



A STUDY ON SOCIO CULTURAL HISTORY IN INDIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

Autobiography is a story of the writer's own life in which he looks back towards his past at a certain point in his life and creates the character of his own self with the help of his memory. From the autobiographies of the suppressed people one comes to know about the character of the author how he faced the difficulties and conflicts of his life and with what stuff his personality is formed. Yet while narrating the experiences of his life the author gives an objective analysis of his life and it is due to such objectivity and disinterestedness his autobiography successfully creates the image of his self in conflict with oppressive social and cultural conditions. Autobiography presents as untroubled a reflection of identity as the surface of a mirror can provide. The corresponding assumption has been that autobiography is a transparency through which we perceive the life, unmediated and undistorted. The same assumption had been made about photographic self-portraits.

KEYWORDS

AUTOBIOGRAPHY, LITERATURE. SOCIO CULTURAL, INDIAN

Autobiography is to be distinguished from memoir, in which the emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author knew or had opportunity to observe and experience. Private diary or journal, which is a day-to-day record of the events in a person's life, written for personal use and pleasure, with little or no thought of publication are also important sources. An autobiographer is expected to be impersonal and objective in self-portrayal. A memoirist may sound more personal and subjective. The voice of any auto/biographical work brings together narration and interpretation of the author. The most important aspect of an autobiography is the individuality of the experience and expression. The narrative is a powerful way of making meaning out of experiences. It is the means by which the autobiographer understands and expresses his own identity. Autobiographies have always been a popular form of writing because the unique experiences of an individual provide the readers a sense of joy in knowing others in addition to instructional values contained in them. Self centeredness is an important characteristic of an autobiography. Yet, an autobiographer does never limit the scope of his life only to personal things and goes on explaining the contexts. An autobiography reflects how the personal and public spheres of life relate to and effect one another. In the autobiographies of public figures, the writers 'selves get dissolved in narrating other events, characters and places. An autobiography being a life-history is surely associated with reality. Fact is the soul of it. There is a process of selection and rejection of facts with emphasis on certain aspects of life. The autobiographer seeks genesis of his/her present condition and considers only those facts helpful in the evolution of the self. It recreates life through the creative arrangement of facts. Likewise, the primary task of a historian is to understand the past, constituted of events and experiences. But an autobiographer's treatment of fact is quite different from that of a historian. A historian is more concerned with the results and explanation of events while an autobiographer is concerned with the events themselves.

Autobiography as a distinct mode of literary expression is yet to be recognized. There is a total dearth of critical literature on the subject. The writing of autobiographies is of recent origin in our country and is essentially the result of English education. The autobiography, the memoir, diary and letter writing constitute what is termed literature of self-revelation. The memoir is mainly concerned with the affair of a select number of people often in high society. An autobiography is a literature of personal revelation and its main interest lies in conscious or unconscious self-portrayal by the author. The writer must not give an account of his external life and largely in chronological order, but he must give an account of his inner life. i.e. Sensation. The ideas and emotions that keep floating not only through his/ her conscious self, but also through the unconscious one. Both this external and internal life should find a literary expression and this need not only command over language but also an artistic self-control and ordering of material. Different social, cultural, literary, and political others that have gone in to the making of author's personality should be fully brought out without any minimization. The autobiography depicts the hidden form of inwardness and the writer has to establish the portrait of the self in

the public eye. One has to consider whether a woman reveals her unique self-indulges in self-exploration.

In the autobiographical memory conversations reported in Reese & Fivush (2008) prioritise the causal connectivity of events (it happened) that is the hallmark of narrative, prompted by the mother's question: 'Yes, the yellow spade broke, and what happened?' (204). The daughter's response, 'um, we had to um dig with the other end of the yellow bit one' (204), indicates that the episode focus remains on the event of spade-digging as experienced by the child, and that the integration of this event into a causal narrative is reinforced (Boyer, 2009). A similarly structured sentence used in another study likewise presupposes a narrative generic schema for a childhood autobiographical memory and a defined topic focus: 'Your mum told me that you went to the glow worm caves, but she didn't tell me what happened' (Reese & Newcombe, 2007, 1158). These questions encourage the reporting of event-specific memories, and more broadly demonstrate how responsive memory is to cues (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000, Nelson & Fivush, 2004). They prompt the relational ordering of events, and foreground narrative coherence.

Autobiographical remembering is a central part of the individual's sense of self. Both memory and self are constructed through forms of social interactions and/or cultural frameworks that lead to the formation of an autobiographical narrative. Through autobiographical narratives rich with explanatory and evaluative frameworks that weave together people, places, and events imbued with psychological states, intentions, and motivations, we create stories that define who we are in time and place and in relation to others. Obviously, autobiographical memory and autobiographical narratives are not the same; memories are multi-modal, and include information encoded and stored at multiple levels (e.g., implicit and explicit, episodic and semantic); recent models of autobiographical memories suggest that autobiographical memories are highly dynamic; each time a memory is brought to mind, it is reconstructed in the moment to serve the goals of the current situation. Narratives are culturally canonical linguistic forms that modulate the organisation of experienced events. Narratives provide a sequential organisation that specifies the unfolding of an event along temporal lines, but even more so, narratives provide an explanatory and evaluative framework for understanding how and why events unfold as they do. Narratives move beyond a simple script or chronology to imbue a sequence of actions with causal links that explain why one action follows another, and, critically, does so within a folk psychology that interweaves actions in the world with human thoughts, motivations, and emotions. Thus a narrative provides an account of what happened that is dense with interpersonal meaning and evaluation. Clearly, language is a critical tool for organizing and expressing the past through narratives. Following from a sociocultural perspective, language allows both for social transmission of culturally constructed ideas and ideals, and for providing new ways of organising and representing personal experience. It is through language that we share our past, and it is through language that we construct socially mediated interpretations and evaluations of the past. It is as we share

the past with others through language that events of the past take on different meanings and different evaluations. Thus there is a dialectical relation between memory and narrative, in that the ways in which the past is shared in social interaction will change the way in which the past is subsequently understood and remembered by the individual. Although memories are not simply linguistically represented, linguistically based narratives become a critical filter through which our memories evolve. The role of language as a tool in the formation of both autobiographical narratives and evolving autobiographical memories suggests that how and what is narrated about the past is pivotal for what is remembered. Narratives emerge in social interactions, in which certain events, and especially certain interpretations and evaluations of events, will be validated. Each individual is situated in a particular place in cultural and historical time, in which specific enduring aspects of the individual are valued in particular ways, e.g., race, gender, class. Being an individual of a particular race, gender, and class provides and denies access to particular aspects of experience. Societal roles that are imbued with power have the opportunity to shape the culturally shared narrative that is both normative and prescriptive. Culturally canonical, or dominant, narratives provide a culturally shared understanding of the shape of a life and how a life is to be understood, and in this way cultural narratives provide authority to define a culturally appropriate narrative of a life, and the power to validate certain narratives over others. From this perspective, power gives voice.

Autobiography is not whether the subject is representative, whatever that may mean, but rather what is it that we might learn from a study of a specific life. Autobiography, of course, is not the only form of historical writing, but it does provide a valuable perspective.

Autobiography has been considered as outside the discipline of history by many historians. Since the chronological framework of the study is pre-determined, given the subject's life, it has been argued, it does not meet the fundamental historical test of analyzing historical change across time. Others, particularly literary critics, have suggested that the biographical emphasis on the personal is itself, at root, invalid. This comment instead suggests that the recent turn to Autobiography in labor and social history is most welcome, for it creates the possibility of a broader understanding of the interplay between an individual and social forces beyond one's ability to control. But to write a social Autobiography demands a disciplinary rigor and thorough research effort that treats equally seriously both the subject and the context that shapes that life. Also, it is not entirely clear how much of the autobiographical recall differences between the older and younger cohort are due to societal norms and standards at the time the self was formed (early childhood) and how much of the differences might be due to age-related ways of remembering. Longitudinal studies would be necessary to explore how autobiographical remembering changes over the lifespan and to explore the possibility of age-related cognitive patterns of autobiographical memory functioning.

Autobiographical remembering not only as being subject to the dynamic interplay between memory, self and culture, but also to socio-historical changes over time within the *same* cultural context. Cross-cultural studies concerning the onset and content of autobiographical memories of adults have been mainly conducted with homogenous age segregated cohorts, living in the same historical time within different cultural environments.

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