“Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter”.

(Wilde 9) \(^1\)

Preoccupation with self is a trait that seems to haunt every artistic creation. One’s desire to see one’s self is, in fact, at the very root of an act of creation. James Olney in his *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* writes:

> Heraclitus was the first, according to historians of Greek philosophy, to declare that every cosmology begins in self-knowledge.

(Olney 4) \(^2\)

However, of all the literary forms, autobiography is held to be the most appropriate genre for advocating the remarkable presence of an all pervasive sense of self. Derived from the Greek *autos* (meaning self), *bios* (meaning life) and *graphein* (meaning to write), the term autobiography refers to a self-written account of the life of a person. According to the French critic Philippe Lejeune, autobiography is a “(R)etrospective prose narrative written by a real
person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.” (Lejeune qtd. in Kumar 10)  

Another critic Estelle Jelinek in an attempt to distinguish a good autobiography from a bad one suggests that a good autobiography must centre exclusively or mostly on the author, not on others; it should be representative of its times, a mirror of the predominant zeitgeist; the autobiographer should be self-aware, a seeker after self-knowledge; he/she must aim to explore, not to exhort; and his/her autobiography should be an effort to give meaning to some personal mythos, etc. 

(Jelinek qtd. in Kumar 11)

In the words of James Olney, “(A)utobiography is precisely an attempt to describe a lifework, in matter and content as well.” (Olney 3) He further analyzes the term as he says:

What one seeks in reading autobiography is not a date, a name, or a place, but a characteristic way of perceiving, of organizing, and of understanding, an individual way of feeling and expressing that one can somehow relate to oneself. 

(Olney 37)

The fact that an individual’s point of view is highlighted by an autobiography is supported by Olney as he comments: “(A)utobiography…is among other things a point of view on the writer’s own past life.” (Olney 42) At the same time, he is also aware that the individual can always be dissociated from his point of view since one cannot understand it as a point of view if one were not in some ways “outside and beyond its limitations.” (Olney 42)
Thus, traditionally speaking, the most important factor that acts as the central force in any autobiography written in the Western context is the idea of individualism. (McKay 175)  

The term autobiography was first made popular by Robert Southey in the *Quarterly Review* in 1809. But the genre has a long history as the practice of autobiographical writing can be traced even in 4th century BC when Plato in his *Seventh Epistle* described a significant period of his life. In fact, many ancient Roman philosophers like Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius referred to several aspects of their lives when they were explaining their philosophical arguments. Similarly, vignettes of personal life-histories are also found in the accounts of some early Roman emperors such as Lutatius, Catulus, Rufus, Caesar and so on. (Kumar 9)  

However, St. Augustine’s *Confession* is regarded as the best known example of autobiographical writings prevalent during the ancient period of history. It was written while Augustine was the Bishop of Hippo—a responsibility that he undertook in AD 396 and continued to execute till his death in AD 430. This fact certainly adds a new dimension to his autobiography since *Confession* as the title suggests is a confessional outpouring of Augustine’s agonized Christian self. His genuflecting gesture is revealed as he entreats God: “I beseech you, grant me to wind round and round in my present memory the spirals of my errors.” (Augustine qtd. in Olney 37)  

But what is remarkable here, is that Augustine, despite invoking God and asking for His forgiveness for his sinful past shows a “heightened awareness of the self.” (Kumar 13)  

According to Scott Berghegger, Augustine “…gives himself agency in his own writing, confessing of the sins of his past but evaluating them within his own heart.” (Berghegger, 1)  

In the opinion of Raj Kumar, it is, perhaps, this assertion of self that inspired critic like Roy Pascal to note in his *Design and Truth in Autobiography* that “with the coming of Augustine’s *Confessions* European civilization witnessed ‘the coming-into-being of a new concept of human personality.’” (Pascal qtd. in Kumar 13)  

However, Augustine’s *Confessions* was followed by several similar works written
by Justin, the Martyr; Hilarious, the Bishop of Poitiers; Gregory of Nazianzus; Ennodius, Paulinus of Pella, Patrick and Saint Teresa. (Kumar 9) These accounts which seem to be the offshoots of the transition of these authors from ignorance to enlightenment due to the impact of Christianity are “…emotionally charged confessions suffused with the spirit of self-discovery and self-pity.” (Kumar 9)

However, the Christian, confessional mode was subsequently replaced by a secular one during the late Middle ages and especially during the Renaissance. Christianity, by then, established its hold over Europe and lost its earlier novelty that inspired a spurt in life-stories written in the manner of confessions. Secular accounts of individual lives appeared in various forms such as diaries, memoirs, chronicles, and journals and played a crucial role in shaping the structure of modern autobiography. A brilliant example of this trend is found in Rousseau’s autobiography-Confessions. Rousseau who was one of the famous philosophers of the French Enlightenment employed a secular subject matter in his autobiography though he retained the mode of confession. The fact that Rousseau was aware of the uniqueness of his work is understood from his comment made at the beginning of the Book One: “I am resolved on an undertaking that had no model and will have no imitator.” (Rousseau qtd. in Kumar 21) However, despite such changes in the writing of life-stories, one cannot say that the genre of spiritual autobiography or confessional accounts was lost in the abyss of oblivion. They were present even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and a very apt example of this is John Bunyan’s Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666). But according to critic William C. Spengemann, the first surge of critical interest in autography which overwhelmed the European reading population appeared in late 19th and early 20th centuries. Spengmann informs that this great surge was possible not merely because of the huge number of autobiographies that were
written and catered to the interested readers, but also due to the publications of numerous critical essays that focused on this particular genre. Along with that, the enthusiasm roused by William Dilthey’s call for writing history out of autobiographical documents also contributed to the flourish of this form of writing. (Smith 3-4) 

In the opinion of critic Sidonie Smith, various social and cultural influences also played immensely significant roles in the creation of this interest. According to Smith, some of these shaping influences are

…the revolutionary movements of the late eighteenth century, with their pressure for greater democratization of society; the preoccupations of an individualism privileged by romanticism and, later, by Victorian notions of evolutionary progress; the Industrial Revolution and its informing myth of the self-made man; the historiographical elaboration of the “great man” thesis; Darwinism, most particularly, social Darwinism, with its emphasis on the survival of the fittest; Freudianism and the analytical methods psychoanalysis brought to bear on self-reflection; and the great outburst of literary activity and of literacy that attended those developments.

(Smith 4)

However, a subsequent wave of interest in the domain of life-writings brought by the second generation of critics shifted its focus from the lives (bios) of the autobiographers to the question of truth-claim inherent in any factual representation of self. This new perspective certainly adds new complexities to the genre. To quote Sidonie Smith:

Since autobiography is understood to be a process through which the autobiographer struggles to shape an “identity” out of amorphous subjectivity, the critic becomes a psychoanalyst of sorts, interpreting the truth of an autobiography in its psychological dimensions rather than in its factual or moral ones.

(Smith 5)
The debate among the literary critics over the categorization of autobiography as ‘fact’ or ‘fiction’ is not an issue that can be easily resolved. A clear division between ‘truthful’ scientific study and ‘imaginative’ literary writings is found in Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* as Coleridge informs that there is “species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth.” (Coleridge qtd. in Mansell 62) 21 This tradition of distinguishing between the fixed, objective scientific terms and subjective, fictitious literary terms was followed by later critics such as René Wellek and Austin Warren, Cleaneth Brooks and Northop Frye. The great divide which Ralph W. Rader describes as the “fundamental contrast between the fictional and the factual narrative modes” (Rader qtd. in Mansell 62) 22 renders autobiography a problematic literary genre. Autobiography, which is supposed to be an account of one’s life-events as they really happened is often counted as a factual literary type (Shumaker qtd. in Mansell 63)23 According to critic Roy Pascal, while we read autobiographies “[W]e like to ask, does the author’s representation of himself…correspond to what we can get to know of him through other evidence? It is a question that can never be asked regarding a work of art.” (Pascal qtd. in Mansell 64)24 The confusion over finding the ‘right’ shelf for an autobiography is seldom resolved because often the dividing line between ‘facts’ and ‘fiction’ remains blurred. Should *David Copperfield* be treated as an imaginative creation of Dickens’ mind? How much truth does Rousseau’s statement bear while in *Confessions* he states: “…My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself”? (Rousseau qtd. in Eakin 4)25 Such dilemma reminds us of Frye’s comment who says: “an autobiography coming into a library would be classified as nonfiction if the librarian believed the author, and as fiction if she thought he was lying.” (Frye qtd. in Mansell 63)26 So it is the author’s intention and our readiness to accept the narrated events as truths which are deemed to be of paramount importance in the ‘construction’ of an autobiography. But is it
possible for the words of an autobiography to capture the entirety of a life lived? Is it feasible to produce a verbatim representation of the past? According to Eakin, “…memory and imagination become so intimately complementary in the autobiographical act that it is usually impossible for autobiographers and their readers to distinguish between them in practice.” (Eakin 6)²⁷ In fact, referring to twentieth century autobiographers, Eakin informs that those autobiographers who stopped considering memory as a “convenient repository in which the past is preserved inviolate, ready for the inspection of retrospect at any future date”, no longer accept that “…autobiography can offer a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past.” (Eakin 5)²⁸ Instead, autobiography, in their opinion, “…expresses the play of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness.” (Eakin 5)²⁹ Thus the autobiographical truth which in Eakin’s proposition is “not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation” (Eakin 3)³⁰ loses its claim of fact-based veracity and stands in a twilight zone between the real and the fictitious. In his narrative So Long, See You Tomorrow (1980), William Maxwell focuses on the nature of autobiographical truth and the role of memory which is in a continuous state of flux and comments: “…in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw.”(Eakin 6)³¹ This issue of ‘constructing’ truth with what may not be called ‘true’ in the strict sense of the term is further reinforced by the fact that autobiographers do ‘select’ the events of the past before presenting them to their readers. In Pascal’s words, “[A]utobiography means…selection in face of the endless complexity of life, selection of facts, distribution of emphases, choice of expression.” (Pascal qtd. in Mansell 69)³² According to Sidonie Smith, “[A]utobiography becomes both the process and the product of assigning meaning to a series of experiences, after they have taken place, by means of emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, omission.” (Smith 45)³³ Moreover, an autobiographer not only selects past incidents but also fictionalizes them in a
way that seems more convenient to him. Comparing them to novelists, Mansell suggests that the autobiographers select and alter their personal experiences “…so as to create a structure of words that answers to an inner vision or purpose of some kind.” (Mansell 70)\textsuperscript{34} Thus the practice of omission and alteration propelled by an autobiographer’s idiosyncratic mental process or inner censors becomes an integral part of the ‘production’ of an autobiography. Elaborating on this point, Sidonie Smith writes:

\begin{quote}
The play of seeking, choosing, discarding words and stories that suggest, approximate but never recapture the past is what Elizabeth W. Bruss calls the ‘autobiographical act’; an interpretation of life that invests the past and the ‘self’ with coherence and meaning that may not have been evident before the act of writing itself.
\end{quote}

(Smith 45-46)\textsuperscript{35}

Smith also highlights the complicity of the readers in this act of ‘creation’ as she says:

\begin{quote}
The reader allows the autobiographer to create her fiction, knowing that it is, in Francis R. Hart’s phrase, either ‘an inductive invention’ or ‘an intentional creation’ because every life contains within it multiple discourses on discourses, stories on stories.
\end{quote}

(Smith 46)\textsuperscript{36}

There is disagreement, though, among critics regarding the span of this second surge of interest in autobiographical writings. While James Olney traces it to 1956, Spengemann believes that this surge can be traced till 1970s and he argues that most of the work on autobiographical writings done before 1970, including Gusdorf’s famous article “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” remained largely unknown.
However, the domain of critical theories concerning autobiography became more complex and problematic with the third generation of critics—the structuralists and the post-structuralists who “challenged the notion of referentiality and undermined comfortable assumptions about an informing ‘I.’” (Smith 5) Focusing on the stance of these critics, Smith comments:

> The autobiographical text becomes a narrative artifice, privileging a presence, or identity, that does not exist outside language. Given the very nature of language, embedded in the text lie alternative or deferred identities that constantly subvert any pretensions of truthfulness.

(Smith 5)

Such an ideological position that negates the existence of one authoritative speaker or an absolute self and questions the very nature of truth enunciated in the pages of autobiography shatters “...the epistemological certainties and ontological legitimacy of... ‘master narratives’ of the West, autobiography among them.” (Smith 6) The new concern, now, becomes the graphia which Barbara Johnson succinctly describes as “…the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself.” (Johnson qtd. in Smith 5-6) The critical focus, once again, changes and moves during this phase to the readers who are now considered to be the ‘actual’ creators of the text. Such a paradoxical position developed by poststructuralist assumptions regarding the impossibility of recovering an ‘absolute’ or ‘complete’ meaning out of the words of an autobiographer, turns the reader into a creator who brings her/his cultural codes in the process of creation. But even the identity of an ‘actual reader’ gets problematized since Lacanian perspective informs that “‘you’ and ‘me’ are always “…subjects in process, always products of language, therefore not stable or stationary ‘selves…” (Smith 6) The notion of self as a “unified and unique core isolable from society and ‘representable’ in autobiography” (Smith
Chapter: Six Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?

48) is further critiqued by Mikhail Bakhtin who challenging the philosophical and psychological discourses prevalent in the West about the ‘self’ argues that autobiographical self is created by the “polyphonic voices of discourse” (Smith 48). According to Bakhtin, social man is surrounded by ideological phenomena, by...words in the multifarious forms of their realization (sounds, writing and the others), by scientific statements, religious symbols and beliefs, works of art, and so on. All of these things in their totality comprise the ideological environment...And man’s consciousness lives and develops in this environment. Human consciousness does not come into contact with existence directly, but through the medium of the surrounding ideological world...In fact, the individual consciousness can only become a consciousness by being realized in the forms of the ideological environment proper to it: in language, in conventionalized gesture, in artistic image, in myth, and so on.

(Bakhtin qtd. in Smith 48) 44

While such ideological complexities lead Philippe Lejeune to term autobiography as a mode of reading as well as writing, they make Janet Varner Gunn situate her “theory of autobiography in both moments of reading-‘by the autobiographer who, in effect, is ‘reading’ his or her life; and by the reader of the autobiographical text’, who is also in the encounter with the text, rereading his or her life by association.” (Smith 6) 45 Thus the conventional notion of an autobiographical self which as a consequence of the “essentialist ideology of individualism” (Smith 48) is usually viewed as one, fixed, unified whole is gradually turned to be insistently fluid in the hands of the twentieth century autobiographers and critics. In addition to this idea of self as a “fictive structure” (Eakin 3) 47 or a “product of self-invention” (Eakin 190) 48 , the notion of amalgamation of facts and fiction leads to the negation of the assumption that autobiography is a document of
unadulterated truth recording verbatim the experiences encountered by a unique, unified individual self.

Yet, despite such interesting ideas and constant experimentations that provoke ambiguous, unsettling questions about an autobiography’s ability to tell ‘truth’, one cannot deny the responsibility that this genre still has to present facts in order to narrate its ‘story’. The very act of designating a narrative as an autobiography does evoke an expectation of knowing nothing but the whole truth and readers are still overcome by such a feeling though they are well aware of the fictionality that is intrinsic to any narrative about self. According to Käte Hamburger, “‘an innate characteristic of every first-person narrative’ is that ‘it posits itself as non-fiction, i.e., as a historical document,’ a ‘reality statement.’” (Hamburger qtd. in Mansell 63-64)\(^{49}\) Autobiography is still considered to be outside the purview of imaginative literature and in Barrett J. Mandel’s opinion, the feature that sets it apart from other kinds of literature is the ‘truth’ that it is avowed to tell. (Mansell 63)\(^{50}\) Hence, the appeal of an autobiography to its readers is still irresistible. Contrary to general belief that the popularity of this genre rests on its ability to provide us with “recorded gossips” (Olney vii)\(^{51}\), the charm of an autobiography lies in the fact that it “…brings an increased awareness, through an understanding of another life in another time and place, of the nature of our own selves and our share in the human condition.” (Olney vii)\(^{52}\) Ranjana Harish in her article “Authority of Experience: Autobiography as ‘Scriptotherapy’”, emphasizes on the self-redeeming quality of autobiography. Having praised the socio-cultural and psychological significance of autobiography, she focuses on the cathartic impact of this genre as she says: “…I could see how Aristotle’s insistence on catharsis as a safety-valve remained relevant even after so many centuries.” (Harish 9)\(^{53}\) In fact, Harish refers to the notion of scriptotherapy introduced by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their book entitled *Reading Autobiography* (2001). The
term which was coined by Suzett A. Henke refers to the therapeutic value of autobiography. Smith and Watson write:

> Speaking or writing about trauma becomes a process through which the narrator finds words to give voice to what was previously unspeakable. Thus narrator of trauma often testifies the therapeutic effect of telling or writing a story, acknowledging how the process of writing has changed the narrator and the life story itself.

(Smith and Watson qtd. in Harish 10)\(^{54}\)

Such an outlet for self-healing results in a better and mature understanding of life. According to Smith and Watson, “people read other people’s narratives as prods to self-understanding, self-improvement, and self-healing.” (Smith and Watson qtd. in Harish 7)\(^{55}\) In simpler terms, Olney, too, underscores the significance of autobiography as he says, “…behind the question “What is man?” lies another, more insistent question—“How shall I live?” If autobiography can advance our understanding of that question, and I think it can, then it is a very valuable literature indeed.” (Olney xi)\(^{56}\)

However, the question that plagues a contemporary reader of autobiography is the genre’s ability in expressing the experiences of those who belong to the margins of society. It is generally observed that the ‘self’ that occupies the centre-stage in an autobiography is often the self of the male protagonist who is usually deemed to be the representative of the dominant social discourse. This tendency to exclude the ‘other’ from the sphere of artistic representation renders the marginalized beings invisible or located far from the loud proclamation of individual self pronounced through the pages of an autobiography. A glaring example of this absence is seen in the domain of women’s literature. Women have always been denied access to their own
selves, their own desires and control over their own bodies. They have been forced to remain “unrepresented and unrepresentable” (Smith 49)\(^57\) while the genre of (masculine) autobiography is defined by the presence of an “essential and inviolable self” (Brodzki and Schenck 5)\(^58\) of a man. Such a precarious situation creates what Sidonie Smith calls “double bind” since women writers, as long as, “…remain silent, ..will be outside the historical process. But if they begin to speak and write as men do, they will enter history subdued and alienated.” (Smith 18)\(^59\) Yet, the urgency for women to enter the realm of representation is felt as one remembers What J.S. Mill said in *The Subjection of Women*:

> We may safely assert that the knowledge men acquire of women, even as they have been and are, without reference to what they might be, is wretchedly imperfect and superficial and will always be so until women themselves have told all they have to tell.  

(Mill qtd. in Smith 3)\(^60\)

According to critics, one important feature of women’s autobiographies is its relationship with others. In Mary G. Mason’s words, “the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other’”(Mason qtd. in Green 189)\(^61\) Emphasizing on the relational aspect of women’s writings, Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* comments that “…because of the nature of mother-daughter relationship, women’s sense of self is continuous with others and that, unlike men, women experience themselves relationally.” (Chodorow qtd. in Green 189)\(^62\) Similarly, women’s autobiographies throw another challenge at the conventional assumptions of (masculine) autobiography as they focus on the personal, domestic sphere rather than the public domain of social and political significance which forms the core of any male
It is interesting to note here that autobiographies written by those women who participated in public life also delineate the private sphere in considerably minute details. This practice is in stark contrast with the androcentric parameters that hardly accept the experiences of women as the appropriate content for autobiographies and hence label women’s life-narratives as marginal or inferior texts. But following Gerda Lerner’s suggestion, we can also infer that women’s writings can bring a change in the perspective towards the notion of historical significance which has always been “defined by men and in relation to male-dominated activities.” (Green 190) The masculine perspective inherent in the structure of an autobiography is further critiqued as women’s life stories lying “…outside the dominant culture’s boundaries in a spatial, experiential, and metaphysical ‘no-man’s-land’” (Showalter qtd. in Smith 8-9) exhibit an apparent formlessness. These narratives as Estelle Jelinek points out are “often not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary” (Green 190) and thus stand in opposition to the patriarchal idea of the linear progression of a logical and structured thought-pattern celebrated in (masculine) autobiographies. In Jelinek’s opinions, this discontinuous form seems to reflect the “fragmented, interrupted and formless nature of their [women’s] lives.” (Jelinek qtd. in Green 190) Similarly, other critics, too, emphasize on a woman writer’s location outside representation as “absence, negativity,….or at best a lesser man” (Moi qtd. in Smith 57) and view her search for a new language as a result of her effort to tell her story which has always remained suppressed by the dominant male ideological discourse. Hence, as suggested by Margaret Homans, a woman writer, in her bid to represent herself, may “remember and then reinvest with her own meaning a maternal language…” (Homans qtd. in Smith 58) which in Kristeva’s opinion, embraces “the pre-Oedipal rhythms of the semiotic.” (Smith 58) This undoubtedly reveals how the identity of an autobiographer as a woman brings phenomenal changes in the conventional patterns of autobiography and liberates the genre from
“the ideology of essential selfhood through which it has historically been constituted.” (Smith 58)

It has been observed that the public autobiographies written by women in the West until twentieth century followed the andro-centric tradition of writing as the model for their self-expression. This is evident in the autobiographies written by Kempe, Cavendish, Charke, and Martineau. Yet, a close scrutiny reveals the fine balance that was intricately maintained by these women authors who in spite of conforming to the patriarchal image of womanhood, intelligently devised ways to express their own desires and reveal their experiences as women. The palimpsestic writings of women authors spanning from “Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson”…show how the “surface design” of their works “conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning.” (Gilbert& Guber 73) A similar manifestation of this strategy can also be observed in the autobiography of Margaret Cavendish. Her narrative, though at first reading, seems to be fashioned in accordance with the patriarchal codes of femininity, yet an intense reading between the lines suggests the presence of a more meaningful subtext. Cavendish’s modest declaration within her humbly presented text that “…however …little wit I have, it delights me to scribble it out, and disperse it about” (Cavendish qtd. in Brodzki and Schenck 8) contains a revolutionary zeal to defy the socially scripted feminine roles. While, for a woman, calling attention to her distinctively unique identity was viewed as unfeminine and therefore a matter of great public disgrace, this subtle attempt of Cavendish to assert her own self is certainly a commendable effort. According to Brodzki and Schenck, “Shot through with qualifications--protestations as to her modesty, insistence upon her dependence on her husband--her autobiography is nonetheless an exploration of self-inscription and subjectivity.” (Brodzki and Schenck 8) A woman
autobiographer’s awareness of her own self, her role as the narrator and her place as a woman becomes more pronounced in the twentieth century as the ideologies of modernism and postmodernism shattered not only the notion of individualism but also the hegemonic conception of selfhood. This certainly opened new possibilities for women writers who can now explore more effective and more creative ways of self-expression. Many feminist critics started arguing in favor of including within the domain of autobiography those loosely-structured literary forms such as memoirs, diaries and journals since the fixed boundary of autobiography could no more be seen as the universal form for narrating one’s life-story. An apt example of it is The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas where Gertrude Stein chooses another’s voice to talk about her own life. Such instances of subtlety are also observed in the writings of Virginia Woolf and Anaïs Nin. In Sidonie Smith’s words, “For these women, the masculine autobiographical mode is passé. Rejecting the universalizing ideology of the essential self that erases male and female difference on the one hand and that illegitimizes female forms of self on the other, they pursue a vision of their own. (Smith 175) The significance of women’s autobiography is also underscored by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck as they suggest: “…it should provide the emotional satisfaction historically missing for the female reader, that assurance and consolation that she does indeed exist in the world which a femininity defined in purely textual terms cannot provide.” (Brodzki & Schenck 14) Though the “danger of reverse reification” brought by a separate female tradition cannot be overruled, yet the fact that a feminist reading unfolds layers of meanings is claimed by Brodzki and Schenck as they announce “…to become a feminist reader of autobiography is to become a new kind of subject.” (Brodzki & Schenck 15)

The dwindling sense of relevance of such a canonical literary form as autobiography is also noticed in the life-narratives written by Dalit writers. Opposed to the notion of
Chapter: Six Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?

individualism, these narratives like other marginalized people’s autobiographies emphasize on the significance of community identity. According to Nellie Y. McKay, “(C)ommunity identity permits the rejection of historically diminishing images of self imposed by the dominant culture; it allows marginalized individuals to embrace alternative selves constructed from positive (and more authentic) images of their own creation. Such images...come from the merging of the individual with a collective group identity and not from within the individualist, isolated self.” (McKay 175-176) An echo of this thought is heard in the voices of Afro-American autobiographers, too. The “black self”, as suggested by Stephen Butterfield, “is conceived as a part of a group, with inseparable ‘ties and responsibilities’ to the rest of the group in the creation of the individual self in narrative.” (Butterfield qtd. in McKay 176) Similarly, Dalits who have also been relegated to the margins for centuries articulate their experiences of angst and anger through the collective self of their community. Hence, in spite of carrying the generic title of autobiography, the life-narrative of a Dalit individual is not merely an account of the events of her/his personal life. Instead, embodying the larger experiences of Dalit lives shared by almost all the members of the community, these narratives reflect the agony and aspirations of not one single individual but that of the people of the entire community. The collective voice articulated in Dalit life-narratives stands opposed to an autobiography’s conventional notion of essential individualism and unified selfhood. Moreover, the practice of inscribing the experiences of injustice and pain of a marginalized community flouts the central message of an autobiography which aims to glorify an individual’s self by upholding ‘his’ spectacular achievements. Thus these life- narratives push the rigid boundary of an elitist literary genre like autobiography and demand to be re-defined and re-named. An analysis of the characteristics of Dalit life-narratives proves the relevance of such a claim. It is interesting, though, to note here that despite such structural and thematic constraints, most of the creative endeavors in the field of Dalit literature
were directed to the writings of life stories. Although Dalit autobiographies (as they are often termed) emerged quite late in the context of Indian literature, yet they almost overshadowed other forms of Dalit literary expressions. Perhaps, this popularity grew out of the urge of Dalit writers to portray the grim reality of their lives in a form that claims, though apparently, to tell the ‘truth’.

The tradition of writing life-narratives in India emerged long after it appeared in the West. Banarasidas’ *Ardhakathanaka* (1641) which is written in Hindi verse is considered to be the first Indian autobiography (Kumar 43)\(^7\) though historical evidences suggest the existence of autobiographical writings even before the seventeenth century. Sultan Firoz Shah’s autobiography *Futuhat-i-Firoz Shahi* and Mughal emperor Babur’s *Baburnama* are examples of such writing. However, it is worth mentioning here that while Banarasidas’ autobiography seemed to be a significant work from many aspects, the trend of autobiographical writing did not flourish in India till the arrival of the British. (Kumar 56)\(^8\) A crucial aspect of Indian autobiographies is that these narratives often attain a peculiarly complex characteristic due to the influence of the interrelations of such social categories as caste, class, gender and religion. The historical trajectory of autobiographical writings in India reveals that the mainstream literary scene has always been dominated by the Hindu upper-caste writers and that Dalit life narratives emerged only when the ostracized low-caste people received an opportunity to get education after the independence. Hence, quite expectedly, Hazari’s *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* (1951) which is considered to be the first Dalit autobiography was published three centuries after the publication of the first Indian autobiography- *Ardhakathanaka* (1641). Scholars have diverse opinions about the origin of this genre in the Dalit context. Those who emphasize on the political significance of a Dalit autobiography trace its origin in the writings
and speeches of Babasaheb Ambedkar while Daya Pawar- a noted Dalit writer “traces the origins of the genre to the diary of Kalappa Yeshwant Dhale written during the period 1911-1928”. Rege informs us that Dhale in his diary noted the exploitative nature of caste-stratified society, its violence and also the possibility of resistance through education. The interest in writing autobiographies has no doubt increased with time among the Dalit writers and it created opportunities for the voices of the voiceless to be heard loud and clear. While few Dalit autobiographies such as Hazari’s Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste, Balwant Singh’s An Untouchable in the IAS (1997), Shyamal’s Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor (2001) are written in English, a good number of life-narratives written by Dalit authors have been published in several regional languages of India. Among the translated texts, some significant ones are Laxman Mane’s Upara, Laxman Gaikwad’s Uchalya (Translated into English as The Branded), Sharan Kumar Limbale’s Akkarmashi (Translated into English as The Outcaste), Omprakash Valmiki’s Joothan, Baby Kamble’s Jina Amucha (Translated into English as The Prisons We Broke), Bama’s Karukku and Sangati: Events and so on. The unique place that autobiography holds in Dalit literature is understood from the fact that the 1983 Diwali issue of Asmita Darsha was solely devoted to the discussion of Dalit autobiographies. Moreover, awards were given by Ford Foundation to Daya Pawar (for Baluta) and Laxman Mane (for Upara) to honor their immense contribution not only to Dalit literature but also to Indian literature in general. Besides, Baluta was also made into a film which was financed by Film Finance Development Corporation. The inauguration ceremony of the film screening which was held at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay was written up in ‘Kesari’ – a prestigious Marathi Daily on 26 April, 1981. (Gokhale 327) Explaining the reasons for the popularity of Dalit autobiographies, Arjun Dangle writes:
These autobiographies became famous for several reasons. An autobiography was not restricted to the life of a Dalit writer. It was a delineation of the social system, communalism, injustice, exploitation and of the lives of people who had been subjected to these evils. Written without glossing over any facts, these autobiographies not only enriched Marathi literature but also exposed the many facets of the Indian social system and the social and economic injustice nurtured by it.

(Dangle 255) 83

Thus an interesting aspect of Dalit life narratives comes to the fore as these accounts move far beyond the given patterns of an autobiography. Instead of recording the vicissitudes of an individual life, a Dalit autobiographical writing narrates the lived experiences of the community from which it evolves since a Dalit individual’s personal life-story is inextricably connected with the collective experiences of deprivation and anger of her/his fellow community- members. According to the observations made by Stephen Butterfield, in the context of Afro-American autobiographies, “the self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self.” (Beth Web) 84 Similarly, contrary to the conventional notions of an autobiography, the narrator, in Dalit life narratives, does not remain an isolated self solely engaged in a retrospective narration of his life. Jayshree Gokhale, explains the interrelation between the writer and his community in Dalit autobiographies as she writes: “Through the medium of the autobiography, the unity between the writer and his society is established in an organic fashion; the writer becomes the community…” (Gokhale 327) 85 However, this issue of the relation between self and community raises debates among critics. In Anand Teltumbde’s opinion, these autobiographical narratives are “too individualistic” as they often glorify the authors, romanticize their Dalit backgrounds and thus often fail to represent the collective pain. (Rege 10) 86 But a counter-argument is heard as critic
Gopal Guru asserts that Dalit autobiography is “sociologically illuminating, politically subversive and aesthetically interesting.” (Guru qtd. in Rege 10) \(^{87}\) In his autobiography, *Taral Antaral*, Dalit writer Shankarrao Kharat also makes the same claim:

> Along with being my story, this is the story of a community. My autobiography is the story of the emotional, mental and educational development that an individual, a society, a village has undergone...Most of all, it is the story of the freedom struggle of the Untouchables.

(Kharat qtd. in Gokhale 327) \(^{88}\)

Most of the Dalit autobiographers echo what Kharat has said about the representation of a collective self in *Taral Antaral*. It can be seen even in Hazari’s autobiography which privileges the community’s history of suffering over personal sorrow because “…the question”, as Laxman Mane suggests, “is not of an individual. The question is of hundreds of thousands who are living in slums, on pavements, on the outskirts of villages…They have neither work, nor opportunities, neither facilities nor support, neither shelter nor protection. They do not have even two meals a day!” (Mane qtd. in Kumar 182) \(^{89}\) Hazari writes:

> …Our livelihood came from the work we did in the town, cleaning the market, disposing of the dead animals, and, above all, looking after the rich Hindu and Muslim households...As soon as an animal such as a cow, horse, or goat died, we brought it to a field to skin it. We took the meat for cooking and eating, and the skin when dry to be sold. We left the carcass for the vultures to clean, and, when the vultures had finished, we collected the bones, which we sold.

(Hazari qtd. in Kumar 162) \(^{90}\)
The issue of the pitiable condition of Dalit community raised by Hazari has become a recurring theme of autobiographies written by Dalit authors till this day. In *Upara* (first published in Marathi in 1984), Laxman Mane who himself belonged to the nomadic *kaikadis* community depicts a harrowing picture of poverty and oppression. A brief excerpt from his autobiography narrating the desperate fight for food after a feast reveals the frightening reality of Dalit lives:

Then we would be on the lookout to find out when the guests were going to get up….There would be a pile of plates made of jackfruit tree leaves with the leftovers. We would rush and pounce upon them. Whatever eatable came to our hand, we would grab it and put it in a piece of cloth. We had to finish our job before these plates were licked clean by the street dogs. Then, tying our ‘loot’ in a piece of cloth and abusing each other, we would return home.

(Mane qtd. in Kumar 181)

A similar account was narrated by renowned Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki in his autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*. Valmiki’s description of eating *joothan* or the remnants left on the plate of another person indicates the magnitude of poverty and suffering of not just the family of the author but also that of the entire *Chuhra* or *Chamar* community to which the author belongs. Few lines from his autobiography prove the point. Valmiki writes:

During a wedding, when the guests and the baratis, the bridegroom’s party, were eating their meals the Chuhras would sit outside with huge baskets. After the baratis had eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf-plates were put in the Chuhras baskets, which they took home, to save the joothan sticking to them. The little pieces of pooris, bits of sweetmeats, and a little bit of vegetable were enough to make them happy. The joothan was eaten with a lot of relish. The bridegroom’s guests who didn’t leave enough scraps on their pattals were denounced as gluttons… During the marriage season,
Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?

our elders narrated, in thrilled voices, stories of the baratis that had left several months of joohan.

(Valmiki 9)\textsuperscript{92}

These images of extreme poverty, hunger, and violence are so pervasive in Dalit writings that any randomly chosen passages picked from the life-narratives written by two Dalit authors will generally reveal a similar picture of suffering. They all narrate about the humiliation of exclusion endured by the entire community and whatever differences that exist between two Dalit autobiographies seem to occur only in the topographical details, the names of the characters and in the manners of presentation. However, these life narratives also have a political purpose to serve as they create awareness among people and motivate both Dalits and non-Dalits readers to participate in the ongoing campaign against caste discrimination and exploitation. A brilliant example of the subversive quality of Dalit life-narratives is found in Laxman Gaikwad’s \textit{Uchalya} (Translated into English as \textit{The Branded}) which is more an “…anthropological account of the uchalya community” (Kumar 200)\textsuperscript{93} than the author’s personal life-story. The \textit{uchalya} community to which Gaikwad belongs is considered to be a thieving community by the mainstream Indian society. People hailing from this community still have to bear the repercussions of being branded as criminals though the provisions of the Criminal Tribes’ Act of 1871 which marked them as criminals have now become defunct after the independence. Pointing at the double standards of a hypocritical and caste-prejudiced Indian society, Gaikwad writes:

\begin{quote}
Here, on the one hand, is a tribe that, having been denied all lawful living, is forced to resort to thieving and pilfering to satisfy the basic wants-hunger and shelter. There, on the other hand, are the so-called respected and educated people brazenly indulging in looting and amassing crores of rupees. Ironically not those who
pile up crores by sheer corruption and nepotism, but those who pilfer a paltry sum of ten or fifteen rupees just for their daily bread are branded as thieves and treated with leperous disdain.

(Gaikwad qtd. in Kumar 201) 94

Thus Dalit life-narratives are far from being the satiated accounts of life viewed in retrospect. They are not as Arun Prabha Mukherjee argues, “‘sob stories’ but stories of anger against injustice.” (Rege 10) 95 These documents of protest are written with an overt purpose of drawing the attention of the world to the burning issues of caste segregation and caste violence. Therefore, these narratives are not just replete with instances that focus on victimhood. They are also afire with revolutionary zeal and are pregnant with the possibility of creating a better world. A glimpse of it can be seen in Mane’s *Upara* where Mane being extremely disgusted with the atrocious and shameless Indian social system utters a furious war cry. His words breathe frustration and anger as he says:

I thought of throwing a bomb on the Parliament and do away with this disease of poverty, once and for all. And, in fact, I dreamt that I had thrown a bomb on the Parliament which I imagined to be the ‘government of the people’ for the poor and oppressed people like me, and I saw it going to pieces…The truth is that I was just waiting to explode myself like a volcano buried under tons of soil. When someone talked about the reservations of the B.C. posts, I felt like strangling him. They were all hypocrites. I felt that I should tear off the masks of these people.

(Mane qtd. in Kumar 183) 96

Thus the very nature and purposes of Dalit autobiographies raise a significant question in the academia about the generic identity of these narratives. Can these life stories be called autobiographies in the true sense of the term? Or, should they be treated more as ethnographic
accounts documenting a community’s collective existence, their culture, and social practices? This question becomes relevant in the context of Untouchable: An Indian Life History—an orally transmitted narrative “…collected in Oriya and then translated into English by James M Freeman, an American anthropologist.” (Kumar 168) In this narrative, Muli, a poor Dalit man hailing from bauris—an untouchable caste group—oral narrated the ‘story’ of his life which in a way points at the insecurity and vulnerability of his community. Muli’s short stints as a pimp, a sharecropper and as a small businessman may not be seen as a stray individual’s checkered career if we remember that the bauris “…did not have a fixed traditional occupation at least till the seventies of the twentieth century.” (Kumar 171) They mostly worked as daily wage labourers and earned their living by doing such odd jobs as cutting stones, building roads and weaving. Muli’s life history, thus, reflects the precarious existence of this landless community whose ‘polluted’ social status due to their low caste identity turned the possibility of social mobility through education and employment into a distant dream. (Kumar 171) The portrayal of sub-human existence that is usually present in all Dalit life-narratives is also found in Muli’s narrative. Recounting the abysmal poverty in which he and his family members had to live, Muli says:

We were always hungry; most of the time we starved. Father’s income alone was insufficient to feed us. Because mother was usually pregnant or nursing babies, she rarely worked in the fields. We ate whatever we could find: snails from the river, leaves, and rice from the fields….we ate hot cooked rice only very rarely, once every two weeks, and it was a great feast for us.  

(Freeman qtd. in Kumar 172)

The picture of such grim reality was certainly not very different in other bauri households. Similarly, Muli’s unceasing fight against a caste prejudiced society through his own clever
idiosyncratic ways can also be seen as a part of the resistance mechanism adopted by the entire bauri community. In fact, the global appeal of Muli’s story is ascertained as Freeman says: “...he strives for dignity; he seeks to be respected by the people around him; he questions why fate has brought him to his present circumstances; he wants a good life for himself.” (Freeman qtd. in Kumar 170) Muli’s life story acts as a source of inspiration for many Oriya Dalit writers who wish to form a distinct Oriya Dalit identity. But can this story be read and interpreted as an autobiography? Or, should it be appropriate to treat it as an anthropologist’s research project carried out to explore some less-known aspects of an ethnic community? The confusion over the generic identity of Dalit life-narratives has generated intellectual debates and discussions among the scholars and the critics. According to Sharmila Rege, “dalit life narratives are in fact testimonios, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the ‘official forgetting’ of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance.” (Rege 13) I also feel that Dalit life narratives bear close resemblances with the patterns of the testimonio – a rebellious genre that challenges the hegemony and enables the subaltern to speak.

The Testimonio, according to Francesca Denegri, “is an oral narrative told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of the story. As the narrator is by definition illiterate, the narrative is recorded, transcribed and edited by an interlocutor who is normally a university-trained intellectual, or letrado (lettered).” (Denegri 228) However, in their discussion on testimonial literature, Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz describe testimonios as “mediated narratives by a subaltern person interviewed by an outsider.” (Beebe and Senkewicz 1100) Focusing on the testimonio’s engagement with the process of retrieving subaltern history, they inform that a testimonio offers “vivid examples of a subjugated people
attempting to reclaim its historical voice in a time and place increasingly inhospitable to its culture, heritage, and experiences.” (Beebe and Senkewicz 1100) A more comprehensive idea about testimonio is provided by John Beverley who defines testimonio as “(A) novel or novella length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or significant life experiences.” (Beverley 24) According to him, the testimonio is a “post fictional form of literature with significant cultural and political repercussions.”(Beverley 38) Narrated from a skewed subject position this component of “resistance literature” (Harlow qtd. in Beverley 25) exists, as Raymond Williams suggests, “…at the margin of literature, representing in particular those subjects -- the child, ‘the native’, the woman, the insane, the criminal, the proletarian-- excluded from authorized representation when it was a question of speaking and writing for themselves.” (Williams qtd. in Beverley 25) These definitions open up the possibility of viewing testimonio as a means to facilitate the voices of the subaltern to be heard. According to Denegri, “(T)estimonios produced in the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America or by Latin Americanists and which circulated among metropolitan readers proved that indeed the Third World Other not only could speak but also that s/he could speak as a subaltern, i.e., from within his/her own cultural difference and therefore keeping its unfamiliar, transgressive edge and avoiding the domestication of its alterity.” (Denegri 230) While more discussions and counter-arguments are required to come to any conclusion on this issue, there is no doubt about the fact that testimonio does establish a somewhat horizontal (instead of a vertical) relationship between the writer and the speaker of the testimonio. (Denegri 231) Moreover, the emergence and acceptance of testimonio as a distinct literary genre mark a victory for subaltern voices which have been silenced or altered by official interpretations.
The Testimonio enjoyed a rich development in Latin America where it has been approved as a literary genre. As suggested by Denegri, the use of testimonial writings in Latin America goes back to the time of the Conquest. The Crónicas appeared in the 16th century were a series of non-fictional first person narratives that told the experiences of soldiers and priests who followed the conquistadors in their expeditions to the New World. This practice was found throughout the 19th century in forms that included autobiography, epistolary and a hybrid form of essay as in the case of Domingo Sarmiento’s Facundo and Euclides da Cunha’s Os Sertões. The writings of the 19th century revolutionaries (such as the diaries of Bolivar or Martí) were the predecessors of literatura de campana (battlefield literature) which has a strong link with the testimonial narratives. The genre was further invigorated and widened with the popularity of the anthropological or sociological life(histories which were composed out of tape recorded narratives and developed by social scientists such as Oscar Lewis or Ricardo Pozas in the 1950s. According to John Beverley a more crucial inspiration for the testimonio was a direct-participant account represented by Che Guevara’s Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War (1959). (Beverley 25)¹¹² This inspired the combatants in the 26 of July Movement and in the Campaigns in Escambray Mountains and at the Bay of Pigs to produce a series of direct-participant testimonios. Denegri informs that huge number of testimonios were produced during the “…national liberation in the 1960s and 1970s in South and Central America” as these were supposed to record “…the stories of guerrilleros, resistance fighters, organised workers, community leaders and miners in Bolivia, Peru, Nicaragua, Cuba, Chile and Brazil.” (Denegri 229)¹¹³ Fidel Castro, as Denegri mentions, is considered to have acted as an inspirational force to testimonio compilers since in his speech “Words to the Intellectuals” (1961) he suggested that “no one could describe life under slavery better than a slave herself.” (Denegri 229)¹¹⁴ Emphasizing on the impact of Latin American history in the 1960s upon the testimonial
narratives, Miguel Barnet says: “I believe the Cuban Revolution, with its powerful organic influence, provided all the literature of this type that developed in the Americas with a rejuvenating nutrient.” (Barnet 203) However, not only in Latin America, but throughout the Third World *testimonio* emerged as a revolutionary genre along with the spread of armed struggles against hegemonic oppression. These narratives of “personal witness” (Beverley 26) are primarily designed to make the cause of the movements known to the outside world and to build a strong resistance to the atrocity perpetrated by the State and other agents of violence.

The study of the *testimonio* requires an understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of academic disciplines since the scholars have still not been able to ascertain any particular identity for this genre. The institutional legitimacy of the *testimonio* was affirmed when in 1970 the prestigious Casa de las Americas admitted Cuban ethnographer Miguel Barnet’s *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (1966) --a recording of the life —story of a 105 years old former slave— for its literary awards and accepted *testimonio* as a literary genre in its own rights. But the very nature of the testimonial narrative forces it to break the boundary of any particular discipline of study and hence it turns out to be a hybrid genre assimilating elements from history, sociology, anthropology, ethnography and literature. In fact, its purpose of creating a counter- hegemonic discourse is best achieved when the narration of the ‘real’ life of a marginalized community embraces political, cultural and aesthetic principles within its fold. In the Afterward of his *testimonio- Biography of a Runaway Slave*, Miguel Barnett said:

I no longer believe in genres as the people have never believed in them. The people sang ballads, and rhymed couplets, used theatrical and narrated forms, and subordinated all of that to the effectiveness of the message, and the people never got stuck on
one thing. I think our peoples still have much to tell in their own tongue, not in the one invented for them to undermine them.

(Barnet 206)\textsuperscript{117}

This unwillingness to be tamed by the restrictions of an established genre definitely shows the rebellious nature of the \textit{testimonio}. It is not a work of fiction. On the contrary, it narrates a community’s struggle for survival in a historical context. However, we must remember that despite the truth-claims that it makes, the \textit{testimonio} is far removed from the standard definition of official history primarily because official history does not acknowledge the existence of the ‘Other’. In fact, “History, with a capital H” does not “tolerate otherness or leave it outside the economy of inclusion” (Young qtd. in Gugelberger 5)\textsuperscript{118} But \textit{testimonio} documents the reality of those whose ‘stories’ get lost amidst the grand fables of great individuals. These narratives from below unmask the politics of official history that falsifies and obliterates the accounts of the subaltern in order to consolidate the authority of dominant groups. Walter Benjamin reminds us of this politics as he comments:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.

(Benjamin qtd. in Gugelberger 5)\textsuperscript{119}

The \textit{testimonio} affirms this and hence reinforces its alliance with the oppressed and the deprived of the world. Thus as a genre, it turns out to be the fittest medium for foregrounding the oppositional consciousness of the Third World. In Fredric Jameson’s words:

…it is here--in the passing of the older psychic subject, in the return to storytelling and a literature of wishes and of daily life, and in the experience of History ‘anonymously’ rather than under the aegis of great men, great names, world-historical ‘heroes’- that
the intersection as well as the radical differences between First World postmodernism and the cultures of the various Third Worlds can most faithfully be explored.

(Jameson qtd. in Gugelberger 5)\textsuperscript{120}

Again, testimonial narratives are different from such other genres as ethnographies and testimonies. For instance, though ethnography is the study of the life of people and their culture, yet it is different from \textit{testimonio} in the sense that it follows a scientific, objective method in describing the life-stories of the people of a given community. \textit{Testimonios}, on the other hand, (though mostly are the transcriptions of recorded documents) infuse a learning process among the readers and influence their opinions and even actions. Similarly, testimonial narratives are not to be confused with testimonies which are delivered by witnesses in courtroom trials. Though literal translation of the word \textit{testimonio} means testimony which involves an “act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense” (Beverley 26)\textsuperscript{121} yet the connotations of it are profound. According to Gugelberger, the speaker “I” in testimonial narratives is the “allegory of the ‘we’-the community, the people” (Gugelberger 3)\textsuperscript{122} whereas in testimonies the eye witness speaks only about his/her experiences. Moreover, testimonial narratives generate a process of consciousness-raising which is not to be found in testimonies. In Beverley’s opinion, “(T)he situation of narration in \textit{testimonio} has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself.” (Beverley 26)\textsuperscript{123} Furthermore, it is the “intentionality of the \textit{narrator}” rather than the “intentionality of the \textit{recorder}—usually a social scientist” that sets the \textit{testimonio} apart from oral history. (Beverley 26)\textsuperscript{124} In short, the political edge which is the hallmark of the testimonial narratives is absent in such orally transmitted narrative as testimony.
Similarly, the subversive potential of the *testimonio* is undermined if it is considered to be a novel. According to Beverley, “(U)nlike the novel, *testimonio* promises by definition to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness.” (Beverley 26) In his opinion, novel is a “closed and private form” (Beverley 37) since both the story and the subject end with the end of the text. But the narrator of a *testimonio* continues to live and act in a real social context which also continues to exist. Moreover, the novel which is a bourgeois literary form, maintains the distinction between the public and the private spheres, while the *testimonio* transgresses this essential element of bourgeois law and culture. On the contrary, *testimonio* allows the personal to be merged with the political because the *testimonio* is not a narrative of the life of one single individual. It, rather, is the narrative of the trauma suffered by an entire community. However, we must not forget the fact that the dominance of the bourgeois traits of novels was challenged by the socialist-realist novels even before the rise of *testimonio* as a genre. In fact, they marked a movement that raised questions against fictional representations and testimonial literature continues this tradition of moving away from fiction. John Beverley in his essay “The Margin at the Centre” even goes farther as he makes a distinction between the *testimonio* and the testimonial novel. He points out that the term testimonial novel can be used for those narrative texts where the author has either invented a *testimonio* like story or reworked with explicit literary goals a testimonial account that is no longer present. For instance, the sense of immediacy and continuity do not seem to be present in Nawal el Sa’adawi’s *Woman At Point Zero* in the same way as they are perhaps seen in the lines of *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. Beverley clearly separates *testimonio* from testimonial novel or pseudo-*testimonio* and calls it a “postfictional form of literature with significant cultural and political repercussions.”(Beverley 38) It challenges the bourgeois ideologies that are embodied in and disseminated by the traditional form of novel. Literature, in colonial situation, is often written from the dominant
position of race, class, caste and gender and thus any representation of the subaltern by authors hailing from a privileged subject position runs the risk of leading to misrepresentation. For example, Joseph Conrad’s portrayal of the natives in *Lord Jim* or *The Heart of Darkness* is part of a larger process of empire building. In postcolonial literary context, the attempts to write back have already begun with a view to correcting the western canon and its version of truth. But the upsurge of testimonial narratives flooding the field of literature and other arts since 1970s-80s proves that even such corrective methods are not enough. For example, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* (1959) set in West Africa during the early penetration of missionaries into Igboland (South Eastern Nigeria) was written in order to challenge the white Western view propounded in novels by Joseph Conrad and Joyce Carey. But in spite of its rectifying efforts, the novel differs from a testimonial writing because Achebe presents a fictionalized narrative of what seems to be a more ‘authentic’ version of Africa. Thus the ‘reality’/‘realities’ of African life continue(s) to be misrepresented. There is no doubt about the fact that Achebe’s version of ‘truth’ is more correct than what has been presented by white European writers. But we must not forget that Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* is, after all “…a creation of the writer albeit a creation which is closer to the truth than the many unnamed ‘others’ in previous literature about Africa written by Europeans.” (Gugelberger and Kearney 5) 

In contrast, a *testimonio* is woven around the lived experiences of the narrator who is both a witness to and a participant in the struggle that he/she narrates. No literary genre in the past has offered such a degree of immediacy as is given by the *testimonio* which connects the narrative with on-going social and/ political struggles against power and hegemony. Okonkow in Achebe’s novel is led to frustration and eventually to suicide. But a testimonial narrative “…does not write to the past”; it is, rather “concerned with the future.” (Gugelberger and Kearney 5)

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266
Addressing the immediate needs of an on-going struggle, the *testimonio* always looks forward to building a better tomorrow with hope and determination.

The problem of indeterminacy regarding the generic status of the *testimonio* persists as often it is equated with autobiography. Though at first glance, a *testimonio* seems to resemble an autobiography, yet a closer look reveals profound structural and ideological differences between the two. An autobiography, as discussed earlier is generally associated with the notion of individualism propounded by Western discourse and it is supposed to affirm the individual identity of the autobiographer. But the *testimonio* negates such a notion that celebrates the triumph of a personal self. The writers of *testimonios* believe that self can be defined only as a collective self engaged in a common struggle. It is not the personal experiences of the narrator only, but the collective experience of the entire community to which the narrator belongs, that comprises the core of a *testimonio*. The narrator’s voice is just one of the many voices that tell the tale of suffering and struggle. Dorris Sommer in “Not Just a Personal Story: Women’s Testimonies and the Plural Self” comments: (T)he singular represents the plural not because it replaces or subsumes the group but because the speaker is a distinguishable part of the whole. (Sommer 108) Moreover, the *testimonio* is distinctly set apart from an autobiography because of its subversive nature. Emphasizing on the problems of aligning *testimonios* with biography/autobiography/oral history, Allen Carey –Webb suggests that testimonial narratives are “a sort of Third World ‘auto/biography’ that brings to the center the experience of the unlettered, marginalized, and oppressed.” (Webb 44) Thus there is no doubt about the fact that *testimonio* challenges the notion of cultural hegemony associated with the established definition of an autobiography. Debates and controversies regarding the effectiveness of this genre are continually raised in the academia. Yet, there is no dearth of consensus among critics.
in accepting the fact that the *testimonio* does include the voices of the excluded and at the same
time it also unsettles the status-quo maintained by dominant discourses. The most unique aspect
of this genre is its emphasis on the shared experiences of the community. Narrated by one who is
both a witness to and a participant in the struggle of his/ her community against all forms of
discriminations and violence, the *testimonio* is an account of trauma of not one single individual;
but that of an entire community. Domitila Barrios de Chungara’s testimony *Let Me Speak! Testimony
of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines* (1978) supports this view as she begins
her narrative telling her interlocutor Moema Viezzer:

> I don’t want the story I am about to tell to be interpreted as a personal matter. Because I think that my life is related to my people. What has happened to me may have happened to hundreds of others in my country… That’s why I say that I do not want to simply tell a personal story, I want to speak of my people.

(Barrios de Chungara qtd. in Yúdice 15)  

An echo of similar commitment to one’s community is heard as Miguel Barnet in the Afterword
to *Biography of a Runaway Slave* writes:

> I want to be just one of the bellows in the sounding box of my people. Let the people, for whom I write, recognize themselves in my voice, and discover there that their demons are pacified in the substance of time. It is a great and ambitious task.

(Barnet 207)  

The collective experience of trauma that enables a *testimonio* to foreground the communal self as
the subject of narration, binds the members of the community with a profound sense of solidarity. Whether it is Rigoberta Menchú’s *I, Rigoberta Menchú* or Alicia Partnoi’s *Little School*, this bond of oneness with other members of the community becomes an important
Chapter: Six   Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios? 

feature of testimonial narratives. However, the intimate world of a marginalized group built over the customs and values integral to the community does not allow indulging in self-pity and victimhood. Hence, the vivid graphic delineation of brutality perpetrated upon such a community is deemed to be an essential means adopted by testimonial narratives to raise the collective voice of resistance. It also in a way, prepares the ground for raising consciousness among readers who at a secondary level ‘witness’ the violence through the narrator and are inspired to participate in campaigns against State sponsored atrocity and such other hegemonic oppressions. Again, it is through this complicity with its readers that the testimonio can take the issue of human rights violation at the international level. Quoting John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman, Gugelberger says,

Testimonio in this sense has been extremely important in linking rural and urban contexts of struggle within a given country, and in maintaining and developing the practice of international human rights and solidarity movements in relation to particular struggles.

(Gugelberger 3)134

While subverting the dominant power relation is the primary message that a testimonio aims to convey, it also affirms the solidarity between the intellectuals and the subaltern communities whose participation in the production of the testimonio allows them some sort of agency in asserting their distinct identity. However, the process of producing a testimonio does not let the position of an educated interlocutor remain undisturbed and unproblematic. As Francesca Denegri suggests: “(I)n this process in which the subaltern made explicit the political agency of his own community, the letrado was forced to unlearn the privilege of his/her own class” (Denegri 231)135 Again, emphasizing on the contribution of the testimonio in enabling the
marginalized voices to be raised and heard within the mainstream bourgeois discourse, Arturo Arias says:

> In as much as the genre was developed as a means of empowering subaltern subjects and hearing their voices, one can hardly be surprised that it was a tool for political agency.

(Arias 77)\(^{136}\)

In short, it can be said that the purpose of the subaltern movement to challenge the bourgeois history and its manipulated records by telling the ‘story’/ ‘stories’ that often remained buried under the ellipses is brilliantly served by testimonial writings whose ideological commitment as well as structural design facilitates the mission of empowering the voices of the underprivileged and the oppressed.

The structure of a *testimonio* is unique in the sense that it moves between the spoken and the written forms. In fact this is a kind of writing that has evolved out of an orally narrated account. Here the narrator/speaker/interviewee narrates the trauma faced by his/her self and the community to an interviewer/interlocutor who records the narrated account before transcribing it into a written document. Such a method of documenting the struggle of the subaltern definitely displaces the Western notion of the *ecriture* whose supposedly ‘indisputable’ authority in disseminating ‘truth’ gets undermined by the voices of the marginalized section of the society. It is necessary to remember here what George Yúdice says as he defines a testimonial narrative. According to him, a testimonial narrative is an

*authentic* narrative, told by a *witness* who is *moved to narrate* by the *urgency* of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc). Emphasizing *popular oral discourse*, the witness portrays his or her own *experience* as a *representative* of a *collective memory* and
identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or exorcising and setting aright official history.

(Yúdice qtd. in Gugelberger & Kearney 4; italics in original)\textsuperscript{137}

Thus the testimonio successfully resists the dominance of the printed culture which excludes the majority of the population. Moreover, through this process of recording struggle and resistance, testimonio builds a bond of solidarity between the educated interlocutor (the dominant) and the usually non-literate narrator (the subaltern). It is an interesting feature because the testimonio which opposes the hegemony of a culture dominated by bourgeois values, does so by incorporating it within its own structure. However, this aspect of testimonio has made it exposed to the attacks by the critics of this genre. The contribution of an educated interlocutor/interviewer to the making of a testimonio raises question about the authenticity of the voice of the (often uneducated) narrator and thus problematizes the issue of representation/presentation. Though the narrator of a testimonio tells his/her own story, yet the critics feel that the process of making the subaltern speak is a flawed one since the “two subjects who participate in the process of testimonio production, i.e. the interviewer/editor/addressee/researcher and the interviewee/narrator/speaker/witness represent the cultural groups of the dominant and the subaltern respectively.” (Denegri 231)\textsuperscript{138} Denegri comments that in the second stage of the process of testimonio production, where the editor/interlocutor/interviewer transcribes the narrated material, does the ethical dilemma with regard to retaining the voice of the ‘Other’ come up. The horizontal dialogic relationship that marks the first stage of this process is changed into a vertical relationship since the act of transcribing an oral narrative into a written document is entirely controlled by the editor/interlocutor/interviewer. Thus the intervention of the educated researcher/interviewer may result in representing the narrated facts from a point of view which is
different from the perspective of the uneducated narrator. This reminds one of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s caution against the “danger of the ‘First world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter’” (Brittin 101)\(^ {139} \) A similar argument is put forward by Stephen Tylor who raises question against the authenticity-claim made by ethnographic writings. He comments:

Some ethnographers have tamed the savage, not with the pen, but with the tape recorder, reducing him to a ‘straight man,’ as in the script of some obscure comic routine, for even as they think to have returned to ‘oral performance’ or ‘dialogue,’ in order that the native have a place in the text, they exercise total control over her discourse and steal the only thing she has left—her voice.

(Tylor qtd. in Brittin 102)\(^ {140} \)

In fact, the intrusion of the dominant voice becomes almost inevitable in the use of language. The narrator’s language in most cases does not conform to the grammatical norms established by the academy and here the editor possesses the discretion of correcting or not correcting the narrated material. But Brittin asks here a significant question regarding the ‘active’ role of the interlocutor who is often seen as the manipulator/coordinator of the entire narrative process. Citing the example of Elisabeth Burgos Debray, the Venezuelan anthropologist who edited I,Rigoberta Menchú, Brittin sheds some light on the production history of Menchú’s testimonio. As Brittin suggests, Elisabeth was “at first reluctant to interview Rigoberta” since she was extremely “…aware of the politically complex and emotionally sensitive nature of the ethnographer/native informant relationship…” (Brittin 102)\(^ {141} \) However, her involvement with Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonial project can yield new meanings if we analyse the circumstances that led Rigoberta to collaborate in this project. According to Brittin, Rigoberta, like many other narrators of Central American testimonios participated in this project as a part of the political
agenda since she is aware of the immense potential of these narratives in creating a global consciousness about the State sponsored violence unleashed upon the indigenous people of Guatemala. In Rigoberta’s own words:

> It was difficult, but thanks especially to Arturo, who pushed me a little, he told me that it needed to be done….And later my comrades in the CUC always said that having given this testimony—having told it in other circles, especially at the bishops’ conference in Mexico, before writing the book—was very important and that it had to be done. So, if it had not been for the CUC and various other comrades and friends, it would have been very difficult.

(Rigoberta qtd. in Brittin 103)

This suggests that Rigoberta was not just an ethnographic subject-chosen and written about by an educated interlocutor. She rather was persuaded by her fellow comrades in order to advance a particular political cause. However, at the same time, the fact that Rigoberta was egged on to participate in the testimonial project encourages critic like Dinesh D’Souza to castigate her saying that Rigoberta is merely “a mouthpiece for a sophisticated left-wing critique of Western society, all the more devastating because it issues not from a French scholar-activist but from a seemingly authentic Third World source.” (D’Souza qtd. in Brittin 104) Such argument as this which echoes Spivak’s notion of “intellectually constructed subaltern subject” (Brittin 104) reduces Rigoberta to a being that is “nothing more than a ventriloquist’s dummy of sorts” (Brittin 104). But counter-arguments underscore Rigoberta’s identity and agency since they present as evidence Rigoberta’s own words that reveal her spontaneous decision to collaborate with Elisabeth in the testimonial project. Brittin quotes Rigoberta:

> It was very hard for me to make the decision, and that’s what determined the way in which the book was done….For me, it was
very important to give this as a memory, and this idea was what most compelled me to do it, and I threw myself into the project with a lot of strong emotion. It was a moving experience, and, yes, there was consciousness because it was a difficult undertaking.

(Rigoberta qtd. in Brittin 105)\textsuperscript{146}

Besides, Rigoberta and her comrades also took part in editing the narrated material— an act which certainly adds new edge to the discussion regarding the empowerment of the subaltern subject.

Rigoberta informs:

And from Mexico we reviewed the transcript. And my reading ability was limited at that time, so I had to work with other people, who read me practically the whole book. I took out some things, and I also censored many parts. In the first part, for example, only because there were things that I shouldn’t have said, and it was necessary to take them out.

(Brittin 104)\textsuperscript{147}

However, one cannot deny the presence of Elizabeth as the editor of this \textit{testimonio}. In fact she pointed out that Rigoberta’s language was corrected by her in order to avoid a “folkloric image” of her informant and to protect her dignity. In an interview with David Stoll she commented that Rigoberta’s “Spanish was very basic” and then she further claimed:

Yes, I corrected verb tenses and noun genders, as otherwise it would not have made sense, but always trying to retain her own powerful form of expression. Rigoberta’s narrative was anything but chronological. It had to be put in order…It was hard to give it a sense of continuity in Rigoberta’s own words.

(Stoll qtd. in Arias 81)\textsuperscript{148}
However, there are other practitioners of the testimonial form who have opted for retaining the original voice of the narrator. Such is the case of José Maria Arguedas who retained the language of his narrator because any attempt to neutralize this language will be an act of devaluation of the original culture of the narrator. But at the same time, this is to be remembered that the need for reaching out to a wider audience who are not familiar with the linguistic peculiarities of the native narrator, also makes the intervention of the editor/interlocutor indispensable. Hence agreeing with what Brittin says, we can infer that not only the retrieval of the “deeply disturbing and painful memories” of the community’s collective suffering was possible because of Elisabeth’s sensitivity to Rigoberta’s predicament, but also the readability and the coherence of the text were immensely enhanced by this learned editor’s professional expertise. (Brittin 111)\textsuperscript{149}

The issue of authorship of a testimonial narrative, nonetheless, remains problematic and continues to challenge the conventional notion about the production of a literary text. For instance, while the Spanish version of \textit{I, Rigoberta Menchú} proclaims Elisabeth Burgos Debray as the author of the text, the English version makes no mention of it. Perhaps a gesture of acknowledgement will somewhat dispel the gloom of confusion that shrouds the issue of authorship in a testimonial narrative. In the words of James Clifford: “(A)nthropologists will increasingly have to share their texts, and sometimes their title pages, with those indigenous collaborators for whom the term ‘informants’ is no longer adequate if it ever was.” (Clifford qtd. in Brittin 111)\textsuperscript{150} Again, questions are raised as to whether the narrator’s story truly represents the experience of the community or that of the narrator only. While Rigoberta’s \textit{testimonio} is not just ‘her’ personal life-story, it is also true that her narrative does not speak for those acculturated Indians who have severed their connection with the indigenous community. Yet one should not deny the representative value of her testimonial narrative because she does voice through this
account the “concerns of the CUC, which, in turn, voices the concerns of many poor Guatemalans, both indigenous and ladino.” (Brittin106). However, controversy over the authenticity of testimonios runs deep since in spite of narrating life as it is, it is not as objective a genre as it claims to be. While the editor’s subjectivity may be responsible for some facts to be included or excluded, critics have also questioned the truth-claims made by the narrator. Judging the veracity of these accounts has become a matter of great concern among the critics perhaps because of the fact that testimonios evolve from orally transmitted narratives. Oral discourse, in popular view, is often held as a volatile source of information as it continually ‘invents’ and ‘re-invents’ ‘reality’. Moreover, as Denegri has pointed out, a written text follows a chronological pattern whereas an orally narrated text arises from memory that arranges images simultaneously rather than consecutively. Therefore structuring events according to a linear pattern of time is almost impossible in verbal discourse. Memory and facts are inextricably linked in a testimonial narrative. The veracity of narrated ‘facts’ summoned by memory plays a crucial role in the understanding of the dynamics of a testimonial narrative because the purpose of a testimonio is not merely restricted to the act of recording personal reminiscences of a single individual. It narrates the trauma of the entire community and more importantly, it preserves this collective memory for the generations to come. Hence the interviewee’s memory turns out to be a matter of paramount significance since the readers of a testimonio expect to receive nothing but ‘true facts’ from the mouth of a testimonial narrator. Furthermore, the question of authenticity and truth, role of memory, relationship between testifier and the transcriber and such other issues become important in the analysis of a testimonio since the régime of truth is usually associated with the notion of accuracy determined by the dominant Western discourse. So any attempt to interpret events or frame historical data from a non-Western, subaltern perspective is doubted and turned into object of both desire and derision. A huge controversy has been raged around the testimonio I, Rigoberta Menchú as David Stoll, a North- American anthropologist raised questions in his
book Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans regarding the authenticity of the events narrated by Rigoberta. Stoll, who is skeptical about the reliability of the testimonio as the genre according to him, is not suitable to find out ‘certified truth’ points out various incongruities in Menchú’s narrative. Anybody who read I, Rigoberta Menchú should be aware of the Menchú/Stoll controversy that represents a conflict of perspectives between the dominant and the subaltern communities. Stoll published his book Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans in 1991 and claimed that Menchú who is a winner of the 1992 Noble Peace Prize, had falsified facts in her testimonio. The controversy attracted public attention when The New York Times published a front-page article accusing Rigoberta of telling one lie after another in her testimonial narrative. Allen Carey Webb, on the other hand, in “Teaching, Testimony, and Truth: Rigoberta Menchu’s Credibility in the North American Classroom” produces enough information to show how Stoll disputes with Menchú’s testimonial accounts on several points. According to Stoll, Rigoberta’s brother was not burned alive. He argues that Rigoberta’s brother might have been burned after he was killed. However, he admits the fact that the army did burn many people alive in front of their families. Again, Stoll provides information revealing the fact that Rigoberta was a student in a junior high boarding-school for three years—a fact which she has not mentioned in her testimonial narrative. He also claims that Rigoberta’s brother Nicholas could not have died of malnutrition as informed by Rigoberta because he met her brother Nicholas alive and well in Guatemala. Stoll accuses Rigoberta of providing falsified facts because he has found no specific evidence that supports her claim of having worked on coffee or sugar plantation or as a maid in the city. He further comments that he has also found no evidence of the death of Petrona Chona on the coffee plantation. Rigoberta’s narrative makes Stoll believe that it portrays the indigenous Guatemalans as more sympathetic to the Guerilla Movement than they actually were and he blames the revolutionary Guerillas for the violence of the army. As Arturo Arias suggests, Stoll has been keen on establishing a connection between
Menchú and the Marxists without providing any conclusive proof. The allegation becomes clear as he states: “Cuban promotion of Rigoberta and Elisabeth’s book suggested that it might be speaking for the guerillas more than for peasants….I, Rigoberta Menchú became a way to mobilize foreign support for a wounded, retreating insurgency.” (Stoll qtd. in Arias 83) 154

However, Stoll’s accusations have led Rigoberta to respond to several of these points. She refutes the distorted account given by Stoll of her brother’s death and tells that her testimony repeats the first- hand account her mother gave her and that, until she is presented with the evidence of her brother’s body itself, she will continue to believe her mother. She responds to Stoll’s charge of hiding information regarding her education by saying that she did not speak about the school in order to protect it from reprisal by the army. It must be mentioned in this context that the fact that the army used to surround the school and interrogate the children has been admitted by Stoll himself. Rigoberta’s justification regarding her silence about the school sounds credible since her best friend was killed by the army. Next, Rigoberta clears the confusion over the ‘supposed death’ of her brother Nicholas by informing that her father married twice and named two different sons Nicholas-- a practice common enough among the native Guatemalans. It was the first Nicholas who died of malnutrition. The ‘truthfulness’ of these accounts given by Rigoberta can hardly be doubted because Stoll himself admits that many indigenous Guatemalans do work in these plantations and that Rigoberta’s description of the working condition prevailing in these areas is accurate. But critic Dinesh D’Souza vehemently attacked Rigoberta stating that she is an “ignorant and uneducated Indian woman from whom we have nothing to learn,…an Indian woman whose experience and life-choices make her insufficiently typical to represent an indigenous view of the world.”( Pratt 35) 155 The hatred that is revealed through such prejudiced opinions reinforces the imperialistic and dominant attitude of the mainstream Western discourse. However, while the factual veracity of Rigoberta’s account becomes the centre of controversy among critics, we must not forget what Arturo Arias suggests
Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?

about the ambivalent nature of truth of a *testimonio* which under no circumstances should be categorized as a sworn testimony where every fact is verified and classified as an evidence of a crime. (Arias 82) According to him the interplay of fiction and history in memory is a central issue in Rigoberta’s narrative since the verification of facts she narrated has been impossible due to factors such as oral mode of narration, hurried composition of the text and her status as an exile. But is it really so important a question as to whether Rigoberta’s brother was shot dead or burnt alive while the primary point that her narrative does underscore is the large scale massacre of the indigenous Guatemalans in the hands of a US backed oppressive military army? Rigoberta narrates the trauma faced by her community and we know that in this kind of situation a cousin or a neighbor can well be considered as a brother. Moreover, she has made no claim that whatever she narrated is an eye-witness account. On the contrary, the very beginning of her narrative makes it clear that it is the testimony of her people. Here, I should mention what Kavita Panjabi wrote in this regard: “(T)he point is that the collective experience/knowledge of a community can, by extension, inhere integrally in its individual members too.” (Panjabi 134)

Panjabi cites the example of the riot in Gujarat, India in 2002 and suggests that the fear and terror experienced by those Muslim women who were raped had also by extension been the experience of every Muslim woman living in Gujarat, then – even if she had not been raped. Therefore what matters is not the veracity of minute details; but the fact that the indigenous people of Guatemala were actually subjected to brutal oppression and torture by the State during 1970s when approximately “150,000 Mayas out of a population of five million were massacred or were ‘disappeared’ during the peak of the conflict (1978-84).” (Arias 77) This grim truth went largely unnoticed till *I, Rigoberta Menchú*(1984) grabbed the attention of the world.

However, it is not difficult for us to understand that in a bourgeois capitalist Western-educated world, what is often put at stake by the politics of truth is the voice of the marginalized
people. Talking about the Rigoberta Menchú controversy in an article entitled “Let’s Shoot Rigoberta”, Eduardo Galeano comments:

All of a sudden, the voices that speak of a scandal have multiplied the voices that call Rigoberta a liar and that, in passing, repudiate the indigenous movement that she represents and symbolizes. With suspicious celerity, a smoke screen is rising to hide forty years of tragedy in Guatemala, magically reduced to a guerilla provocation and to family quarrels, those typical ‘Indian things.’

(Galeano 100)\(^{159}\)

Elisabeth Burgos-Debray’s responses in the context of Menchú-Stoll controversy become extremely important. Although she accepts the proofs given by Stoll regarding the factual veracity of Rigoberta’s narrative, yet she refuses to challenge the history of the community that Menchú narrates. Elisabeth writes:

One cannot say that Rigoberta lies. She’s a person that[sic!] belongs to a different cultural tradition, a pre-literary tradition, an oral tradition, in which history has a collective nature, facts are stored in common memory, and belong to the entire community. Everything she told me happened, even if it didn’t happen to her personally. Her family does know what poverty is, even if her own is not as miserable as she painted it. There are people whose children were indeed burned alive, fathers that were executed by the army, and that’s what Rigoberta has said.

(Burgos-Debray qtd. in Panjabi 132)\(^{160}\)

However, the ‘truthfulness’ of the accounts of the indigenous Guatemalan people is still doubted by the representatives of dominant discourse as they fail to realize that for the Mayan people, there exists hardly any distinction between self and the community; between “being and
belonging” (Arias 85) But how much does the accreditation by the white Western ‘masters’ matter while we are reminded that Menchú’s text and her political activities not only established the recognition of the Mayan subjectivity but also played a key role in reinforcing the socio-cultural and political importance of the Mayan people? I completely agree with Arturo Arias as he comments:

If her text, which did not make any historical truth claims, achieved the goals of ending massacre and creating respect for Mayan culture, does it matter if it did not conform to how Western science contextualizes documentary facts?

(Arias 87)

The denial of authority to the speaking subject has always been a major issue in the domain of subaltern studies and we can understand the intensity of this power–game when we focus our attention on the testimonios written by women. The authenticity of women’s words is often questioned in a patriarchal society in the same way as the veracity of the facts recorded in testimonio is challenged. Interestingly, a great number of women’s testimonial literature emerged in the literary milieu of Latin America during the later part of the last century. This was a direct offshoot of the military oppression that ravaged the indigenous communities in the 1970s. Nancy Saporta Sternbach, in her essay “Remembering the Dead: Latin American Women’s Testimonial Discourse” observes that women’s increasing participation as activists in Latin American politics defied those notions that kept women marginal and defined men as “warriors” (guerrilleros) and their testimonios as “epics” (Che Guevara, Omar Cabezas). (Sternbach 96) In fact, during the period spanning from 1969 to 1986, the best-known testimonios were mostly written by women writers such as Elena Poniatowska (1969), Domitila Barrios de Chungara with Moema Vizzier(1977), Rigoberta Menchú(1983), Claribel Alegria and Darwin Flakoll(1983), Hebe de
Bonafini (1985), Doris Tijerino (1978) and Alicia Partnoi (1986). The success of so many testimonios composed by women narrators-editors reinforces the relationship that exists between the testimonial narratives and the feminist discourse. A careful examination reveals that both have emerged out of a context of marginality and both strive to give ‘voice’ to the ‘voiceless’. They also attempt to break the ‘silence’ in which the outcastes of this society are forced to live.

Another important feature that testimonial narratives share with feminist criticism is the belief in the slogan that “Personal is Political”. According to Sternbach, personal in this sense refers to a private, domestic or intimate sphere and political may be viewed as the public, historic or collective one. (Sternbach 97)\textsuperscript{164} The blurring of the line between the personal and the political is often seen in Latin American women’s testimonios. Sternbach shows how a woman can enter the public domain in the role of a mother and how an intimate experience such as maternity attains a larger dimension as she quotes Claribel Alegria and Darwin Flakoll:

\begin{quote}
Having children is the most beautiful and most revolutionary experience….As a mother, I can’t just watch out for one child, there are millions of children in the country…Maternity has a historical dimension and not just an individual one.
\end{quote}

\textit{(Alegria and Flakoll qtd. in Sternbach 97)}\textsuperscript{165}

This statement reinforces the fact that feminist discourse and testimonial narratives, both, emphasize on the significance of collective experience in building resistance against hegemony and oppression. Again both are endowed with inspirational quality since both aim at rousing a new consciousness that helps them envision a better and brighter future. Structurally, too, a testimonio is closely associated with the accounts narrated by women since both are primarily grounded in oral discourse. In fact, the unofficial ‘history’ of a community is usually conveyed orally by women from generation to generation. Furthermore, the testimonio narrates the
condition of slavery and coercion of the oppressed people in the same way as the feminist discourse upholds the torture of the patriarchal society. The necessity for establishing connections between testimonios and feminist literature is understood if we remember Sternbach’s observation in this regard:

…in testimonial literature, it is not the women who are conforming to a male model; on the contrary, the dimensions of male testimonial literature tend to incorporate those characteristics we normally attribute to women’s discourse, that is the circumstances of viewing oneself as a marginal subject who has taken history her or his own hands for the first time.

(Sternbach 95)\textsuperscript{166}

Interestingly, however, a close study reveals that a woman’s testimonio is different from the testimonio narrated by a man. The primary difference that occurs between the testimonio of a man and that of a woman lies in the representation of the family or the community. Though the testimonio as a genre addresses the issue of collective struggle yet the modes that keep the members of a family or a community tied to each other are less visible in male-narrated testimonios. While their narratives do underline the relationship with other comrades, yet they fail to bring out the warmth and woes of personal space- a feature that is found in abundance in testimonial accounts narrated by women. Sternbach cites the example of Jacobo Timmerman, the author of Prisoner Without Name, Cell Without Number (1988) whose estado limite (i.e crisis situation) was “so pronounced that any mention of tenderness reduced his resistance” (Sternbach 97-98).\textsuperscript{167} For Omar Cabezas, the loss of love can only be compensated by his love for Nicaragua. But women’s testimonios do not relegate the personal loss to the background. It, rather occupies the centre stage, though women’s testimonios are not devoid of the abstract love for one’s country, one’s race or one’s revolution. This is proved immediately as we start reading
Rigoberta’s testimonio: “I’d like to stress that it’s not my life, … My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans…” (Menchú 1)\textsuperscript{168} A similar note is also heard in Domitila’s voice as she begins her narrative Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines.

Moreover, the bond of solidarity that these women share with their fellow sufferers does not remain confined only within the boundaries of their family and community, but also extends beyond that to include those (even the poor ladinos)\textsuperscript{169} who are continually battered by the agents of oppressive power. Thus by situating the ‘personal’ in a wider political context, the narrators of women’s testimonios adopt a subjective approach to the representations of their collective experiences. Women do think relationally and in case of testimonios produced by women in the Latin American context, the act of narration is largely motivated either by the pain of those who are dead or by the dream of a new and transformed society for those who are going to come.

Testimonios flourished as an integral part of a globally emerging revolutionary discourse. In fact, it emerged in the 1960s when along with the national liberation and insurgency movements, movements of women, Blacks and homosexuals also picked up momentum. The subversive potential of this genre has made it the perfect mouthpiece of the subalterns who demand self-authorization and empowerment. Again, testimonial literature not only aids the political struggle against domination, but also ushers in a new aesthetic revolution and therefore is viewed as a liberating tool in more than one way. Though the testimonio, as a literary genre is yet to find a foothold in the Indian literary landscape, its relevance in the domain of Dalit literature cannot be ignored. Dalit life-narratives as I have already mentioned are the documents of collective struggles launched by low-caste communities against the violence unleashed by a caste-stratified, elitist, patriarchal Indian society. Interestingly enough, the fundamental aspects of the testimonio that aims to establish a distinct subaltern identity by building a strong collective
resistance against the State sponsored oppression seem to be present more prominently in the pages of Dalit women’s life-narratives than in the so-called autobiographies of Dalit men. Hence, my attempt in the following concluding chapter will be to bring out the testimonial qualities of Dalit women’s life-narratives with particular reference to Bama’s Karukku. But why should we think seriously about re-casting Dalit women’s autobiographies as testimonios? How can this generic recasting benefit Dalit literature at large? I’ll try to find answers to these questions, too.
Chapter: Six Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?

Endnotes:


6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.


Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?


15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.


19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.


Chapter: Six Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.


36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.
Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?

39 Ibid.


42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.


46 Ibid.


52 Ibid.
Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?


55 Ibid.


Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?


66 Ibid.


70 Ibid.


Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?


76 Ibid.


80 Ibid.


Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?


Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?


98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.


101 Ibid.


105 Ibid.

Chapter: Six Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?

107 Ibid.


111 Ibid.


114 Ibid.


Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?


123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid.


129 Ibid.
Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?


Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?


145 Ibid.


The Noble Prize, however, was awarded to Rigoberta not because of her testimony, but because of her political work and peace organizing.

Petrona Chona: Rigoberta Menchú mentioned in her testimonial narrative (*I, Rigoberta Menchú*) of the killing of one Petrona Chona by the land owner’s son when she refused to yield to his amorous advances.


Chapter: Six  Dalit Life-Narratives: Autobiographies or Testimonios?


162 Ibid.


164 Ibid.


167 Ibid.


169 Ladino: Today, any Guatemalan-whatever his/her economic position is-who rejects, either individually or through his cultural heritage, Indian values of Mayan origin. It also implies mixed blood.

300