural experiences through autobiography. This paper tries to present how the women used autobiography as a genre to explore self with reference to the autobiographies by various women writers in India.

The events that happen in our life create an urge for self-expression. Autobiography is a literary genre that necessitates the assertion of self through such utterances. Autobiography seems to be consequent to self-love; it bears an aesthetic urge to present one's personal matters, impersonalized in the first hand narration.

Women writers usually encounter their experience in a reflective mood. Theirs is not the purpose of social reform or historical record or self- glorification. Jelinek Estelle.C very aptly finds the major differentiating feature of life-studies by women: "Women's autobiographies rarely mirror the establishment history of their times. They emphasize to a much lesser extent the public aspect of their lives, the affairs of the world or even their careers and concentrate instead on their personal lives, domestic details, family difficulties, close friends and especially people who influenced them."¹

Indian women writers wrote autobiographies both in Indian languages and in English. Women autobiographical writing started since mid19th century. Women have not followed men's style but developed their own style and narrative technique in telling their life stories. New writers and social reformers used autobiography as a form of self-expression. Indian women used this genre to describe their

patriarchal and the colonial experiences. Women use this genre to explore their self which is neglected or crushed in the male world.

Women autobiographies are not only about self-exploration but also of self-analysis and of self-identification. Women tried to search for identity through writing autobiography. There were only few women writers who wrote autobiographies in the beginning. But later in the second half of 19th and early 20th century, more autobiographies were published which were written by women. The autobiographies of women focus on the changing condition of women's situation. They talk about their response to the changing society which is also exploiting the 'new woman' in different ways. Along with others the actresses like Binodini Dasi and Hamsa Wadkar also wrote autobiographies. Their autobiographies reflect their experiences and responses in the public life.

Some of the women who wrote autobiographies in the 19th century are Rasundar Devi, Krupabai Sattianadhan, Pandit Ramabai Saraswati, Lakshmbai Tilak. The 20th century women writers are Kamala Das, Amritha Pritam, Savithi Devi Nanda, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, and Cornlia Sorabji. They used different themes and strategies. The story of these autobiographies has been made to understand the themes, style, and the use of autobiography as a genre by women writers.

Indian psychoanalysts like Sudhir Kakar, Indira Parikh and Ashish Nandy's research supports the theory of women's collective selfhood and women's identity formation in the Indian context. When such a person who doesn't possess the proverbial isolate self which could reside at the center of the text, holds the pen to write her autobiography, the product is going to be different both in form and context.²

Woman's joy in the love and support of a progressive husband and her education and the new possibilities that opened out to her are the recurrent themes in many nineteenth century women autobiographies. There are also some passages that give a glimpse of the many-facet struggles involved: the pain of being constantly watched and corrected; the feeling that they were not good enough; the exhausting demands of the new house works; the certainty and anxiety involved in raising children in the new mode, outside the reassuring circle of the traditional family; the longing for the support of a world they had lost and so on.

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati was well known scholar and humanist, in her autobiography, *My Testimony* (1907), Ramabai had become a celebrity, but her personal life was marked by one disaster after another. Ramabai decided to devote her life to uplifting of women and reformed to her homeland, Maharashtra. She was welcomed by social reformers; she spoke about the need for women's education and their right to freedom and a life of dignity. In her autobiography she pictured her life and her struggle and her participation in social reformation etc.⁴

Rassundari Devi in her autobiography *Amar Jiban*⁵ described how upsetting it was for her to be introduced as her father's daughter. She struggles to hold onto her individual identity in the most adverse of circumstances and it is a striking feature of her autobiography. She gives us few details about her childhood, but she does tell us that she was a timid child and her mother taught her how to pray when she was frightened. Her autobiography is an amazingly detailed account of the exhausting drudgery of his household work, which, especially after the children came along, was never over, day or night.⁶

Indian women wrote autobiographies in English. Those autobiographies show how difficult it has been for the women those who have once subjected to exploitation from time immemorial, to grow out of that exploitation and to find a real self for themselves. Over centuries the Indian women were looked upon as a subject by men and by society. This practice was so over- powering and their social conditioning to self- effacement story that at one stage of social history they too started believing in the conditions stuck to them by the male dominated society. Indian women's progress from a subject of exploitation to a real self has been a heart- breaking hard journey for them and that has been reflected in their autobiographies.

In the 20th century women autobiographies by Attia Hosain, Nayantara Sahgal, Cornelia Sorabji, Suchetha Krupalani, Kmaladevi Chattopadhyaya and many others are remarkable. Women's autobiography is dominated by the passion to reveal the world within and show that 'other side of the coin' of life which remained in the dark. The writer's mind is not merely creative but analytical and more than that it is receptive. The writer receives life not as it comes to her but as she reaches out to it.

The focus of women autobiographers, naturally, is more on the factual than on the 'conceptual'. Among women who write autobiographies, their public contact and outer life in society has a vital role to perform. If the autobiographer is a woman, the fact turns to be an asset for her in reaching out to her readers. On the other hand, the same fact prevents her from transcending the barriers of socially accepted and expected expressions in her work. Amrita Pritam's *The Revenue stamp*⁷ offers her cognitive vision of life, where as Kamala Das's *MY Story*⁸ invites severe criticism for the sensational and even distorted image of her view of life that she lived. Amrita Pritam and Kamala Das are such women, committed to the truth of self. They examine the male-oriented social pattern with a purpose of probing into their inner self and the world around, in relation to themselves. They uncover the hidden side of their personality through their autobiographies. These women write of their predicament in familial, social world and their conflicts in the inner personal world of their private relationship.

To conclude, the autobiographies by women writers provide insights, wealth of understanding and a reservoir of meaning and a basis for discussion. The women writers who wrote autobiographies have the motif either to analyze their failures in life or to legitimize their victories. Even other than these, there are some who created their life stories for different reasons with different results. In this way by referring to the autobiographies by various women writers in India, this paper presents the themes, style and new innovations and the theme of exploring self of women writers in using autobiography as a genre.

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