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The History and Evolution of the Genre of Autobiography: A Critical Study

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Though the term autobiography was coined in the eighteenth century, the genre had been practiced from the hey-day of Greek literature. There have been conflicting theories regarding the origin of this form of writing, with some attributing it to the Christian era whilst others claiming this form of writing to be present ever since the light of civilization. Since then the trends in the writing of autobiography have changed over the centuries. The initial focus on the 'bios' of the autobiographer has since the nineteenth century shifted to the 'graphia' in the text. The modern trends in autobiography differ greatly from that of the beginning of the genre. And the paper proposes to delve into the intricacies of the beginning, growth, and the development of the genre.

Deriving from the three Greek words, *autos*, *bios* and *self*, autobiography means writing of the self. The Oxford English Dictionary defines autobiography as the "story of the person's life written by that person". Smith and Watson quote the famous critic Misch to state the definition of autobiography, "the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*autos*)" (113). Autobiography has a "philosophical dignity" and "...is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life comes before us" (Misch 7). Though popular citations would credit Robert Southey with the coinage of the term autobiography, but the term was originally coined in the preface to a collection of poems by the eighteenth century English working class writer Ann Yearsley. Smith and Watson quote Robert Folkenflik to note the exact emergence of the term in the west. As Folkenflik notes, "having never been used in earlier periods", the term autobiography, "appeared in the late eighteenth century in several forms, in isolated instances in the seventies, eighties and nineties in both England and Germany with no sign that one use influenced another" (2). The term memoir was more commonly used than autobiography to designate self writing, though there have been at times a distinction drawn between the memoir and autobiography, as in the former the relation between the author and the work is passive and the author states all events as a mere observer. In the latter however events are reported as a part of the life-story. Thus the term autobiography is a relatively contemporary formulation. However it was during the Renaissance that autobiography became the subject of learned works. The Humanists in the Renaissance showed interest in the ancient autobiographies which provided them with a model of self-portrayal which arrived at the objective view of autobiography (Misch 1). Autobiography as an expression of the contemporary social environment occurs as a special genre in literature, and as an expression of the self-awareness of the individual occurs as an interpretation of the individual's experience. The boundary of autobiography is more fluid than any other literary genre, and as George Misch states in his book *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, "autobiography is one of the innovations brought by cultural advance, and yet it springs from the most natural source, the joy in self-communication and in enlisting the sympathetic understanding of others; or the need for

self-assertion” (4). L. Anderson in her book *Autobiography* quotes Roy Pascal, that autobiography depends on the “seriousness of the author, the seriousness of his personality and his intention in writing” (3). When we read an autobiography says Anna Robeson Burr in her book *The Autobiography*, we have planned to meet a number of interesting men and women of high and low degree, of many professions and occupations and the significant thing is that we are to meet them just as we would meet them in real life (3). Autobiography has been at the centre of debates drawing mainly from the French Theories of Psychoanalysis, Post structuralism, and Feminism. The evolution of the genre of autobiography is well explained by Burr in her book *The Autobiography* when she quotes Cardan “Since among all things mankind has given us to follow there is nothing more worthy or pleasing than a knowledge of the truth...we have been led to write this book of our own life” (25). And the genre is best described by Misch when he quotes Balzac that “...the most moving novels are autobiographical studies, or narratives of events submerged in the ocean of the world” (3).

There are many theories regarding the origin of this form of writing. While some would attribute the origin of this style of writing to the western culture, others would say the Christian era to be the beginning of the genre of writing. In the Western world the most direct influence on autobiography came from “the formative influence upon life of the consciousness and the evaluation of personality” (Misch 16). This consciousness according to Misch exists at all levels and has evolved in the light of the civilization. Burr notes the Christian era to be the beginning of the subjective trend in writing; however she does not deny the existence of this mode of writing before Christ. Misch identifies the autobiography of Isocrates, a famous Greek rhetorician to be one of the earliest autobiographies. Christian era according to him was the point from where autobiographies started flourishing. The Christian practice of self-examination shows the genre to be emerging from inwardness and the secular autobiographies are considered to be the secularization of the Christian possession. Art and literature was earlier objective. Individualism was a later development in writing which preceded the subjective trend in literature. The writers never thought that their personal attitude would hold any interest for the reader. The earlier Biblical writings were communal, and so were the ancient historical narratives which came closest to the writing of the personal memoir. The literary tradition did not leave any space for introspection, but all the writer could do was look to the outside world for the imaginative fodder. Yet the great religious reformers before Christ contained passages which showed a hint of the subjective trend, but it was with the advent of Christ that the man as a being became more important than the action performed by him. However as Burr observes, the germ of autobiographical writing is found in the Egyptian literature as early as the sixth dynasty of Una and Abeba (33). The twelfth and the eighteenth dynasty also contain such instances of writing. The subjective trend demands a self-assertion which is evident in the inscription of the bygone conquerors and kings which records simple sentences of self-glorification. However in contrast to this, Smith and Watson in their book *Reading Autobiography* find this genre of autobiography to be prevalent in the oral tradition, like in the naming songs of Native American culture, the oral narratives of genealogy and descent among Africans, the song lines of Australians. In addition to the oral tradition there was written inscriptions in China about two thousand years ago, in Japan as early as a thousand years ago, in India during the medieval age of the Bhakti saints, in Islamic-Arabic literature in the twelfth century, and in North Africa in the fourteenth century. They quote the German scholar Misch who found a self reference in funeral narrations, letters and travel narrations in the earlier times. Burr quotes a famous passage from the Agricola of Tacitus to describe the attitude of people earlier towards autobiographical writings:

In former times, as there was a greater propensity and freer scope for the performance of actions worthy of remembrance, so every person of distinguished abilities was induced by the consciousness of doing right alone, without regard to favour or interest, to record examples of worth (40).

It was with Caesar's *Commentaries* that inscriptions were made on paper rather than stone making it more durable. Caesar's works are not completely autobiographical, but inspired a large number of works. Though earlier it was the priest with the stonecutter who had the credit of eulogizing the king, later it was the king himself who took upon the task to describe his own achievements in his own words. And as Burr points out it was with Caesar's *Commentaries* and Augustus' *Monumentum Ancyranum* that this trend underwent a change. The movement from just a few words in the royal insignia to a whole commentary written in favour of a person took around two thousand years, and yet the objective accent in those memoirs was distinctly heard. It was with Augustine's *Confessions* that the personal memoir underwent a new change altogether. The focus shifted from the objective trend to the subjective, from the outside to introspection. Unlike Plutarch and other biographers of Rome who described the public life of the rulers and their relation with their subjects, Augustine wrote extensively of his childhood, his intimate desires, his psychology of virtue and vice, his conversion and ultimately his Christian sense of guilt and shame. Augustine's autobiography according to Misch is not "...a beginning but a completion" (Misch 17). It marks the completion of the Christian sense of self-examination and a beginning of newer modes of narratives. In the next thousand years autobiography became an important device in the hands of the religious men and women who sought the blessings of God and subjected themselves to spiritual examination through these autobiographies. In fourteenth century Italy Francis Petrarch and Dante Alighieri used the self referentiality in poetic genre to represent the searching examination of the soul to represent their relation to the maker. With the advent of the fifteenth and the sixteenth century people struggled with the expression of their interiority and exteriority other than that blessed by God's grace, rather than the Christian spirituality, and the secular and political self of an individual gained eminence. The medieval Christian writers used self reference as a means of salvation which did not contain the self narrating individual of the later years. In England, Germany, France, Spain the poetic tradition provided the poet the scope of introspection into a range of emotions evoked by the beloved and the resulting emotions produced in the lover. Benvenuto Cellini in the sixteenth century in his *Autobiography* talks of a humanist subject, while Girolamo Cardano in his *The Book of My Life* written in the same age gives an instance of a psychological life narrative. There were other such narratives which objectified the self and recorded the externalisation of the self, making the subject a historical product.

The beginnings of Renaissance made autobiography the subject of learned works and saw such works as Montaigne's *Essays*, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* which showed the self narrative working within the prose medium to locate the self. The early travel narratives pose the self narrative in migration, conquest and transformation. The writer of travel autobiographies through these narratives show themselves as the chance survivors of heroic struggles and use it to articulate their image as "global subjects" (Smith and Watson 90). With the seventeenth century the philosophy of Descartes brought in an entirely new house of philosophy, and "in isolating and individuating an identity, he transforms experience into metaphysical principles, stripped of everyday particulars" (Smith and Watson 91), and thus enlightenment was born. Enlightenment brought in scientificity in thinking and

rationality in approach. The chaos of the world received a new order and embarked upon an enquiry based on the scientific approach and presented themselves as agents of Reason and Order. There was an increase in the dissenting autobiography after the sixteenth century, which tried to proclaim its independence while still being subservient (Smith and Watson 91). The secular life narratives of the period had no models to follow, but they showed two clear conventions, the narrative of religious conversion and the account of deeds done. Women writing gained force during this time with some women writing biographies of their husbands, whilst others writing their own life narratives. The diary, the letter, the journal became the new forms of narrative for the bourgeois of the seventeenth century. Samuel Pepys' *Diary*, the travel journals of James Boswell, the embassy letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu are ample demonstrations of the above stated fact. The epistolary form in France also enabled an autobiographical representation. The eighteenth century witnessed a new surge in the writing of autobiographies under the influence of inner experience and historical reflection. There arose a variety in the genre of autobiography where the narratives focused most on the mode of soul searching where some of the characters are proud on being a moralist and seducer, whereas in some the character is in dilemma about being the master of the world or shaping his own experience. The mode of soul searching naturally led to the revival of the genre of confession by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, where the focus is not on human vices in terms of a Christian morality or the necessity of conversion, but rather places more significance on the confession to the public, forming a discourse of selfishness and crudity while at the same time recording his own thoughts, impulses, and desires. While some hail it as a modern autobiography, others term it as an egotistic white male discourse. The demand for confessions of great men caused eminent people like Gibbon, Herder and Goethe to be autobiographers. And as Misch claims the genre "...did not merely aim at the reader's amusement but might improve him and do him some service, either by way of instruction or warning" (1). The eighteenth and nineteenth century had a number of influential cultural factors like the Enlightenment, the American Revolution leading to a surge of interest in individuality and witnessed a plethora of autobiography. The rise of the print media, increase in literacy, and the wider circulation of books throughout led to the increase in the number of autobiographies published. The renaissance belief of the self as a microcosm led to the outward and the inward exploration which caused surge in the life narratives of the explorer (Smith and Watson 97).

The spiritual autobiography of the age became more communal, and validation of the conversion of the fallen being became a challenge to those people. The secular narratives became more self-centered and the marginalized gained voice. In England the middle class women through their writings produced gender ideologies, while the slave narratives which began to be recorded in around 1750 became more frequent with the increasing trans-Atlantic slavery. The earliest slave narrators were bereft of any education and hence their experiences were recorded by others. The advent of the nineteenth century brought the celebration of individualism by the romantic movements; Darwinism which talked of the survival of the fittest, the Industrial revolution, the French revolution which led to the concept of self-made men also constituted to be a decisive influence on the writing of autobiography. The decline of aristocratic patronage, the pursuit of the ideal and the desire of the self to merge with the absolute nature and the romantic illusion became the new theme of the quest of the self (Smith and Watson 99). The narratives of exotic travel locales became the escape from urbanisation, and the surrender to oneself. The bildungsroman or the pseudo autobiography became the model of the new life narratives and assumed great significance in the period to follow. Its developmental model is found in the

works of John Stuart Mill, John Henry Newman and the like. Though the bildungsroman did not prove to be an apt medium for the women narratives, it became a popular medium for the slave narratives; the oppressed condition, the embittered life and the quest to live a civilized life forms a powerful rhetoric through this mode of expression (Smith and Watson 102). The life narratives of the immigrants also found an important place in this century. The age analysed the autobiographical works as elaborations of historical narrative, a picture of human life in different ages. The twentieth century witnessed many unseen developments like Freud's concept of the conscious, the unconscious and the sub conscious, the rise of literacy among the people which upheld the varied narratives that people advanced as they negotiated their cultural positions. Important among those are the immigrant narratives or the narratives of exile which enabled the immigrants to situate their own cultural identities, narratives of ethnic identity, autoethnographies formed from ethnographies which were the foundational text of anthropologies, the stories of repression that have influenced the political struggle. The prison narratives also constitute a significant contribution to the genre of autobiography, the bildungsroman, the postmodern narratives, the autopathographies describing illness and disability, the queer narratives by gay, lesbian, the narratives by sports personnel, the digitized subjects produced by the self-producing websites also constitute an important part of these narratives.

The genre of autobiography is generally assumed to be written by people who have participated in significant movements, who are famous and noteworthy. As Misch opines:

The conception of the *document humain* was given definition by the Goncourts; Taine set the Confessions of an *homme superieur*, in which he found the concentrated expression of the nature of an individual, an age, a race, far above the official and documentary material of the historians, alongside great imaginative writing of the type of Aristophanic comedy; and Jacob Burckhardt, the eminent Swiss Historian, who was filled with the Romance spirit, established in his standard work *Die Kultur der Renaissance* in Italian, the importance of autobiography for the development and the recognition of individuality. (3)

According to Roy Pascal a true autobiography does not just enlist past memories and moments of the author, but a spiritual experiment or voyage of discovery for both the author and the reader (Hogarth 364). The autobiography of an eminent personality "...summarize the achievement of culture, entwined with the making of a nation state, which reached its apogee in Western Europe in the nineteenth century" (Smith and Watson 114). This has led to the division of the high culture constituting of music, painting, sculpture, and the low culture which denotes the popular everyday forms. This division of the culture constituting the autobiographical subject has led to the exclusion of letters, journals, memoirs and other modes of autobiography of everyday life. Autobiography was initially assumed to be devoid of any literary value and originality, and it was only later that the Greek and Roman system had broken down, and the other literary genres were failing in creative power that it proved its originality. Remembrance plays a crucial role in any autobiography is creative rather than mechanical and hence is not an objective narrative. The lack of accuracy and subjectiveness makes autobiography creative rather than a historic narrative. And "the term 'autobiography'...conveys nothing in regard to the literary form or standing of this work in relation to great literature; its main implication is that the person whose life is described is himself the author of the work" (Misch 7). Though it was

initially the identity of the author and the subject was what gave the “chameleon-genre” a unity, the postcolonial reading of the slave narrative or the autobiography of a woman questions the autobiographical subject who is generally assumed to write autobiography (Misch 7). Women took to writing to assert their identity and establish their identity publicly, as opposed to the view that “...the criteria for the success of any particular life narrator rest in the writer’s relationship to the arena of public life and discourse” (Smith and Watson 114). The slaves who were denied even the basic human dignity, were brought and sold also wrote to express their condition and their repressed desires. The autobiography of the lower classes, the religious minority also violates the prescriptive definition of the writers of this genre. Smith and Watson quote Misch who defined the concept of representative which is an integral part of autobiographical criticism: “the contemporary intellectual outlook revealed in the style of an eminent person who has himself played a part in the forming of the spirit of the time” (Smith and Watson 115). The life narrative of the marginals in that case would not be representative but exceptional to the times. The question as to the life that can be called representative, and the people whose life can be said to be the ideal life to others is vague and undetermined. The concept of autobiography as an elite concept has long been in use by the critics and the readers. Though representative autobiographies gained importance, there were autobiographies that were produced by the Marginals, which though became popular, never received the status of the former autobiographies. The autobiographies which are not of public significance or of importance to the civilization are not considered to be representative autobiographies. Initially the autobiographical works outside the west was not given recognition as they were not considered to be of enough significance to be a part of representative autobiographies as they were not taken to be culturally significant.

The study in the genre of autobiography emerged as an important genre of study with a canon by the end of the 1960s which constituted of texts like Augustine’s *Confessions*, Cellini’s *Life*, Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Franklin’s *Autobiography*, Mill’s *Autobiography*, and Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. These were known as the traditional autobiographies which were treated separately from the autobiographies of military leaders, religious figures and politicians. The traditional self narrators were considered to be enlightened individuals with a proper comprehension of his relation to the world and others. With time however the focus shifted from the bios of the autobiography and the unified selfhood of autobiography underwent a change in focus. The Marxist analysis of class consciousness which defined man as subjected to the economic forces of change, and the Freudian psychoanalysis which challenged the rationality of man led to the displacement of the self which was till then a major weapon in the hands of the critics. The function and properties of language also came under the scanner with Saussure and the Russian Formalists who found language to be a play of signifiers. This concept about language put the identity of the narrator and the truthfulness of the life narrative into question. Smith and Watson quote the famous critic Gussdorf who tells, autobiography is the act of “reconstructing the unity of a life across time” (125). Autobiography is a re-reading of the experience, the second reading of experience. Autobiography is thus a creative process as it has the potential for self-reflection. Autobiography as a genre is largely dependent on the intention of writing and the narrating self. Reading an autobiography means to read with an already existing knowledge of the author’s intention. And as Karl Weintraub tells, “this moment, this point of view, needs to be recaptured for a proper understanding of the autobiographic effort; so must be the motivation and intention of the author for writing autobiography at all” (Anderson 3). The intention gives it the basis of division into three categories- the apology, the confession, and the

memoir. Autobiography which was earlier encoded as a chart of the progress of History now came under the realm of literary production. With modernism there was a shift from “polis-centered to a decentered metropolitan habitat of identity” (Smith and Watson 129). There was no more the emphasis on self, but on the search for the self, the definite story of a self narrative was replaced by a search for identity. Autobiography is seen as a point of exchange where the inside, outside, the self and other, creates some traces of the self that then becomes the impalpable self-narrator. The French critic Jacques Derrida also questioned the borders of the text, of what belongs to the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of the text (Anderson 10). The self is the contrivance of many moments of everyday mundane life. Smith and Watson show how the experimental writers lead the self into a labyrinth of signification where the real self eludes the writing and the impersonified self comes into purview, questioning the genre of autobiography. The postcolonial writers through their criticism of autobiography show the treatment as others of the West, and “...they creatively inquire into the histories of their own cultural erasure in the name of civilizing missions and employ modes of oral storytelling” (Smith and Watson 132). This has further led to newer concepts of autobiography which includes transcultural, diasporic, hybrid and nomadic subjectivities. These have led to a collective resistance which has contributed to a resistance literature leading to an increased global knowledge of the genre of autobiography. The post structuralist and postmodern view of the subject has taken a completely new turn with Derridean Deconstruction, Barthesian Semiotics, and Foucaultian analysis of the discursive power has dismantled the notions of authority, authenticity, and truth which form important factors in autobiography. The self is thus not determinate, but rather split and fragmented with not a definite identity but with multiple identities. The self is now divided, debarred from self knowledge by the unconscious or the unending play of signifiers, and feels Anderson “The subject and object of knowledge are no longer divisible, able to be thought of separately” (17). The queer theory has further criticized the concept of subjectivity and questioned the double identity of gender and sexuality through their self narrative.

The present day study of autobiographical criticism is embedded more in the graphia, which are the forces of signification within a text. The eminent critic Elizabeth Bruss considers autobiography to be more of a personal performance than a chronology of events, and it has three defining features- the act-value, the truth-value and the identity-value (Smith and Watson 138). The genre has been connected by critics like Louis A. Renza to the past. The self narrator talks of the presentifying the past, where autobiography acts as a screen between the present and the past. Paul de Man talks of autobiography to be the representation of a person, who is either absent or imaginary. The critic Phillipe Lejeune shows that autobiography presupposes a pact between the reader and the narrator about the identity of name between the author, the narrator of story and the character of the narration. He also declares that the author of an autobiography is the person he says he is, and that the author and the protagonist are the same here. This is what he calls the ‘autobiographical pact’ or ‘contract’ based on ‘an intention to honour the signature’ (Anderson 3). This narrator reader context takes a new step with Janet Varner Gunn, who tells that autobiography consists of two kinds of reading, one by the narrator and the other by the reader. For Karl Weintraub, an autobiography can only be comprehended by a reader if the place that the author occupies in his life can be reconstructed by the reader (Anderson 3). The feminist autobiographies use the genre to situate their marginality and win a place in literary history. The subject and object in an autobiography are the same and self-awareness is the basis of any autobiography, where the emphasis on “I” helps man deduce the importance of his actions and reflect upon them (Misch 7). Autobiography shows a performative view of life because “...it

enacts the “self” it claims has given rise to the “I” (Smith and Watson 143). The performative view shows that identities are not fixed but ingenerated through the cultural norms. Autobiography is generally held as an instrument of knowledge, but the question as to the amount of truth in them occupies an important place, and Misch states, “...in general their truth is to be sought not so much in their elements as in the whole works, each of which is more than the sum of its parts” (Misch 10). And even when the autobiographer tries to hide the truth, the “spirit of lies” will reveal the truth (Misch 11). The narrative truth arises out of the relation between the autobiographer and the personal subject. Lejeune also problematises this notion of identity when he questions if the autobiography belongs to the narrator or the person who lived the life. The relations of power termed as positionality is important in the narratives of decolonization, immigration, displacement. The desire to indulge in writing an autobiography is explained by Karl Weintraub who says, “We are captivated by an uncanny sense that each one of us constitutes one irreplaceable human form, and we perceive a noble life task in the cultivation of our individuality, our ineffable self” (Anderson 4). De Man in 1979 published an essay ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’ where he signaled the end of autobiography (Anderson 12). The major genres according to him, made the genre of autobiography look plagued by a series of unanswerable questions and found it looking disreputable and self-indulgent. In trying to differentiate between fiction and autobiography, De Man asserts that autobiography is not a genre at all, but a device of reading across a range of texts. Autobiography thus is the author’s own understanding of himself in a linguistic dilemma. Autobiography thus produces figures or fiction in place of self knowledge and the narrator gives a face to what he assumes to be himself through the phenomenon of prosopopoeia (Anderson 13). These figures cause a distortion of language itself which gives rise to only writing. There are various elements of autobiography like the character or the portrait of the autobiographer, the technique that is used to draw the self portrait and the theme which arises out of the author’s beliefs and the manner in which he shapes the autobiography. The new studies focus on how the life narratives are used in disputes of property and even assertion of human rights and as Smith and Watson put it “...the ownership of one’s story is less an intrinsic right and more a site of contestation...” (158).

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