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Socio-Cultural Realities Reflected in the Autobiographies of Asian Women

Abstract : Women are nearby half the population of the country. Their healthy viewpoint and progress concerns half the country. Besides, they are the centre of the family and affect the thought of the next generation by their rearing. All these autobiographies show the condition of women in Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. Their rise only can raise the country. Their sufferings in their autobiographies tell a lesson to the parents and policy makes to rethink about them.

Keywords – Asian, Women, Socio-Cultural, Realities, Autobiographies

I. Introduction

The present study makes a search through the recognized autobiographies of women. An attempt has been made to find out the pain, trauma and the sufferings of women in male dominated society, no matter what is the area. Women are affected by society and culture. Asian woman has been a victim of social discrimination down the age. Her birth is regretted and she is second rate citizen in the family. However cultured and educated a family may be, birth of a girl is not a welcome. Even women desire to give birth to male babies. Females are even sexually abused by the family members. This study makes an attempt to make a psychoanalysis of these writers. The main writers discussed are Taleema Nasreen, Gayatri Devi, Shobha De, Kamla Das, Malala, Jhamak Ghimire and Amrita Preetam. Their autobiographies are the potent vehicles through which they gave an outcry to their suppressed feelings and the churning has brought to the surface the frustration, anguish and disappointment of there women.

II. Socio-Cultural Realities Reflected in the Autobiographies of Asian Women

Men and women differ not only in the parameters of culture, morality, chastity and suffering but also in concept of writing autobiography. The critical theories on autobiography tend to marginalize women's autobiography- writing and focus only men written autobiographies. Most of the critical theories are not applicable to women's life writing due to biological, socio-political as well as psycho-cultural reasons; that women's autobiography-writing is different. For male individuation 'dissociation' is a must, while for women according to feminist psychoanalytic theorists like Chodorow and Rowbotham, 'association' is central to their individuation. Men's autobiography in form, is dominated by an 'I' and this 'I' is always at the center of every incident.

Marginalization of women and their autobiography-writing is clearly reflected in all the autobiographies of the present study. In these celebrated autobiographies the writers present their inner self as well as external visible aspects of personality in a very effective and artistic style and full of details associated with their private lives based on their own self- assessment.

Male view of history is that a good autobiography not only focuses on its author but also reveals his connectedness to the rest of history; it is representative of his times, a mirror to his era. This criterion is adequately supported by many male autobiographies which concentrate on their author's professional or intellectual lives, usually in the affairs of the world, and their life studies are for the most part success stories. Augustine's Confessions, Rousseau's Confessions (1781), Gibbon's Autobiography (1793), and Goethe's Poetry and Truth, Hitler's My Story, J S Mill's Autobiography etc., though personal in some respects, are also success stories and can be read as histories of their era.

The emphasis by women is on the personal, especially on other people, rather than on their own work life, their own professional success, or their own connectedness to current political or intellectual history clearly contradicts established criterion about the content of autobiography. Woman's autobiography projects love affairs, children, private suffering, torture and selfishness of male members in the family. Chronology has no value in their life story. Almost all stories are the same. Thus, the belief that a good autobiography is always representative of its times and is a mirror to the era also does not hold true in relation to women's autobiographical writing. Women's writings, in this context, serve as reservoirs of social customs and traditions and can be treated as authentic data to do research in social sciences.

Women mostly write about their children in their autobiographies. The emotional and physical needs of children are essential aspects of female life studies. While male authored autobiographies mostly overlook personal life, especially details regarding wives and children. Male autobiographers mention their children but only briefly.

Women project an acceptable self in their writings adopting the ideology of self-subordination, which implies among other things, suppression of narrative about the self. Women's autobiographies, to a striking degree, fail directly to emphasize their own importance, though writing in a genre which values self-assertion and self-display. For women the immediate community is their family or neighbors. They tell of lives led by others' values and based on others' assumptions than their own. According to Mary Mason, 'other' or 'others' may be represented as husband, children, even God, but in all cases the female self depicted is as profoundly influenced by the 'other' i.e. 'delineation of identity by alterity' and this primary relationship structures their autobiography.

On the other hand, men depict their childhood as a symbol of innocence and redemption and their lives as heroic. Men's autobiography results in the projection of a self-image of confidence, no matter what difficulties they have encountered. This is contrary to the self-image projected in women's autobiographies. They reveal self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding. The autobiographical intention is often powered by the motive to convince readers of their self-worth, to clarify, to affirm, and to authenticate their self image. Thus, idealization is not typical of the female mode. In place of glowing narratives, women tend to write in a straight forward and objective manner about both their girlhood and adult experiences. They also write obliquely, elliptically or humorously in order to camouflage their feelings, the same technique is used to play down their professional lives.

Coming to the discussion of narrative techniques and architectonics of the genre of autobiography, critics have often asserted that the male autobiographers consciously shape the events of their lives into a coherent whole. By means of chronological, linear narrative, they unify their work concentrating on one period of their life, one theme, or one characteristic of their personality. It is not surprising that with men socially conditioned to pursue the single goal of a successful career, we find such harmony and orderliness in their autobiographies. Such unity shows a faith in the unity of the world and their own self-images. The "unidirectionality" of men's lives is appropriately cast into such progressive narratives, notes Jelinek.

On the other hand, irregularity rather than orderliness is seen in women's autobiography-writing. The narratives of their lives are often not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary, or organized into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters. The multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write their autobiographies as well. Thus, the established critical standards exclude women's autobiography-writing from the genre and cast into the "non artistic" categories of memoir, reminiscence, and other such forms.

In a very interesting study, titled *Women's Autobiographies* (1980) Estelle Jelinek shows the gender specificity of autobiography as a form by citing examples of famous male and female autobiographers. The earliest male autobiographer, Augustine, narrates his life story progressively up to the time of his conversion and then crowns it with three chapters of brilliant intellectual analysis. Rousseau's *Confessions*, however excessively detailed, are persistently chronological and progressive. Franklin wrote his autobiography during several sittings over a period of eighteen years, yet resuming the narrative each time where he had left off. Goethe's autobiography, also written over a number of years, is methodically chronological. To add Indian male autobiographers in the same context one may think of Gandhi, Nehru, Chagla, Deshmukh, Morarji Desai, A P J Abdul Kalam and many others.

In a sharp contrast to the theories of Gusdorf and Olney, the psychoanalysts like Freud and Lacan focus on the development of the self through an intense interaction with the others. In Jacques Lacan's theory, the child's separation of himself from his mother is followed by the mirror-stage and a Narcissistic identification first with his own image and then with others. All the female autobiographers go through the mirror stage and identify themselves either with their mother or father. Shobha De and Kamla Das focus whole of the story either on personal life relations, husbands or surrounding people while Amrita's is a torn personality between Self and Sahir. Shobha De shared her 'self' with kiths and kins and presents her childhood experience in the following way:

"My sister tells me I was an unsufferable brat at that age constantly whining and clinging to my mother."

Maharani Gayatri Devi describes her life story in the periphery of siblings and mother in childhood, her husband in youth and politics and people in the growing age. She recollects her childhood days with glee:

“The bedroom was crowded with maids, female relatives, friends and us children, she held court for us all.....”

The autobiographies of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Acharya Kripalani and C. D. Deshmukh, on the other hand, focus on the public rather than the personal aspects of their lives. Their autobiographies are representative of their times, a mirror to the era of Indian freedom struggle. This criterion is adequately supported by these male autobiographies which concentrate on chronicling the progress of their author's professional or intellectual lives, and their life studies are for the most part success stories.

Like the other male autobiographers Gandhi dissociates himself from his family, friends, community, fellow workers, and so on in *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Individuation for Gandhi lay in dissociation. Gandhi asserted his conviction against the prevalent social conventions and customs. Gandhi dissociated himself from others. In *My Experiments with Truth*, he dissociates himself from his family, community, colleagues, and even the Indian National Congress.

My Experiments with Truth focuses more on the public than on the personal. Gandhi is a political leader, social reformer, and spiritual seeker combined into one. He devotes full chapters to his political views, political events and personalities. For example, he discusses in detail the Natal Indian Congress, Lord Curzon's Durbar, the Kheda Satyagraha, the Khilafat Movement, and the Amritsar Congress etc. Gandhi's autobiography, however, gives an impression that in his quest for spirituality and truth, the personal, domestic aspects of his life are relegated into the background.

The self-image projected by Gandhi in *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* is of confidence and determination. The depiction of self-image by Gandhi in the early part of his autobiography seems to defy the notion that men project the self-image of confidence and determination in autobiography writing. His autobiography reminds us of the confessional autobiographies of the earliest autobiographies like St. Augustine's. The self-image of consciousness apparent in the early part of *My Experiments with Truth* is disproved by the monumental work he undertook later. It would be almost impossible to measure confidence of the man who confronts and challenges the erstwhile British Empire, the most powerful one in the modern world. Gandhi claims that the reader will benefit from the account of his experiments with truth. He was confident that his autobiography would influence generations of people. There is an undertone in Gandhi's autobiography that his existence is significant to the world.

Mahatma Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth* covers the first five decades of Gandhi's life from his birth in 1869 to 1921. It is a connected account of his experiments with truth, non-violence, celibacy, self-purification, humility etc. *My Experiments with Truth* identifies itself with the male tradition of uniformity in form and content in autobiography-writing. It conveys the impression of a chronological linear narrative shaping the events of his life into a coherent whole. The autobiography is divided into five parts which are subdivided into chapters. The uniformity is evident in his concentration on one period of his life, one theme, or one aspect of his personality at a time. This is in accordance with the male tradition of autobiography writing.

Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* is considered by the critics as one of the outstanding prose works in the annals of Indian writing in English. Written at the age of forty -five, it is a literary expression of a man at the height of his powers. Nehru's *An Autobiography* attests the male critical theories. From his very childhood he starts dissociating from others and projects himself as the center of a living space. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote his entire autobiography in prison; "...in the long solitudes of gaol life" (Preface). Initially he dissociates from his father, Motilal Nehru, when Jawaharlal's autobiography provides a detailed description of the freedom struggle and the role he played in it. In *An Autobiography*, we note that the personal history is fused with the national history, and we are privileged to watch the development of Jawaharlal' s character, personality in the context of the drama of the national struggle. He sought satisfaction in his work and rushed about from end to end in India:

"I carried about me microphones and loud speakers and addressed a dozen meetings a day, apart from impromptu gatherings by the road side. Some mammoth gatherings approached a hundred thousand; the average audience was usually twenty thousand. The daily total of persons attending was frequently a hundred thousand and sometimes it was much greater. In a rough estimate it can be said that ten million people actually attended the meetings I addressed, and probably several million more were brought into some kind of touch with me during my journeying by road."

Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*, thus, projects an image of self-confidence and determination. Nehru's autobiography portrays him as the son of a wealthy Indian barrister and politician Motilal Nehru who became a leader of the left-wing of the Indian National Congress at a remarkably young age. Congress President, under the mentorship of Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru projects the self-image of charismatic, radical leader, advocating complete

independence from the British Empire. Jawaharlal Nehru was a pivotal figure in the Indian independence movement.

In contrast to the self-image in the autobiographies of women writers discussed in the present study, which reveal self consciousness; Nehru's active role in the Indian freedom struggle and the prevailing social conventions lead to the projection of the confident self image:

"It was true that I had achieved, almost accidentally as it were, an unusual degree of popularity with the masses; I was appreciated by the intelligentsia; and to young men and women I was a bit of a hero, and a halo of romance seemed to surround me in their eyes. Songs had been written about me, and the most impossible and ridiculous legends had grown up. Even my opponents had put in a good word for me and patronizingly admitted that I was not lacking in competence or in good faith.

Only a saint, perhaps, or an inhuman monster could survive all this, unscathed and unaffected, and I can place my self in neither of these categories. It went to my head, intoxicated me a little, and gave me confidence and strength.

Father's personal valet for many years, Bhola Ram, belonged to the Harijan community, and Hari Lal, my brother's valet, also an "untouchable," became well known in his own right as a member of the Uttar Pradesh Legislature. My own cook, Budhilal, who has been with the family for forty- three years, and his brother, Tulsi Ram, who served my brother until he died, both Harijans, are to us the equal of any Brahman of the highest group. It is a joy as well as a matter of pride that their children are educated, hold good positions, and have considerably raised their standard of living because of our encouragement and trust. In the Uttar Pradesh Assembly one of the able younger ministers is a lawyer and the grandson of one of Anand Bhawan employees. He was a Harijan, known technically as a member of the scheduled class. There are others also, who, but for the fact that my father had the courage of his convictions, would not have been able to make good as they have done. Parliamentary debates and demands asking for a better deal for Harijans seem hypocritical to me. If those who shouted loudest had done one fraction of what my father did more than half a century ago the problem, by now, would have been resolved and all Hindus emotionally and socially integrated."

However, in Nayantara Sahgal's autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake and From Fear Set Free*, there is no documentation of politics for posterity. The personal- family,

friends, domestic affairs, family problems- is always ahead of the political. Returning from the United States after the completion of her studies, Nayantara was eager to see Jawaharlal Nehru who had become the first Prime Minister of independent India by that time. However, his political position did not mean much to her. She always looked for her Mamu with whom she had played as a child. When Nayantara and her sister Lekha went to the USA for higher education, India was still a British colony. When she was returning home, the country had gained independence. Her mother was in Moscow as the first ambassador of the newly independent country to Russia. On her arrival in India, Nayantara was supposed to stay at the official residence of her Mamu who had become the first Prime Minister. She had never visited New Delhi till then. She writes in *Prison and Chocolate Cake*:

“As I thought about going home, I gradually became more accustomed to the idea. So much had happened since I had come to America and now Mamu was the Prime Minister, the first Prime Minister of an independent India! I repeated it over and over again to myself in wonder and awe, not quite believing it. It was a distant, dazzling title. It spelt victory after a long, hard, sad battle, but to me it had no reality. What had reality was Jawaharlal Nehru, the Mamu I had played with and known and loved. He was infinitely more inspiring than the Prime Minister of India. Suddenly I was eager and impatient to be with him again. I had been the ardent little hero-worshipper, trudging solidly behind him in the make-believe processions of our games. Now I was ready to walk beside him towards whatever future the building of a New India would involve.” Nehru's autobiography, thus, has been an invaluable document as an account of historical events, outstanding contemporary personalities, world movements and the contribution of all this to our civilization. However, we feel that the autobiography unfortunately leaves many things unsaid. The emphasis is clearly on Nehru's public life and his personal life is relegated into the background. Mahadev Desai shrewdly observes: "Although Nehru is sincere, we have a feeling of something missing, something kept from us".

Nayantara Sahgal's autobiographies *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free* reveal her consciousness as a woman in a male dominated society. She grew up at Anand Bhavan, the home of the Nehru family. For Nayantara and her mother Vijayalakshmi, 'home' always meant Anand Bhavan. But Nayantara remains instinctively conscious that her real home would be where her husband lives. When Nayantara leaves for the United States for higher education, her aunt Krishna comes to see her off at the Bombay port. Offering a

parting advice to the niece, Krishna asks Nayantara "to look helpless but be efficient" so that people may give her a helping hand.

In *From Fear Set Free*, Nayantara is conscious of the difference in her and her husband's backgrounds. She is conscious that as children grown up at Anand Bhavan she and her sisters were cut off from ordinary life around them. Before her marriage with Gautam, she feels herself unfit for her husband's family:

"Life would be different for me from henceforward, and not only as it is different for any newly married woman. From the smallest detail to the overall picture, it would be strange. I should shift from orange juice to the cocktail circuit."

Focusing on the purpose of writing 'An Autobiography' Nehru confidently asserts:

"My attempt was to trace, as far as I could, my own mental development, and not to write a survey of recent Indian history. The fact that this account resembles superficially such a survey is apt to mislead the reader and lead him to attach a wider importance to it than it deserves. I must warn him, therefore, that this account is wholly one-sided and, inevitably, egotistical~ many important happenings have been completely ignored and many important persons, who shaped events, have hardly been mentioned. In a real survey of past events this would have been inexcusable, but a personal account can claim this indulgence."

Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography provides us with very little information about his childhood and deals mainly with the adult crisis. An Autobiography begins with the description of Nehru's ancestors and their descent from Kashmir. This is followed by a very brief description of this childhood. The rest of the autobiography focuses on his adult crises, his significant role in the Indian freedom struggle. An Autobiography thus projects an image of self confidence presenting an unforgettable picture of the man and his milieu. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar notes in *Indian Writing in English* (1980):

'It was a very personal book, being a sensitive individual's autobiography; on the contrary, it also struck one as the testament of a whole generation -the generation that was striving hard to negotiate the difficult passage from the dying old world to the new world that was struggling to be born.'"

Estelle C. Jelinek, in her *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*.. very interestingly notes that most autobiographers are achievers with self- sustaining ego systems, and not surprisingly, therefore, most are only children or the oldest child.

Nayantara Sahgal's autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake* also lacks the chronological order. The narrative moves back and forth in time. It begins with the description of herself and her sister Lekha's voyage to the United States for higher education. Then she goes on to describe the introduction of the Pandit girls to the national politics at a very early age. At the age of three Nayantara came to associate prison with chocolate cake as the occasion of her freedom fighter father's imprisonment was celebrated in the family with chocolate cake. Nayantara does not talk about her childhood and parent age in the established tradition found in male autobiographies. *Prison and Chocolate Cake* closes with Nayantara's return from the United States and the death of Mahatma Gandhi. *From Fear Set Free*, the sequel to *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, describes the eight years after her return to India- her courtship with Gautam Sahgal, her marriage, and her domestic life as a housewife. Once again the narrative in *From Fear Set Free* is disjointed, disconnected, and fragmentary. Nayantara justifies this lack of chronological order in the Preface to *Prison and Chocolate Cake*:

"If I write haphazardly it is because I describe events as I remember them and not necessarily in the order in which they occurred. It is putting together the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. The pattern forms in its own way as the relevant pieces are located and not in the neat, methodical way desired. Much of the atmosphere we knew as children is fast vanishing, for already Gandhiji's name is history and Anand Bhawan, our home in Allahabad, is a deserted house. Only a memory remains of the glamorous aura which once surrounded it. I have tried to recapture a little of that fading atmosphere."

The vision of self in women's autobiographies reflects their isolation, involvement and identity. In men's autobiographies this projection of self is missing. It is related, to the autobiographer's self- narrative as the writer to her book is. Amrita cites this illustration in the beginning of her autobiography. Life is a strange book, constructed by letters and sounds that combines and break, to scatter away and change. After a long journey of consciousness, then comes a point when one finds the courage of introspecting and scrutinizing all those past moments of failures and frustration of restless noon's and gloomy evenings of painful mornings and sleepless nights... through which one finds the hope of new sense of continuity and confidence to step forth to transcend the consciousness of *'I' was trading upon the sense of me.*"

The writing of autobiography is conscious and continuous work for women writers. The contradictory generic conditions of form suit the female psyche so well that the form has

a different kinship, with the feminine self. On one hand the auto biographer has to expose herself by exploiting the truth in its private shades, on the other, she has to justify and present herself as she prescribes herself to be. Sacrifice of privacy is the central demand of autobiography and it appears to be opposed to feminine culture. Very few woman writers have come forward with this dimension.

In light of the foregoing analysis of male and female autobiographies the researcher is of the view that these autobiographies uphold the gynocentric theory of "gender-difference" in autobiography-writing. Though having the same socio-political and economic backgrounds, man and woman project an essentially different orientation of 'self-image' in their autobiographies. 'An Autobiography', "My Experiments with Truth" by Nehru and Gandhi consistently focuses on the important role that they played in the contemporary public affairs. In contrast, women writers undermine their achievements to underscore the significance of personal affairs in their life.

III. Conclusion

The present study concentrates on the pathetic condition of women of Asia, and their marriage in male dominated society. These women challenged the dictates of society and proved themselves audacious enough to create their own life history despite some negativity in them. Their life stories insist that women must be treated equally in society. Then only gender discrimination can be controlled and progress of society can be ensured.

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