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Reminiscences and Reflections: Telling Lives

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Abstract:

In autobiographies, men and women tell their stories; in biographies, the authors tell the stories of their subjects. For the historians, these are windows, entry points into the social and political history of the period. The present study understands that men and women occasionally do make events, and influence the course of the history, just as events make men and women. Scholars are of the opinion that as a cultural category, biography as a form reveals insights not just into the experience and attitudes of the individual directly concerned, but also of the wider society, or social segment, of which they are part. This is of particular value in seeking to understand and analyze groups that are socially marginalized, such as “women”. Biographies of women render ‘voice’ to the voiceless and as approaches to break the silences imposed by society and history. Hence, a study of women’s biographies becomes extremely important, as a process to recover or retrieve women’s history.

The present paper provides an entry point into the social history of the period seen from the women’s perspective. Biographies could bring out women’s real worlds and their real experiences and aspirations. They show how the efforts, struggles, achievements and failures of these women have shaped the world that they have inherited. Whereas biographies can be about eminent women, they can also be about women who have been marginalized and whose lives and work need to be known. India has a long and strong tradition of oral history, but a much weaker and more discontinuous tradition of written history. The result is that in much of the kind of biographies, the content is weak, due to lack of proper documentation. And, then the assemblage themselves of such biographies provide the opportunity of opening new windows on the history of the times.

However, to look for one general argument is impossible, instead outlining a cluster of issues will help to explore the complex of reasons that might determine the commissioning or writing of biographies as well as those behind nurturing and shaping the writings of autobiographies.

Key Words: auto/ biography, invisible. rewrite, women, lives, fact, fiction, oral history

Right from the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, women in ancient India became a major issue of debate for not only historians, but the policy makers and national thinkers. The question of women was preset to that of ancient India, which kept on taking new contours in different times. History will not speak about women. It will make women speak of it; that is the history we are unaware of. Is there a better definition for the history of women than this? From the earliest times, historical documents have been unjust in recording women's history, owing to the domination of men. The feminist questioned this invisibility of this prototype and set out to rewrite history a new. Gerda Lerner, an American pioneer in the field of women's history, stated in *The Majority Finds its Past* (1979) "women have always been making history, living it and shaping it" (127). Her words became a manifesto. What emerged was a new way of thinking about gender. Instead of accepting feminine identity as natural and essential, historians and other social scientists treated it as constructed. The feminist movement, which started in the eighties, developed a specific form for women's history, began rewriting in an alternative method, made gender difference a key to the analysis of social relation. Stimulated directly or indirectly by the women's movement, historians have not only documented the lives of women in various countries and periods, but they have charted the changes in the economic, social, educational and political positions of women as well. As the field of women's history took shape in the 1970's and early 1980's, the aversion to biography as a historical genre and to the study of women who did not fit notions of contemporary feminism kept many biographers underground.

Gerda Lerner's warning as stated in "Placing Women in History: a 1975 Perspective" that "the history of notable women is the history of exceptional, even deviant woman, and does not describe the experience and history of the mass of women" (357) illustrates the generally accepted caution. Some feminist historians, however, ignored this warning, though many worked in the shadows. In the last few years or so in India, corresponding with an upswing in both the popularity and acceptability of biography, women have published first-rate biographies, providing models and suggesting new directions. The invisibility of women's history doesn't mean the absence of women's history. An extraordinary number of autobiographies were written in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Many of these texts are personal testimony of the new sense of worth these women experienced as 'individuals'. Autobiographies and memoirs of Pandit Ramabai, Cornelia Sorabji, give a glimpse of the many faceted struggles involved. Theirs were records of the politically significant struggle of women caught between the public gestures of the new westernized men they were married to, and the personal lives that were bound anew into private spheres. The extracts from the biographies of Binodini Das and Hamsa Wadkar show their struggles to make a living and survive in the male world of theatre and cinema. Muktabai, Tarabai Shinde and Rokeya Hussian added new dimensions to the sculpting of new woman.

Nevertheless, multiple biographies are written about the same person. For instance, several biographies have been written about Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, despite the fact that she wrote her own autobiography titled *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces* (1986). However, Reena Nanda's valuable political biography of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay falls silent when it comes to the personal facets of Kamaladevi's life. A biography of any political figure needs to balance equally the personal and political. Therefore one needs to read this biography with Kamaladevi's autobiography, aptly titled *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces*. In such cases the sub-text becomes as significant as the visible text. There are numerous volumes of short biographical sketches of other Indian women - *Great Women of India, Eminent Women of*

India, Women Pioneers in the Indian Renaissance, and many more. In India, biographies of Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, and the multiple biographies of Indira Gandhi occupy the spectrum to some degree. There is no reason why women's biographies should be written only by women, but often this is so. This may be because women find the lives of other women interesting and can empathise with them.

India has a long and strong tradition of oral history, but a much weaker and more discontinuous tradition of written history. The result is that in much of the kind of biographies, the content is weak, due to lack of proper documentation. And, then the assemblage themselves of such biographies provide the opportunity of opening new windows on the history of the times. For some, biography becomes a way of illuminating history. In most biographies, history is sketched into the background. For case in point the Nehru family men and women, to write about them it is necessary to understand the events of the period and the individuals, because politics was central to them; politics amalgamated into their lives. All of them were not working in a political void. To a certain extent they were shaping events as much as events were shaping them. The need was to explain the logic and the working of their decisions. In such an approach, a biography is a study of time not just a person. Sometimes it is a period, not a person that is unknown.

It hardly needs to be stressed that a biography is neither a mere exercise in literature nor a branch of history. Biography is a part of literature as it is part of history, if only it is based on well-ascertained data and presented in an objective manner, as far as practicable. Biography is as much a part of literature, as it is of history - it is literature in so far as it recreates the life of the person it is concerned with; it is history when it purveys details of his life. The genesis of biography is as old as that of history.

Both 'History' and 'Biography' theorize a dialectical relationship between life (as information) and art (as an expression of subjectivity). Both have a 'truth' claim and are represented as forms of narratives. Above all, even a complex history should yield points of significance that would enable us to understand and interpret in its light events, movements, and large sections of time. Biographies, of course, have an important though not exclusive role in the construction of the kind of history evoked in the literal sense. But, as an unwritten rule, is not the biography composed around the life of a 'man' or a 'woman' of some significance? And, the investment of significance is precisely the point where the discipline of history is provoked into internal conflict. Few scholars also hold a view that biography as history can truly make a signal contribution to the story of the nation. It has been pointed out that biography can easily slip into hagiography. But biography and hagiography, if the facts are stated, at least some picture will emerge of the person's life and, more importantly, of the times.

Nevertheless, a biography is written about or around a person, and is obliged to privilege the experiential, the particular, and the expression of the 'self' in everyday practice. The coherence of the biography is believed to lie in the specific mode of representing the 'experiencing consciousnesses in relation to a larger historical frame or, a resemblance of one.

Then the question takes place to what extent is the writing of biographies an indigenous literary tradition in India? In the Indian Scenario *Harshacharita* of Banabhatta, written in the first quarter of the seventh century is regarded as the earliest biographies in Indian history. The medieval period in the north India witnessed the arrival of a tradition of writing biographies in Persian. Writing biographies was definitely part of Mughal literary traditions. The most striking biography written in the peninsular India was *Madhuravijayam* written by Ganga Devi during the fifteenth century, the Saluva phase of the Vijaynagar era. It is to be noted at the outset that these texts do not fit into the western model of biography.

Another thread of inquiry often encountered is why do biographies in the Indian context end up hagiographies? Ramachandra Guha looks at this aspect vital as he writes in an article titled "Lives in Need of Authors: Why South Asians Don't Write Good Biographies" (2002) that: "

we know how to burn our dead with reverence...but not to evaluate, judge or honour them....This is a world governed by deference, not discrimination." (32). Thus, Guha locates the problem of impoverished biographies in the obsession with idolization and iconisation that characterizes most biographies and biographers.

Political profiles and biographies are very much a part of the imperial art of history-writing. A biography of any political figure needs to balance equally the personal and the political. One could ask: are silences in political biographies another indication of the tendency among Indian biographers to express only that which is laudable and looks good in print, leaving out all grey areas of their subjects' lives? As discussed earlier a biography is written about or around a person, and is obliged to privilege the experiential, the particular, and the expression of the 'self' in everyday practice. The coherence of the biography is believed to lie in the specific mode of representing the experiencing consciousnesses in relation to a larger historical frame or, a semblance of one. On the other hand Autobiography is an act of self-presentation. It is a performance in which candour is fused with deception, and display alternates with concealment. As stated by Bhiku Parekh in *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse* (1999), Autobiography could be defined as "a history of a life recollected, interpreted and reflected upon from the clam vantage points of the present." (275) It can be seen as a genre that narrativises 'self – realisation'; this 'self' being the representation of a unique self-characterized by being historical, meditative and reflective. Such a genre fails to exist in Indian history well until the very far end of the nineteenth century; if not actually at the beginning of the twentieth century. This is, however, a debatable position. For the only reason that the theory demands an 'I' as a pre-requisite to write an autobiography. The genre of autobiography is well developed in the western context with clear sub-generic distinctions drawn between autobiography, memoirs and reminiscence. In the Indian scenario, autobiography writing, was certainly being inspired from outside, was an appropriation of the genre, it would be insignificant to make these sub-genres distinctions in the Indian context. Still memoirs, anecdotes, reminiscences and reflections often parade themselves as auto/biographies on the Indian scene.

To conclude, by studying the status of women in literature and the works of women authors, feminist critics have unveiled some of the biases at work in traditional approaches to literature. Feminists question the learning imparted by traditional humanism which states that, as human beings, we all share basic universal values, and that, although women's and men's experience

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