ABSTRACT

Although the autobiography has been in existence for long, it is only in the Twentieth Century that this unique literary discourse has flourished. Critical interest in this genre started even later, only in the late 1950s. Theory and criticism of women's autobiography is even more recent—barely a decade old. Thus a lot needs to be done in this field and it is as yet still an unexplored territory.

The study of autobiography has been sought to be confined within several boundaries—boundaries of class, culture, nationality, gender and even genre. But the very nature of autobiography has ensured that it escaped the confining criteria chalked out for it by the "masters".

The focus of this study will be a look at autobiographies across the cultural i.e. the East-West boundary. Since the approach towards the examination is feminist, and the autobiographies come from different economic and social groups, it is also a look across the social and biological boundary. Three American and three Marathi autobiographies written by women have been selected for a closer examination. This kind of a cross-cultural examination, involving American and Marathi autobiographies and using the feminist literary approach, has not been attempted before. Nor have the individual autobiographies been examined in such detail before. This thesis thus hopes to break new ground in the area of autobiography-studies.
Each of the six books selected for this thesis is discussed in a separate chapter. By including the Introduction and the Conclusion the thesis is thus divided into eight chapters.

The first chapter is the Introduction which discusses the late entry of Autobiography into the literary canon. The autobiography as a genre and its slippery nature, its frequent escape from a confining categorisation and the various attempts by critics, all male, to restrict the boundaries of Autobiography is discussed. The four models of difference that theories of women's writing presently make use of are given in detail, viz. biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural criticism. The Introduction also makes clear the fact that since there is not one but several feminist theories, this thesis will not adhere to a particular feminist framework but will borrow from all the relevant feminist theories. Just as the boundaries of feminist literary criticism are ever-changing and defying restriction, the boundaries of autobiographical writing are also straining against fixity. The relevance of doing a cross-cultural examination of women's autobiography is elaborated. The Introduction stresses that in the process of making interpretive statements about foreign cultures, dichotomising and restructuring are inevitable. Studying other cultures and learning about their experiences teaches us that the "other" (in my case the "Westerner") is not so removed from "us" after all. The Introduction throws up some important questions that need to be examined: What are some of the similarities and differences between the three Marathi autobiographies chosen for analysis? Has the form
of the autobiography changed over the years? Are the three Marathi
autobiographies different in any way from the three American
autobiographies? In what way are the three American autobiographies
similar to and different from each other? Are there major differences across
the East-West divide? The Introduction also gives in brief the summary of
each chapter which is to follow.

The second chapter deals with Pearl S. Buck's My Several Worlds: A
Personal Record. What is apparent in this autobiography is Pearl S. Buck's
constant attempt to dissociate herself from her identity as a "woman" and to
portray herself as a "world citizen" i.e. in a genderless, neutral role of the
"Scholar-Gypsy". Pearl S. Buck's rather chequered personal life was led on
her own terms. She hides this fearlessness in My Several Worlds and gives
us an autobiography that is evasive, tangential and deliberately impersonal.
Pearl S. Buck, by her very success in the literary world, had challenged the
male hegemony. In addition, she was not considered even a "proper"
American. She wrote novels about an alien culture and had an Eastern
sensibility. These two factors contributed to her remaining an "outsider" in
the literary world of America. Her defensiveness, which is apparent in My
Several Worlds prevented her from writing an open, frank autobiography
with an assertive, strong "I" at the centre. My Several Worlds defies the
notion of the autobiography as a confessional ideal and represents the
evasiveness of women autobiographers of an earlier era, especially women
who were spectacularly successful in their fields.
The third chapter deals with Marian Anderson's autobiography *My Lord, What a Morning*. Marian Anderson has become famous in history as the first Black to sing at the Lincoln Memorial. Her autobiography would have us believe however that this is not the way she would like to be remembered. She reiterates in *My Lord, What a Morning* that she was a reluctant "symbol". Her fidelity lies with her music, not with any causes. She too, like Pearl S. Buck, wishes to transcend the Self and be known only through the excellence of her music. She seeks no concessions on account of her colour or her gender. What is noteworthy about this autobiography is the fact that Marian Anderson describes herself almost entirely on the basis of her music and her public persona. Marian Anderson identified entirely with the phallocentric status quo. With great effort and by keeping a low profile on racial matters Marian Anderson had moved to the centre of the musical establishment from the margins. She wishes to dissociate herself from this or that cause and the politically correct, conciliatory and non-combative tone of her autobiography reflects this attitude. In this respect, it is not a feminist text at all.

The fourth chapter analyses Virginia Foster Durr's *Outside the Magic Circle*. This book is different from all the other autobiographies because this is the only one that is a transcription from oral interviews conducted with Virginia Foster Durr as part of the Oral History Programme (SOHP) at the University of North Carolina. The institutionalising of a woman's life story indicates the growing influence and importance of the female signature. It
also indicates the multiplicity of narrative strategies adopted especially by women autobiographers. A study of such an autobiography pushes the frontiers of autobiographical research even further. *Outside the Magic Circle* is written from a position that is self-confessedly feminist. Virginia Foster Durr was, what can be called a "socialist feminist". She regarded the Women's Movement and the Civil Rights Movement as interlinked and she was in the forefront of both these movements. Virginia Foster Durr describes everything in terms of her public life. This may be partly because this was a sociological study carried out as part of a funded programme and partly because in the case of Virginia Foster Durr herself the Private and the Public had long become enmeshed.

The fifth chapter analyses the famous Marathi autobiography by Laxmibai Tilak-- *Smriti Chitre*. Ironically, this well-known autobiography was undertaken by Laxmibai Tilak not as her own story but as a kind of biography of her husband. Midway, Laxmibai Tilak also decided to fit it in the Puritan confessional mould. But *Smriti Chitre* defies all such categorisation and becomes finally a tale of one woman's search for autonomy. *Smriti Chitre* can be said to belong to the "feminine" phase of autobiographical women's writing in Marathi in which the female "subculture" is secret, ritualised, characterised by internalisation and self-censorship. *Smriti Chitre* conforms, outwardly at least, to the patriarchal framework given by the "masters". However, a closer reading of the text proves that Laxmibai Tilak was an instinctive feminist, unaware though she
may have been of the term. Smriti Chitre is replete with instances of shared sisterhood and acts of courage by women. This single piece of literary work moved Laxmibai Tilak from the margins of the Marathi literary fraternity right into the centre. Its chronicling of the life of an average Maharashtrian woman at the beginning of this century is frank but laced with humour and this has ensured for Smriti Chitre a permanent place in the canon.

An analysis of Mee-Durga Khote comprises the next chapter. Durga Khote brought respectability to the profession of acting while herself keeping her image blemish-free. By the standards of that time (1930s) she had certainly stepped outside the magic circle. She was an exception by all counts—a woman celebrity in an age when success was the prerogative of men. How did a woman, independently famous and wealthy, and not parasitically so because of her father or her husband, handle success in the pre-feminism era? Her autobiography reveals the answer. Durga Khote was a child of her times. In her autobiography she chronicles not the rewards of a successful professional life but rather its hidden costs on the personal front. The strict distinction that Durga Khote made between her public and private lives is reflected textually in the form of her autobiography. She clearly places her sense of Self in her identity as a daughter and mother. Unlike Marian Anderson, who concentrates only on her professional life in her autobiography, Durga Khote in her autobiography portrays herself as a "good" Indian woman who prioritises her family over everything else, especially her professional success.
The next chapter discusses Bandh-Anubandh. In a closely argued
Introduction, the author explains why she has undertaken to write her
autobiography and the feminist standpoint that she has chosen through a bold
and defiant examination of her own intimate relationships. Kamal Padhye
scrutinises the close, almost claustrophobic kinship ties in the Indian society
that can become oppressive and place major obstacles in the search for an
individual identity and autonomy. Fully conscious of the sanctity in the
Indian society of the very ties she speaks against, Kamal Padhye has written a
text that is close to being subversive in articulating literally the feminist
slogan of "The Personal is Political".

The last chapter is the conclusion that states that the basic difference in the autobiographies of the three American and three Indian women arose
due to cultural variety, and the historical place of the autobiography in their
specific cultures. The three American women tend to use the autobiography
more as a social document while the three Indian women use the
autobiography as a literature of the Self. There is also a change in the
handling of the autobiographical genre over the years. We see in the
autobiographies of Kamal Padhye and Virginia Foster Durr an intermingling
of the private and public selves. They also show a greater willingness to
experiment with the standard framework of the autobiographical genre.
However, such evolutionist conclusions should not blind us to the unique
historical specificity and narrative strategies used variously by the six
women. Hopefully, this study will throw more light on the variety of
women's voices that had hitherto been marginalised or excluded from the canon.

At the threshold of the Twentieth Century we confront a world which is becoming a big global village but also a village where each group is becoming more aware of its own special quality, its unique feature. A study of women's autobiography that spans the Twentieth Century and straddles the globe will make us more aware of the rich literary inheritance left to us by our mothers.