

Forms of Self-Portrayal in 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of literary genre with the inclusion of ordinary day to day activities, questions the applicability of classical and traditional rules of autobiography as genre in the present times. The present forms of self-portrayal questions the canonical status of the auto biographer as Metaphysical, Cartesian rational entity who belongs to elite class of the mainstream world. Such claims of authoritative unitary atomic core which has well-defined boundaries of inner and outer self and the authoritative elite status of classical auto biographer are the focal point of the present paper. It highlights that there is a scope to revisit and re-interpret this unruly genre of autobiography with new methods and set of methodologies which can accommodate the voice of that section of society who are marginalized in the name of gender, caste, race, colour, region, nationality, ethnicity etc.

Keywords: Re-evaluation, Metaphysical, Globalization, Form, Life-narrative.

INTRODUCTION

With the inclusion of technology and globalization, the art of portraying self has found endless ways to uncover and restructure oneself. It has become a matter of identity for individual lives where personal achievements, ethics, social, traditional and cultural values are linked to deeper questions of self and various issues related to the identity formation. Life-narrative as a literary genre uncovers the divisive process of identity formation in the name of nationality, ethnicity, gender, caste, race, colour, region, tribe and all the subaltern issues which are not streamlined till date. Life-narrative as a genre has been subjected to various experimental forms during its evolutionary period. It is a broad term associated with the paper of various self/life-writing forms like autobiography, biography, letters, diaries, memoirs, family histories, case histories, oral history, anthropology, testimonies, films, paintings, photography, travel books, scholarly articles, broadcasts, political websites, newspaper, blogs, biopic, social-networking sites, fashion and tattooing. This continuous expansion in the forms of self-portrayal raises the concern over blurring of generic boundaries in the 21st century which has shaken the classical beliefs of autobiography as a unique legitimate literary genre. According to Goodson:

We can then begin to see how grand narratives fell from grace, losing not only scope and aspiration but also our underpinning faith in their general capacity to guide or shape our destiny. Into the vortex left after the collapse of the grand narratives we see the emergence of another kind of narrative, infinitely smaller in scope, often individualized other personal life story. It reflects a dramatic change in the scale of human belief and aspiration. (2)

The expansion of literary genre with the inclusion of ordinary day to day activities, questions the applicability of classical and traditional rules of autobiography as genre in the present times. It becomes imperative to explore the concerns regarding classical thoughts on autobiography as genre which have been traditionally and culturally passed on to the whole world. Therefore, the present paper explores the transformation of autobiography as genre; role and scope of narrative which have been shifting from conventional canonical forms towards the making of life-narratives from the margins. Thus, the boundaries of autobiography as genre need an elucidation and elaboration on following grounds:

- a. The legitimacy of canonical definition of autobiography in 21st Century.
- b. The significance of metaphysical self as unitary, irreducible, atomic, stable, with well-defined boundaries separating inner from outer, impermeable self.
- c. Conventional notion of autobiography as free agency, teleological, self-presentational form of utterances which are univocal, monologist, universal, authoritative, and sovereign.
- d. This univocal authoritative self as 'A Cartesian Self' with rationale vision, totalizing, and appropriative, unshaken embodiment of self in the present times.

Philippe Lejeune in 1982 defines the widely quoted definition of autobiography, "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" (193). He also proposed an authoritative, legal terminology, to define the relationship between an author, narrator and the protagonist as an 'autobiographical pact' or 'contract' based on in Anderson's views, "an intention to honour the signature"(3). Nancy Miller argues that, "...have we

necessarily believed all subjects in the same way? Have all signatures had the same legal status? Does not sincerity itself, ... already imply a masculine subject, since women are less likely to be believed simply on account of who they are" (51)? Miller's argument brings to light the conventional belief about autobiography as a universal subject, metaphysical, totalitarian masculine ideology and "Western and middle-class – modes of subjectivity" (Anderson 4). In Lejeune's definition, Sadhu observes, "'life' is a pointer to the how or becoming of a self at a particular point of self's reflection which autobiography as a term proves inadequate to address" (21). Further Pascal in his *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, defines the status of autobiographer, "I believe the best autobiographies are by men and women of outstanding achievement in life" (10). It shows that, "the particular historical canon of texts which celebrated the extraordinary lives of 'great men', an important group of modern critics writing in the 1960s and 1970s deduced abstract critical principles for autobiography based on the ideals of autonomy, self-realization, authenticity and transcendence which reflected their own cultural values" (Anderson 4).

The present forms of self-portrayal questions the canonical status of the autobiographer as Metaphysical, Cartesian rational entity who belongs to elite class of the mainstream world. Such claims of authoritative unitary atomic core which has well-defined boundaries of inner and outer self and the authoritative elite status of classical autobiographer are the focal point of the present paper. In the present times, testimonies, first-hand accounts, personal experience, witness and evolution are highly valued. Cuddon in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* states, "Since the Second World War almost anyone who has achieved distinction in life – and many who have not- has written an account of his life; especially politicians, statesman and high-ranking members of the services" (69). People look over and idealize the lives of celebrities, politicians, sportspersons and all those personalities who have marked their lives with successful careers and fame. But the authenticity in the depiction of intimate autobiographical details by the mainstream autobiographers is highly susceptible. "An autobiography may be largely fictional. Rousseau's *Confessions* (published posthumously in 1781 and 1788) is a case in point. They are unreliable as literal truth; they have a different literary value" (63). What is the real motive of the autobiographer behind such autobiographical details is questionable too. How these canonical life-narratives are being narrated, what kinds of issues, challenges and opportunities these writers have faced in composing and disseminating the writing of their life stories have been part of research throughout the world. What should be the qualification of an autobiographer with respect to age, status, education, gender, ethnicity,

class etc.? How such challenges and opportunities are to be confronted in 21st century and in the future? To answer these questions, the present paper focuses on the origin of autobiography and its evolution as genre.

James Olney explains that the term 'autobiography' is a combination of three Greek elements as he has divided the word "autobiography" into three different parts, "autos", the self, the "I", the "bios" or the "life", which is the entire life of the individual up to the time of writing and lastly, the "graphe" or the act of writing" (6). According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, Robert Southey used the term 'autobiography' in 1809 for the first time. Contrary to this view, Robert Folkenflik mentions about the term 'autobiography', that it was first used in its adjective form in the Preface to the 1786 edition of Ann Yearsley's *Poems* as "Autobiographical Narrative". He observes that "autobiography or its synonym 'self biography' appeared in the late eighteenth century in several forms in isolated instances both in England and in Germany. Autobiography as a term came into currency in the nineteenth century that was used in lieu of 'memoir', a traditional term commonly denoting self-life-writing until the twentieth century" (56-57). For Ulric Neisser, the recreation of the past events can be termed as life-narrative, which, he explains, is a "way of defining the self"...They [life narratives] are the basis of personal identity and self-understanding and they provide answers to the question 'who am I?' (1). Further in Dr Johnson's opinion, "no man was better qualified to write his life than himself" (qtd. in Abrams 24). For Cuddon, Dr Johnson's opinion is debatable:

Because memory may be unreliable few can recall clear details of their early life and most are therefore dependent on other people's impressions, which is equally unreliable. Moreover, everyone tends to remember what he or she wants to remember. Disagreeable facts are sometimes glossed over or repressed, truth may be distorted for the sake of convenience or harmony and the occlusions of time may obscure as much as they reveal. (63)

George Gusdorf (who is also known as 'dean of autobiography') in *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography* affirms that the tradition of autobiography, appeared relatively late in the field of literature and even then, it was "peculiar to western man" or to westernized men like Gandhi. According to him autobiography is a marginalized literary genre, which can be traceable through, "a series of masterpieces....Autobiography is not possible in place where the consciousness of individual life has not yet evolved, that is, where the individual perceives himself only in terms of the society or group to which he belongs and in which he is embedded" (28-29).

For Anderson autobiography is, “a public exposure of the private self, “self-accounting and self-reflection are integral parts of the autobiography” (7). As Bates puts it, “he [the autobiographer] will often be enlarging on special aspects of his life, such as the influences that moulded him...or the services that he rendered to what he most cared about; a vindication for this world; he may turn his book into a laundry for the dirty linen of his dirty soul” (3).

The canonical definitions of autobiography by acclaimed critics, represents autobiography as genre with multifaceted aspects during its evolution that have been taken place since its origin.

M.H. Abrams Explains:

Autobiography is a biography written by the subject about himself or herself. It is to be distinguished from the memoir, in which the emphasis is not on the author’s developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed, and also from the private diary or journal which is a day-to-day record of the events in one’s life, written for personal use and satisfaction, with little or no thought of publication. (22)

The autobiographical forms like biography, autobiographical novel, diary, memoir, travelogue, etc., are classified as well-developed time-tested forms of self-portrayal in the mainstream literature. It may be written for the purpose of entertainment, morality, and teaching and can be intentionally informative. Traditionally autobiography is expected to be fairly accurate but the evolutionary forms of autobiography mark the differences in the way individual writes or reports the hard facts about one’s life. The thing which is “common among some autobiographies is the work of a “ghost-writer” and this ghost writer may have a varying role in different projects like diary, memoir, autobiographical novel and in case of biography reporting” (Berryman 49). This brief survey highlights the common features in canonical autobiographies which endorse the changing nature of autobiography as a genre. James Olney also showed his dissatisfaction with the term autobiography while analysing the canonical works of Augustine, Rousseau, and Beckett. He emphasizes on new term for self-life-writing than autobiography. Olney says, “Although I have in the past written frequently about autobiography as a literary genre, I have never been very comfortable doing it, primarily because I believe that if one is to speak relevantly of a genre one has first of all to define it, and I have never met a definition of autobiography that I could really like” (Memory 15).

Olney also distinguishes between the noun 'autobiography' and the adjective 'autobiographical' as a work may be 'autobiographical' without being an 'autobiography' proper and vice versa. Olney also

indicated towards the gradual alteration as an evolution or devolution in the nature of autobiography hence, the focus shifting from bios, the course of a life-time to autos -- the self-writing and the self being written. However, in Sadhu’s views, Olney’s disenchantment with the term autobiography and curiosity for a more inclusive term than autobiography, “indicates an internal shift within the process of writing the autos the shift from writing the ontology of the autos to writing about or around the self-reflecting the empirical dimensions of life. In contrast to using an inflexible term like autobiography, Olney’s preference is for life-writing or peri autobiography which means 'writing around or about the self’” (22). There is a continuous expansion, shifting is going on in the boundaries of autobiography as a literary genre. The changing features are the formal perspective of the narrative, the identity of the self, and self-reflection as well as introspection. Most autobiographies are written in the first-person singular perspective where ‘I’ is the most proficient form of self-portrayal. Anderson adds that, “The author, the narrator, and the protagonist must share a common identity for the work to be considered an autobiography. This common identity could be similar, but is not identical. The self that the author becomes a character within the story that may not be a completely factual representation of the author’s actual past self” (3). Because the author cannot describe events objectively, even the most accurate autobiographies can have fictional elements. Bates thinks that “There is, in fact, no dividing line between autobiography and fiction” (4). Thus, the classification of autobiography and its various forms surveyed until now highlights the fluid and variable nature of autobiography. It also suggests the importance of objectivity in the work of art of a writer. In case of canonical literature technicalities of subjectivity and objectivity plays a vital role. But the biographical details of illiterate, powerless that are marginalized in the name of class, caste, race, education, region etc remain undocumented and thus unheard and unvoiced. The oral culture of illiterate societies like tribals needs a platform to raise their voice where their life-narratives can be accepted irrespective of their technical imperfections in the art of narration. Therefore, the present paper focuses on various possibilities and scope to the forms of autobiography which can become a locale to the unheard voices of marginalized people. Rachel Gabara, argues:

In order to escape the critical impasse that results from a restrictive model of autobiography, we must instead choose to conceptualize a genre that has flexible and porous borders, one that includes. ...These new members of the family of autobiographical texts offer innovative possibilities for the interrelation of autobiography, biography, and history, expanding the boundaries of what has been considered first-person narration. (349)

The life-narratives from the margins give insight into the stories of that stratum of society which is untouched by the canonical autobiographies until now. This highlights the gap in conventional and the present form of research methodologies in the literary field of autobiography as genre. Ivor Goodson's views, "There is a kind of popular consensus at the moment that we live in an age of narrative the truth is rather more complex, for although it is true that narratives and stories are part of the common currency of the day, the scale of those narratives, their scope and aspiration has dramatically changed. In fact, we are entering a period for particular kinds of narratives: life narratives and small-scale narratives" (1).

To conclude, the available literature provides an insight that there is a scope to revisit and re-interpret this unruly genre with new methods and set of methodologies which can accommodate the voice of that section of society who are marginalized in the name of gender, caste, race, colour, region, nationality, ethnicity etc. Consequently, the present paper establishes that life-narratives within the Indian context need to be explored in context to the expansion in the conventional boundaries of autobiography as genre. A thorough review of canonical literature on autobiography as genre will open new possibilities for various forms of Life-narratives from margins and their significance in the 21st century.

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