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THEORY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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CHAPTER I

THEORY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Introduction :

The chapter takes a brief survey of the origin and development of autobiography in Europe and India as a background to the critical study of the two selected autobiographies. Further it discusses in brief the theory of autobiography as a literary genre. It is surprising that an adequate theory of autobiography in the form of books is not available like the other literary forms such as novel, short stories, comedy, one act play etc. on the otherhand, the concept and theoretical consideration of the autobiography form is a scanty material in stray and scattered manner. However an effort to collect and organize such material in order to formulate an acceptable theory of the form of autobiography was done by Dr.M. M. Kanwadkar in his Ph.D. Thesis.¹ The theory of autobiography discussed in this chapter closely follows this acceptable theory.

Autobiography is a rare and distinct creative literary art. It was originated from the human desire to keep one's memorial with the passage of time. The concept of autobiography is of a recent date and the term 'autobiography' was first used by the poet Robert Southey in 1809 in The English periodical, *Quarterly Review*. In general, the history of autobiography closely parallels with the history of biography.

St. Augustine's *Confessions* written around A.D. 309, deserves to be called as the earliest extant autobiography. It is the ancient instance of autobiography from which different methods of writing autobiography developed. But significant autobiographies are rare in the classical and medieval periods.

Autobiography as a genre indebted to the West. As James Olney states, "in the works of three authors one can trace the central line of the western world, St. Augustine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Samuel Beckett; each of them is crucial no other are necessary,"² Roy Pascal's opinion is also noteworthy. He states that autobiography is essentially European, "It is a creation of European Civilization."³

- **Western Autobiography**

An attempt is done here to trace in brief the development of autobiography in different ages in Europe. Autobiography really begins with the Renaissance in the 15th century. Autobiographies and all kinds of autobiographical writings were written in plenty during the Renaissance period as the people in Europe were interested in individualism and their relationship with the world. *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1436), *The Autobiography* (1558 –69) of Benvenuto Cellini, Patriarch's *Literal Postero* (C. 1367-72) and *The Autobiography* of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1764) one among the best examples.

In the 16th century autobiographies became common. From the 17th century it became a practice to write diaries, journals,

memoirs and autobiographical narratives. The late Renaissance and early 18th century became the great ages of autobiographical work. John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) and Richard Baxter's *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696) are good examples of religious autobiography. Colley Cibber's *Apology* (1740) for his own life and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1766) are excellent secular biographies. Possibly because of the romantic moment and a renewed interest in self – examination, the late 18th and early 19th centuries saw the publication of the first great modern autobiographies; highly self – conscious, retrospective analysis of an author's life of some crucial aspect of it written as a complete work. The best of these are :- Edward Gibbon's *Autobiography* (1796), *The confessions* (1781-1788) of Jean- Jacques Roussau, Cardinal John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907), John Sturt Mill's *Autobiography* (1873) and the *Education of Henry Adams* (1907). The poems like wordsworth's *Prelude* (1850) and autobiographical sections of Lord Byron's *Child Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-18) might be included. ⁴

In the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century several types of writings are somewhat distinguished autobiographical writings. The autobiographical impulse today seems stronger than ever. It became popular form in the present age. But most visible forms are the reminiscences of athletes, entertainment personalities and historical and political figures. They are entertaining and at the same time informative. But artistic autobiographies and 'autobiography proper' are rarely

found in the mass-production and mass – popularity of the genre. The world war produced many fine autobiographies. A few instances are Siegfried Sasson's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and *Memoirs of Fox-Hunting Man* (1828) and such other ones.

- **Indian Autobiography**

Although some kind of native tradition in writing autobiographies existed in India before the advent of the British it was only after the introduction of a new system of English education and the consequent assimilation of western ideas in this country that autobiography seems to have cast its spell on a majority of Indian writers. India's encounter with English education and culture began a literary renaissance in India and it strengthened and quickened the impulse of autobiographical writing among Indians.

The autobiographies in India were written under the impact of the Western autobiographical tradition. Gandhiji's one of the close friends observed,

"Writing an autobiography is a practice peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the East having written one, except amongst those who have come under western influence."⁵

But R.C.P. Sinha, considers that India had a peculiar native tradition of writing autobiography before the Western influence⁶. The secular literature produced before the Vedas and Vedic literature had some autobiographical pieces. The Muslim period in Indian history abounds in autobiographical works. Muslim

writers established an advanced tradition of autobiographical writings in India. Sultan Firoz Shah of Delhi was the first Indian to write his autobiography as an independent work.

Raja Rammohan Roy's autobiographical sketch was the first example in this field in Indian writing in English. Since then during the last hundred and fifty years a good number of autobiographies have been written in English by the Indians. The few names of such autobiographers are :- Lal Bahart Day, Lala Lajpat Rai, Rabindranath Tagore. Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru etc.

The earlier two decades of the 20th century cannot be regarded as rich period of Indian Autobiography. During the first half of the 20th century, there was two well known publications of autobiographies : Surendranath Banerjea's. ***A Nation in Making*** (1925) and M.K. Gandhi's ***The Story of My Experiments With Truth*** (1927). Nehru's ***An Autobiography***, is another landmark in the history of Indian Autobiography in English. At the end of the 20th century many autoibographies have been written by Indians in various fields of life. Among these autobiographies, quite a few have been written by eminent men of letters such as R.K. Narayan's ***My Days*** (1975), Dom-Moraes '***My Son Father*** (1971) Kamala Das's ***My Story*** (1976).

In short 'Indian autobiography in English is also rich. William Walsh States, "It gave to the world three best masterpieces viz. M.K. Gandhi's ***The Story of My Experiments With Truth*** (1927), Nehru's ***An Autobiography*** (1930) and Nirad Chaudhari's ***The Autobiography*** of an unknown Indian (1951).

These three autobiographies rank with the best autobiographies in the world literature⁷.

- **Definition of Autobiography**

The term 'autobiography' is a combination of the three words viz. 'auto', 'bio' and 'graphia' which mean in implication the genre – the description or the art of narration (graphia) of an individual human life (bios) by the individual himself (auto).

Autobiography as a genre deals with the lives of individual men written by the subject himself. It is the story of author's own life and achievements. Its aim is successful presentation of the writer's personality. Webster's *World University Dictionary* gives the simple definition of autobiography as,

"a story of a persons life
told by himself." ⁸

More or less similar definitions of autobiography are given in other dictionaries of English language, glossaries of literary terms and encyclopaedias. These definitions only convey that the subject of autobiography is writer himself. But the comprehensive and the final definition of autobiography is not yet available.

There has been a long standing disagreement concerning the definition of autobiography. The following are a few selected definitions which try to throw light on the nature and aspects of autobiography as an art. J.A. Cuddon defines autobiography as, "an account of a man`s life by himself."⁹

Harry Shaw defines autobiography in the following manner,

“This type of writing is an account of oneself written by oneself. The author of an autobiography presents (or tries to present) a continuous narrative of what he considers the major (or most interesting) events of his life usually, an autobiographer, reveals about himself only what he is willing to have known and remembered.”¹⁰

The above definition suggests that in autobiographical writing personal or subjective element predominates and the author has freedom of selection of events. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* brings out the underlying principles of a good autobiography.

“It (autobiography) must attempt to survey, in retrospective mood, a considerable portion of life, if not an entire life, and it must take the form of an ordered narrative, with deliberate selection and shaping of material (though not constructed as fiction) to compose an artistic whole. Above all its underlying principle must be scrutiny of the self, with outside happenings, persons encountered and observations admitted, primarily as they impinge on the consciousness of the person on whose character and actions the writing ----- is focused.”¹¹

It is obvious from the above citations that in autobiography the focus is primarily on the 'Self' rather than on the outward events. However almost all the definitions suffer from one or the other limitations. These definitions do not distinguish between the 'autobiography proper' and the other closer autobiographical forms. But Roy Pascal has tried to define it i.e. to explain the basic difference between 'autobiography proper' and other autobiographical forms. He writes,

"These distinctions have led us a good way towards a definition of autobiography proper. It (autobiography) involves the reconstruction of the movement of a life, or part of life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived. It's center of interest is the self, not the outside world, though necessarily the outside world must appear so that, in give and take with it, the personality finds its peculiar shape."¹²

This definition seems to be satisfactory as it describes the exact nature of the form and as such it is accepted here for this critical study of the selected autobiographies.

- **Nature of Autobiography**

Autobiography is non-fictional prose form. In spite of its popularity the genre had witnessed negligence by scholars. It is not regarded as a significant form of literature. But it is a distinct and worthy form of literature though it was neglected earlier. Autobiography happens to be a very natural and suitable form for

self-expression. It records the day-to-day events in author's life, which he thinks important to present his personality.

Autobiography is a unique literary art that lingers on the borderline of imaginative and non-imaginative literature, of facts and fiction, of history and novel because it shares all the essential characteristic of history and novel but it is neither history nor novel. It is close to the novel, in its narrative technique and interest in characterization. It shares with the novel its interest in individual human nature, but it does not allow itself, the novelist's freedom of invention. Like story and novel, many incidents are interwoven in autobiography. But incidents in story and novel are imaginary while in autobiography there is no place for imagination as truth is the soul of autobiography.

Autobiography is a long book of life. It may be short or long narrative of the author's life. There are no restrictions on the structure of the autobiography. Autobiographer has freedom to start from any period of his life. But it has been long practice by many autobiographers to write in conventional style. That is to write in chronological order from ancestral history, birth parentage, childhood, family background, youth career and so on. The author can write till the point of time of writing or at any stage of his life as he wishes. Autobiography should be coherent. It is not essential to write autobiography only in single volume. One may write it in volumes more than one. P.K.Atre wrote his autobiography in five volumes.¹³ It may be divided in to several books, chapters or parts. There is no limit of pages. Jean-

Jacques Rousseau divided his autobiography in twelve books while that of Mahatma Gandhi is five parts.

Autobiography is not just about the facts in the past. Like fiction it creates an individual in writing and in its aesthetic point to higher truths. It is a process of recreation of past. Roy Pascal considers, "an autobiography is a shaping of the past".¹⁴

Any person from any field of life can write his autobiography. Further, one can write autobiography at any age or stage of one's life. R.C.P. Sinha has classified Indian autobiographies under different heads viz autobiographies written by (i) Men in Religion (ii) Men in politics (iii) Poets and Littereurs, on the basis of the field of work or occupation.¹⁵

Joseph T. Shipley gives similar classification of autobiographies written by different men. e.g. by religious men, sportsmen, solidiers, journalists, actors, artists, writers etc.¹⁶ But a good autobiographer writes it with maturity and retrospection and introspection.

- **Autobiography and Autobiographical writing**

J.T. Shipley states that any one can write autobiography but all autobiographies are not pure autobiographies, some of them fall under sub-categories of the form.¹⁷ Every body will write about himself but such writings may not be considered as the proper art of autobiography.

There is a lot of difference between 'autobiography' and other 'autobiographical writings', often any kind of autobiographical writing is confused with autobiography. That is why Roy Pascal makes a clear distinction between such autobiographical writings and autobiography. Roy Pascal calls real autobiography as "autobiography proper" which shares all the parameters of the art of autobiography. Often common readers get confused with autobiography proper and other autobiographical writings, such as biography, memoirs, diary, journal, letters etc.

Memoir, journal, diary and letter may be grouped together as literature of personal revelation. Autobiography its as a form of literature distinguishes itself by special features. Previously autobiography was considered as a sub-category or special form of biography by eminent literary critics such as Edgar Johnson. The source material for a biographer is the hero's diary, documents, letters, and personal reminiscences of people about the hero. But memory alone is the source material for an autobiographer to review his past life.

Diary is an autobiographical type of writing but not an 'autobiography proper'. It is closer to autobiography. There is self centeredness in the diary. It reveals personality of the writer from all sides like autobiography. "A diary is a day-to-day autobiography."¹⁸ There is a logical connection and sequence of events in autobiography while diary has less sequence of events and there is only a record of events as they occur. Autobiography is a presentation of author's whole life and personal experiences.

It is not a chronological day-to-day record. On the contrary, diary is the record of the events of specific time though it may not be related to the author's life directly. Diary is a valuable source of material for biography and autobiography. Roy Pascal makes a formal difference between diary and autobiography as.

“One can find in a diary all the uncertainties, false starts momentariness but autobiography is a coherent shaping of the past.”¹⁹

Autobiography has something common with **Confession**. J.T. Shipley considers that confession is a type of autobiography and its purpose is either honest revelation or drawing one's own portrait for the next generation. But they differ in their methods and purposes. Confession emphasizes the moral and intellectual experiences in the writer's life but autobiography is not confined to only moral and intellectual experiments and according to L.T. Lemon “it least concentrates on sensational and scandalous events.”²⁰

Reminiscence and **Memoir** are very close literary forms to autobiography Roy Pascal considers reminiscence and memoir as one and the same thing. He states the difference in the method and objective of autobiography and these two. “In the autobiography proper, attention is focused on the self, in the memoir or in reminiscence on others.”²¹

Autobiographical novel differs totally from autobiography as its genre imposes to share more parameters of the form of novel than the form of autobiography. It is first a novel and then

an autobiographical writing. There is "co-relationship between the author's own life and experiences with the life and experiences of a character in the fictional recreation."²²

The focus of the perspective in these writings shifts from its main intention unaware. In 'autobiography proper' there is no such shift from the 'self' to the outside world. Autobiographer's main focus is on the 'self' and it is its distinctive mark. Compared to autobiography, the memoir and reminiscence are minor forms. They are "rather a miscellaneous class of personal writings".²³

The autobiography proper is a connection narrative of the author's life, with stress laid on introspection, or on the significance of his life against a wider background."²⁴

- **Parameters of Autobiography**

The 'autobiography proper' differs from other sub-categories of autobiographical writings or other types of literature of personal revelation by its peculiar parameters, viz. Selection of events, Truth, 'Self' as the center, and detached view of 'self'.

- **Selection of Events**

As a literary art autobiography makes selection of events in accordance with motive of the author. Man's life is longer than his autobiography. Human life is crowded with so many insignificant and routine activities such as daily wash, shaving etc. Autobiographer has to drop out such insignificant events. Autobiography makes a deliberate selection of events so that there is proper self-revelation and documentation in

autobiography. An autobiographer has to restrict himself almost exclusively to salient events, actions and traits. To draw his effective character sketch, some events are trival or insignificant for others but have important contribution to shape the personality of the protagonist. Similarly, artistic arrangement of events is essential in autobiography. After selecting the events to put them in proper organic order and shape is further task for autobiographer.

- **Truth**

It is only Truth or facts that distinguishes autobiography from imaginative writing. Autobiography is a truthful record of the 'self'. Truth is the soul of autobiography. This truth is not based on any evidence or documents. Memory is the main source of the truth in autobiography. So the basic question is, "Is it possible for an autobiographer to tell complete truth, naked truth about himself,..... no one can tell the whole truth about himself."²⁵

Truth is the first requirement of a good autobiography. These should be reflections of true internal and external life of an autobiographer. Edward Gibbon remarks,

"Truth, naked, unblushing truth, the first virtue of more serious history, must be the sole recommendation of this personal narrative (autobiography)."²⁶

The truth in autobiography is a factual truth, which differs from historical and poetic truth. In autobiography, the author tells

about himself. Autobiographer is expected to be honest in telling his faults equally with his merits. Roy Pascal states, "To give the truth about oneself has always been the aim of true autobiography."²⁷

But autobiography may suffer from eulogy and self-glorification. Then readers doubt the truth in an autobiography. Further autobiographer has a few legal, social and moral restrictions. He avoids to tell the truth about living friends and foes. Even he cannot tell about his secret love affairs with a lady by name and location nor can express his social crimes in his past life.

Autobiography cannot be written on the imaginative, lives or events. Memory is main source of truth in the autobiography. So autobiographer has to depend on his parents or grandparents for the truth about his early childhood. It is second hand truth. Shame does not allow an autobiographer to narrate his sex experiences.

The truth about the 'milieu' is also important part of autobiography. In short, presentation of truth about 'self' and 'the milieu' is the most essential prime parameter of an autobiography.

- **Subjectivity and Objectivity**

Autobiography is basically a subjective literature. But it displays a subtle combination of subjectivity and objectivity. An autobiographer narrates his own and actually lived personal

experiences. He is the subject matter of his narrative, naturally the personal events, his disposition, his judgment, his attitudes, his feelings and sentiments are projected. Without the narrator and his personal experience, the autobiography is impossible, subjectivity is inevitable in autobiography.

Autobiography is self-examination, and self-scrutiny. His attitude is of an outsider or a third person. The narrator is simultaneously the subject and also the object. There must be a balance between 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity'. They are so blended in autobiography that they are inseparable. Such a blend of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' contributes alone for making of a good autobiography.

- **'Self' as the center**

'Self' is the center of autobiography. Almost all the details in autobiography viz. events, other characters, etc. should go to contribute to the 'Self' at the centre. Autobiographer being the protagonist, is the centre of autobiography. Autobiographer tries to his best to draw a full length picture of his 'Self'. In addition to the protagonist there are other men and women around him. The narration of these characters is not for their own characterization but they must contribute directly or indirectly to the self-revelation of the protagonist. Autobiography also narrates with details, the 'milieu' around the author. The narration of the contemporary milieu is not the aim of the author. On the contrary, these details of the milieu must focus on the making of protagonist's character. The character of the protagonist emerges by its interaction with

the outside world i.e. contemporary men and the milieu in autobiography should add more colour and life to the central character of the protagonist. "What is unique to the genre autobiography is that all the portraits of other people in autobiographies contribute to the central self-portrait."²⁸

Autobiography is an outcome of narcissism. Those who are 'self-conscious' or 'introverts' such as M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru could alone write autobiography. While extroverts like Swami Vivekanand or Lokamanya Tilak couldnot write autobiographies for want of this essential ego. Autobiography is a search of 'self-identity', there is no place for 'egotism'.

- **Detached view of the 'Self'**

Impartial and detached view of the 'self' is the most essential parameter of autobiography. An autobiographer has to view and pass judgement on his own life like an impartial judge, which is most difficult task for an autobiographer. Herald Nicholson considers autobiography as a "scientific autopsy" and "rigorous post mortem."²⁹ Such impartial view of the 'self' alone relieves autobiography from the faults of 'self-glorification', 'self-justification' and 'self-exhibition'. Autobiographer must draw a 'true picture' of his 'self'. He is expected to present the facts of his life without his comments and to leave the readers to form their opinions on his 'self'. Jean – Jacques Rousseau says about his aim in writing *The Confessions* :

“My purpose is to display to my kind of portrait in every way true to nature and the man I shall portray will be myself.....simply myself.”³⁰

An autobiographer must explore honestly and with detachment the deep rooted thoughts and emotions.

These parameters are essential to make autobiography as a successful literary form. If an autobiographer deviates to some extent from these parameters his autobiography cannot be regarded as ‘autobiography proper’ and that writing merges into other sub-genres of autobiographical writing.

- **Function of Autobiography**

Autobiography is delightful as well as useful. Like any other literary work, a good autobiography not only pleases or delights and teaches but also moves. The function of an autobiography like that of a good play or a poem depends upon the motives behind its creation and the motives behind its reading. It is motivated to delight and teach.

Mostly, an autobiographer being proud of himself and his rich experiences, tells his lifestory for instruction to others. However, the main purpose of writing autobiography is self-revelation from a certain position in life in retrospection.

- i) **Self – revelation**

‘Revelation of the Self’ is the first and foremost function of an autobiography. Autobiographer should have art of revealing

himself. He should confess himself to the reader. The urge of revelation is universal. Every artist tries to reveal himself through his art. Roy Pascal remarks on the importance of self-revelation in autobiography, "Their (autobiographies) most valuable contribution is often the involuntary self-revelation of the author."³¹

The exact idea of 'self-revelation' is given as "the revealing of one's true character feelings or thoughts especially when involuntary."³² Autobiography attempts to reveal the self as an involuntary action. Thus self-revelation is about one's true character. It is man's natural instinct to express himself through creation.

Self-revelation in autobiography is a difficult task. The first role of an autobiographer is to be an inquirer of himself. He should observe himself like an outsider. In such inquiry an autobiographer has to trace his gradual growth of his personality – inner personality.

In autobiography, an author sees eagerly and courageously at his own life. He puts his life in front of himself. So it shows his personality more clearly, explicitly and beautifully. Throughout the autobiography, the readers get information about the personal life of the autobiographer, his emotional involvement, passions, beliefs and his prejudices. Gandhi's autobiography discloses the dilemma of his inner heart.

The self-revelation consists of the revelation of 'consciousness'. According to Freud, the consciousness is the real 'psyche' or 'self'

of a person. An autobiographer has to undertake the search for this 'self'. This search is a 'search for identity'. It implies self analysis and self scrutiny.

In autobiography, autobiographer wants to purge his mind or unburden himself. So he puts himself in front of the readers, without adding something more in his life. It is the truthful revelation of the authors personality. H.G. Wells admits,

"I write down my story and state my present problem, to clear and relive my mind."³³

The success of autobiography not only depends on how far the self is searched but also on how for the 'self' is revealed in words. Thus main literary function of autobiography is self-revelation as an art.

ii) Documentation

These days literature is studied as social documentation. This is more true about autobiography. Autobiography is not only devoted to self-revelation but also to the contemporary society is an inevitable part of autobiography. Infact autobiographer's personality is a formation of many social forces and conditions. Naturally, socio-cultural context i.e. contemporary documentation is inevitable in autobiography. This documentation is more true and genuine than the books of history.

Autobiography is informative, providing information about the author and his milieu. Roy Pascal states,

“Now I know that autobiographies are written and read for the sake of information they provide, information about the author and his time.”³⁴

Self-revelation in autobiography is not possible in isolation. The life of autobiographer is related to many conditions of the contemporary life. An autobiographer's life is conditioned by his milieu. The personality of autobiographer is shaped in the social context. The growth of a human mind and the development of individuals life are determined by the interaction between the milieu and an individual. In that sense, the individual represents his society.

Autobiography is a faithful picture of the society. So the study of autobiography from the sociological point of view is more interesting and helpful. It gives all the details about the contemporary society. It is real and lifelike picture of 'a man' (author) and 'a milieu'.

Like biography, autobiography is also essential for the detailed knowledge of the contemporary history and the great persons. It is a social, political and economical ethos. It shows the various changes in the society from author's birth to his present life. It is an important document to get information about the educational system, social and political conditions, economical background, customs, traditions and manners of the people.

An autobiographer uses the method of historiography while depicting the contemporary life. Many autobiographers

deliberately write their autobiographies to give effective picture of the contemporary society. Autobiography is important as historical document and sociological studies. D.G. Naik supports this view when he writes,

“They say that certain autobiographies enable us to know the history of certain periods in for better than the actual books of history.”³⁵

From the above discussion it is clear that the function of autobiography is self-revelation and the record of contemporary life. Thus the above discussion gives as the exact nature, origin and parameters of the form and function of autobiography as literary genre.

CHAPTER I
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