Chapter I

Autobiography: Its Definition and Tracts

In human civilization both man and literature have existed and grown hand in hand. Man has perished but his saga still prevails in his literature. It depicts various shades of human life by giving space to retrospective analysis. From time to time we have successfully introspected our lives closely to see how in course of time our own experiences and emotions have undergone drastic changes. When we look at those changes, the life seen through literature seems to be exciting. Literature is called mirror due to its reflection of life of past. Literature adds to reality, it does not simply discreet. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.

While talking about literature, having caught human life in it, man has evolved and changed the form of literature from epoch to epoch. Beginning with vague signs to meaningful sentences, from lyric to epic, from story to novel, from oratory discourse to postmodern criticism, he has adopted befitting form of literature according to the need of the time. Each form has its own legacy, limits, liabilities and logics. But there is one form which, perhaps, has grown beyond limits, that is autobiography. Autobiography is closely associated with human experience and expressions. It’s fluid and has crept into various other forms due to its emotional affinity to the author. An autobiography can be found or read in a poem, novel, play or an essay. Its unrestricted and complicated, broader limits have caught the attention of the critics. Critics’ interest and curiosity has grown day-by-day to peel off the layers of autobiography to seek truth in it. It is always interesting to read our own story.
Nearly all of us have at some stage been fascinated by other people’s lives. Life stories of one kind or another have been told to us from childhood; we have heard them or read them for ourselves or see them enacted on stage or screen. They may have been the lives of historical men and women, or, of less influentially, characters in folktales, novels and myths. As Arnold believes, “They may be intended to entertain or admonish us, to encourage emulation or inspire repugnance and fear: we may ever have contemplated the prospect, some day, of publishing life history of our own but if life histories are so omnipresent and central to human experience, how might they nevertheless differ in content, form and intention from one society to another, or from one age to another?” (Arnold and Blackburn 5).

It feels the same when one looks at one’s old photo. Literature is interesting not because it just reminds us our own past but because it provides an opportunity for introspection. These introspections and psychological churning have made us more civilized and more humane. Thus literature has helped man to register his own life to reflect on his own life saga. Therefore, no other form of art would have captured and expressed human experience and emotions so effectively.

An autobiography gracefully and objectively records human joys and sorrows, desires and frustrations, values-morals, facts-fables etc., without dissembling. Autobiography has helped man to register his life in historical context effectively and objectively, of course history is seen through the individual perspective but may be unbiased to the author’s conscience. They precisely straddle the elusive division between personal narrative and objective truth. Along with the historical perspective one is astonished to see biographies or autobiographies as valuable sources to understand the modern sense of self, of individualism as opposed to collective identity. Here is an attempt to establish, as a cultural category, that the life-history form is important to be lightly dismissed or
ignored. We hope to demonstrate that life histories reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individual directly concerned, but also of the wider society, or social segments, of which they are a part. This of particular value I seek to understand and analyze groups that are socially well and marginalized normally such as Dalits.

Hundreds of definitions and attempted explanations of autobiography exist in various fields, yet it is difficult to define it in strict sense. The notion of Autobiography changes from place to place and time to time due to its kelodiscopic nature. Today’s form of autobiography is the result of constant evolution of the literature. Due to continual flux and transformation in the notion of literature; intentions of writers, critical values and social discourse, the meaning of autobiography has changed constantly. Moreover, based on few literary elements one can see an autobiography in any form of literature. James Olney believes, “A theology, a philosophy, a physics or a metaphysics seen, these are all autobiography recorded in other characters and other symbols” (Olney 5). Thus, it is great challenge to define the genre. Yet attempts can be made on the basis of available sources. Therefore, a glance at its meaning and development into current form would give reposeful answer to our quest.

The term ‘Autobiography’ is of recent date. It made its appearance about the end of the eighteenth century in Germany, later, apparently, in English. Though the word formed artificially like a technical term in science, with an aid of Greek language, it attained the place in literary genre in the early nineteenth century. The continuous evaluation of the genre has made it more precise than any other epoch. Today, we see term autobiography in little definite sense. At surface level, an autobiography is a literary work written by the author about his own life. It is his own life story. There are elements that mark an autobiography a unique genre-
firstly it carries the signature of the author, secondly it has first person narration. This explanation can be presumed based on the following discussion of the etymological meaning of the term autobiography. The term consists of, in terms of etymology, the description (graphia), of an individual human life (bios) by the individual himself (auto). Thus an autobiography is literary a work that is written by the author himself or a life story of an individual written by the individual himself.

The Great Dictionary of Oxford gives the meaning and the earliest known use of the term in English. Georg Misch writes a note, to explain the term:

In his Grand Dictionary Universel du XIX Siecle (1864), Pierre Larousse notes the word ‘autobiographie’: ‘This word, though of Greek origin, is of English manufacture.’ For this statement he gives no evidence. The Great Oxford Dictionary gives as the earliest known use of the term a senesce of Robert Southey in the first volume of the Quarterly Review (1809). In his article Southey gives a general sketch of Portuguese literature, and in the course of it he refers to a long forgotten book by a Portuguese painter on his own life, and describes it as a ‘very amusing and unique specimen of autobiography’. The use of the hyphen suggests that the word was not then in common use. (Misch, Vol. I. 5)

While contrasting autobiography with Memoir, Georg Misch defines the term autobiography and says that the usage of the term conveys nothing regarding the literary form or the standing this sort of work in relation to great literature; its main implication is that the person’s whole life is described is himself the author of the work” (Misch Vol. I. 7). The statement tries to magnify the importance of the identity of author and the subject which is of great interest, instead of literariness
of the genre. He further calls it a “chameleon-like genre”. For him this nature of autobiography is a merit. In the late eighteenth century the genre gains limelight due to its ‘chameleon-like’ quality.

It may be assumed that it was invented by Southey himself, or perhaps by other. But it has accomplished full-fledged space in literature, and that continues through the literature of all ages as something natural and human, perhaps all too human.

New Standard Encyclopedia describes Autobiographies as, “An autobiography, the self-written story of a person’s life, usually is more complete and better-organized account than is a diary or journal” (Standard Encyclopedia 234). The encyclopedia focuses on innermost thoughts and history in personal story. Here, along with the writer’s personal account, historical relevance is given place. And the encyclopedia refers to Confessions by Augustine as the first noted autobiography. Another encyclopedia, New Age Encyclopedia, does not give an exclusive place to autobiography, but it is treated as part of Biography. The difference between autobiography and biography is not treated seriously, perhaps. Further, Cassel’s Encyclopedia of Literature describes the term with slight difference. It says, “Autobiography is the narration of a man’s life by himself”, continuing “It should contain a greater guarantee of truth than any other form of biography, since the central figure of the book appears also as a witness of the events which he records” (Cassel’s Encyclopedia Vol. I. 243). Here, the editor seems to be keen on the truth spoken by the author along with individuality. Indirectly he draws ‘Lakshman Rekha’ and demands truthfulness and sincerity in expressions. The encyclopedia lays down certain doubts on the writer and questions the reliability of author’s memory. Therefore, it cautions us while
reading or writing an autobiography in order to protect the objectivity of historical facts. This definition protects the interest of the history and serenity of the genre.

Contrasting with past, recent edition of *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines autobiography as, “A book in which someone writes about their own life, or books of this type” (*Longman Dictionary* 87). *Oxford Advance Learner’s Dictionary* defines the term, “The story of a person’s life, written by that person; this type of writing” (*Oxford Dictionary* 87). These two definitions are quite similar in their approach in defining the term. Both of them talk about a ‘type’ of writing which narrates or includes a narration, and the book is written by the person who is part of the book. It is clear to say, according to the two dictionaries, that an autobiography has a process of writing of a person and by the person himself. This writing process has a vital role to play while defining the genre, autobiography. It lays a strong ground in establishing it as a literary genre as it talks about the literariness of the genre.

Adding to the cluster of meanings and statements, *The Wordsworth Encyclopedia* observes the meaning of autobiography beautifully. It explains that a person’s own biography, or written account of his or her life, distinguished from the journal or the diary by being a connected narrative, and from memoirs by dealing less with contemporary events and personalities. This explanation tries to establish autobiography firmly as a literary work. It detaches the term from other forms like journal and diaries. At the same time it retains umbilical cord of autobiography with biography. Apparently the definition looks into psychological basis of the narrator which is again doubtful as we have seen in earlier reference. It demands separation of the narration from contemporary events so the present influence should not guide the past. Hence, history ought to be represented through
narration as narrator saw or experienced it, without any interference of his contemporary forces.

Therefore, a decent explanation of the term would be an autobiography is a written account of the life of a person written by that person. It tries to comprise the whole definitions in convincing words to reach every mind.

Raj Kumar, a dalit critic, defines autobiography in Indian context “It is an act of a conscious self which is commented through the active help of memory” (Kumar 3). Raj Kumar, focusing on Dalit personal narratives, defines it from a subordinates view point and hints at postmodern concept of autobiography. He hails identity of individual, consciousness of a subordinate who writes his own life-history to make his life magnificent out of insignificant. Here an autobiography becomes self-healing, emotional relief and a source of self affirmation. In traditional trend autobiography was meant for those who achieve greater works or ‘white collared’ people. But now it is a defending weapon of the downtrodden.

Autobiography, in a broader perspective, is used almost synonymously with the term “life writing” and denotes all modes and genres of telling one’s own life. Precisely, autobiography as a literary genre signifies a retrospective narrative that undertakes to tell the author’s own life, or a substantial part of it, reconstruct one’s personal development within a given historical, social and cultural framework. While autobiography on the one hand claims to be non-fictional (factual) in that it proposes to tell the story of a ‘real’ person, it is inevitably constructive, or imaginative in nature and as a form of textual ‘self-fashioning’ ultimately resists a clear distinction from its fictional relatives (auto-fiction, autobiographical novel), leaving the generic borderlines blurred. All the definitions and explanations of autobiography by various dictionaries, encyclopedias and other references indicate
a common understanding with thin differences of opinion, prefacing the nuances of the genre, autobiography. With an overview of all the definitions, one can assume the culmination of individuality, history and, of course, literature. Autobiography is the only genre to be liberal in providing equal opportunity to all three aspects. While narrating the past the author associates himself with historical events and enriches the literary quality, because literature is supposed to speak truth.

Though it is herculean task, we are left with tracts of autobiography by different critics and historians in order to get its meaning, and autobiographies or life stories are as old as human history. In past man has recorded human life-stories in different form to keep human consciousness active to understand and analyze his life. The stories about us existed since long time in different forms. We have life-stories to teach, to entertain, to record or just to pass on legacy, but we have life-stories from time to time. They were generally in the form of poetry or songs, stories or folktales. Broadly speaking, mythological stories, epics or any currently existing stories are systematically constructed biographies, being edited from time to time; sometimes they are oral as well as written. Considering the description of any individual character, speculations, characterization, and contextualization of the individual stint of actions in the particular social space and specific period, is one of the biographical fabrics. Therefore, even classical texts too have biographical sketches.

The masters of Enlightenment of Europe had grasped the importance of autobiography and made it their study subject. Their literary model’s life stories were studies from bibliographical and psychological view point in which both inner experience and historical sense were under growth. The value of autobiography grew gradually due to its value for knowledge and recognition of individuality, not just for readers’ amusement. In course of time, autobiographical
literature received different views through assessments. There was a great demand for ‘confessions’ written by men of outstanding achievements, public figures in ancient times. In the eighteenth century humanists made extensive surveys of the autobiographies of men of immense credibility which hinted at a gradual shift in the genre; from instructing, guiding, motivating and serving the man to a field of specialized interest.

The conceptual growth of autobiography indicates the way in which the individual’s senses of thoughts and personality have developed in the Western world. “They were developed from the spirit of the Enlightenment, for the assessment of the value of autobiography, the points of view that corresponded to the psychological and moral interest which Predominated in that epoch” (Misch Vol. 1. 2). In the nineteenth century, with the renewal of human studies, autobiography gained a guaranteed place among psychology and history. Along with the specialized interest, individual value was also recognised. It was agreed upon that highly civilized society produces the confessions of unique personalities. In these human documents nature of a individual, age, and race, were focused in autobiography for the recognition of individuality. That is why in the nineteenth century it had been declared that “the most moving novels are autobiographical studies, or narratives of events emerged in the ocean of the world” (Misch Vol. 1. 3).

In Europe autobiographies are now studied to reveal the in which the individual’s sense of personality that had developed gradually. As the formation of personality depends on the social environment and self-awareness of the individual, the genre has two claims to make; as a specialized literary genre, and as an original interpretation of experience. Composition of autobiography is not like other forms, it has no defined boundaries, or particular form, whereas other forms
have common and preserved changes from time to time, from place to place. Autobiography is freed from the dependency on external state of the world. Men with original caliber modified or just used lyrics, poetry, biography, novel, epic, drama, historical records, imaginary forensic addresses, rhetorical declamation, epigrammatic description of character, prayer, letters, confessions, literary portraits, soliloquy, court memoirs and different narrative forms for writing autobiographies.

As it is mentioned earlier itself in the eighteenth century the term autobiography made its appearance to refer to as a technical term of science. In the nineteenth century it came into currency in the place of the earlier customary name of ‘memoirs’. This traditional name has deeper meaning and psychological source of history. This conception includes definite type of writings irrespective of their content. It has no personal connotation and it can serve as little for notes of purely factual, official reports of business or proceedings of a learned society, as well as of autobiographical record. It implies that the author has no intention of coming forward and claiming himself a literary person. He proposes only to supply material for a literary work that may be compiled by future historians, or serve for research in other ways.

On the other hand, autobiography, the term implies simply that “The person whose life is described is himself the author of the work” (Misch Vol. 1. 7). It conveys nothing in regard to great literature or literary form. There is basic difference of the objectivity of these two as their purpose has been shifting from time to time. The Humanists of Renaissance understood the value of individual life and wrote the hagiographies ad memoirs, whereas the late eighteenth century celebrated it through self-narration. It is the identity of individual or author and the subject that is based on the great interest we moderns have in autobiography.
A ‘historiographer’ enquires all the facts by the study which is never complete, but the autobiographer has all the facts in his passion. These facts collectively awaken spontaneously, in the mind, the feelings of the autobiographer by their occurrences, whereas ‘historiographer’ needs high intensity of imagination in order to preset his narrative, the feelings, aroused by the incidents happened. An autobiographer has every event connected as a whole and significance of its own. The author himself knows the significance of each and every experience which is mentioned or omitted in the text. The author’s ability to conceive the life as whole is maturity that has grown out of his own experience and contemplations. This growth of the author’s inner spirit is a fundamental advantage of autobiography; it is a philosophized decorum. It becomes the most instructive form of literature as human life is lived by the individual in a given social-political and cultural context; it is an inexhaustible meditation. This meditation has its own place, not merely what is assumed to be ‘sub-division of biography’. It has gained special place as it is a manifestation of an enigmatic knowledge and psychological phenomenon. In this sense the study of autobiography is the study of human self-awareness. This awareness implies that our life is emanated from our ‘self’. It is important to detach from practical life and introspect our deeds at least once in a while.

The reflection on our deeds, which is a psychological root, leads to self-revelation in a given situation in various forms. Not only autobiography, even creative writings like story, fiction, poetry, etc., come under those forms. Though they exist as individual entity without knowing or referring to the author’s background, they are the representatives of the author’s mind or personae. They reflect the writers’ personality and are the replicas by expressing his feelings in any form he wants to put in.

The manifestation of ‘self’ through autobiography must make the readers feel that it is the author himself who is narrating, because there is always a
skeptical observation about the truthfulness in the text. The knowledge that autobiography asserts shall be put on “fence” to investigate or interrogate this aspect with the help of the analysis of few well-known autobiographies. Perhaps, the most honest autobiographer would be the one who writes ‘confessions’ not an ‘apologia’ or writing for publication purpose, or for entertaining cause. This will be evident enough as it won’t touch the reader. Brooding over the recollected material is the truth and real element in an autobiography. It is the inner form or style of the autobiography in which he conceives his life as a whole selects and emphasizes the incidents and builds up his account of life; this style reveals sincerity of an autobiography. Even a quick-witted or cunning cannot frame stories and deceive us as the style of the narration unleashes everything. It is autobiography which reveals the inner form, not letters, diaries, etc., though we find them interesting to read and recollect.

Therefore, autobiography is not merely objective narration that talks about historical facts, it would be a wrong judgment of the genre. They cannot be objective narratives because of two reasons- firstly the life events are recorded as narrator’s own experience, secondly this may cause the loss of historical value. Moreover, autobiographical narratives can be inadequate in detailed accuracy. Yet, it is representative of an age; it provides contemporary outlook through the facts, keeps the spirit of the time alive; in fact it is a zeitgeist.

When an autobiography represents the spirit of an age, it takes certain amount of liberty; the liberty is enjoyed by being a creative art of literature. Historical facts gain spiritual values within the significance of life-story. Historical facts of the past are the ‘organic whole’ where incidents are innately gathered and comprehended in an autobiographical form. The unity of the genre is not just historical continuity; it is the inner consistency and continuous process. It is possible because of the progressive evolution of individual personality.
Throughout history these personalities have built up a coherence to form autobiographies in different times by different individuals. Here, it is unjust to reduce autobiographical genre to mere individual’s impulses to express his ego, or story-telling joy or desire for fame. It is a manifestation of the manifold of human relations; the relationship between man to world or the other way; it is human self-aware of himself, as a ‘person’ to the other persons and to nature and spiritual surrounding. It is the individual’s deep thoughts and interest to spread those thoughts outwards which makes human dealings immerse in the world. So, the world has kept the evolution of autobiography in our history.

Going little back to the discussion, the relationship of an individual, where the author asserts his identity, to the world can be passive as well as active. While recording life-events, an author may take a stance that would decide the nature and form of its narration. “Man’s relation with the world may be conceived actively or passively. From this consideration comes the distinction between autobiographies and ‘memoirs’ (using the latter word with personal connotation that has become current since the nineteenth century)” (Misch vol. I. 15). If we look at memoirs, the writers become merely external observer of the events and write, partially become the part of those events (like commentators). The memoirs tell how writers get involved or become witness to those incidents, which is a passive attitude. The speaker distances himself from adding personal feelings, but may add commentaries in exceptional cases. In autobiography, the author narrates the story by taking the central position in it and becomes the subject of the suffering, which is an active participation. The narrator takes the responsibility of asserting the incidents as his own and brings authenticity to the narration. With the authentic narration he establishes himself with the worldly affairs. Therefore, active relation of the author and the world is a major element of autobiography. Such elements in Europe developed this man-world relationship so much that autobiography has
taken great turn in course of time with new ideas; innovation has kept us introspect our deeds; this introspection has always contributed to the genre.

The dynamic shifts or ‘trends’ of the autobiographical writing, from Confessions to Memoirs then to Autobiography, have made it more interesting and attractive to discern through man and the world relation from various angels; they have paved a structure throughout their evolution. Perhaps, a glance on the first masters of this genre would justify the concept of autobiography. When we have a retrospective glance at the origin of the genre, the tradition of writing about one’s life, goes back to Aristotle’s *Seventh Epistle* of the fourth BC in which he refers to some of the important events of his life. Besides, it records that great people like the Great Caesar have left some records of their lives behind. But Augustine’s *Confessions* is taken, by all critics, to be the first full-fledged autobiography in the Western literary history. Georg Misch gives a number of examples of writers who followed the footprints of Augustine. His style and spirit of writing confessions were imitated for centuries by persons like Tustin, Hilarious, the Bishop of Poitiers, Gragory of Nazianzus, Patrick ad Saint Teresa. The authors came under the influence of Christianity and had undergone great changes; from ignorance to truth. Their life accounts are filled with passion and emotionally charged Confessions. Hence, Confessions were written through ages with didactic and evangelical orientation rather than focusing on individual’s lives.

Notable changes were found in Confessional mode of writing during the age of Renaissance as man became more reflective. Non-Confessional and secular oriented writings replaced Confessional trend. At this juncture of time (transformation), memoirs, dairies, chronicles, journals were written. They had begun to show some of the elements of autobiographical form. Man’s sense of individuality had sprung up so forcefully that he started to find his ‘self’ in his writings. Man started to question the established norms in every sphere of
knowledge in order to assert his individual space, and did not leave a single opportunity to introspect the individual and social life. Social unrest, political swiftness, fights between class and races led to change the subject matter of human thought; it apparently affected his writing too. For instance, Rousseau’s *Confessions* is the celebration of individual life within the realm of religious ring which is closer to Augustine’s *Confessions*, but the matter is purely secular. Raj Kumar observes, “In spite of this change in its thrust autobiography as a genre received impetus from the religious culture of the West as well as the economic transformation of the society, which enabled individuals to assert their uniqueness” (Kumar 9). Among Puritans like John Bunyan, the author of *Grace Abounding*, Confessional journals were commonly found during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The four wheels of English novel wrote their novels in first person narration to avoid stigma of fiction as autobiography was already being accepted as an authentic genre to deal with personal lives.

On the other hand, Franklin’s *Autobiography* restated that autobiography writing had developed into unique and autonomous genre portraying the author’s life. As earlier mentioned, it was the nineteenth century that had defined the term autobiography. In 1809 Robert Southey used the term referring to the autobiographical works available in the market well before his life time in his journal *Quarterly Review*. From this point of time we clearly distinguished autobiography as a separate genre from the other forms of literature which are already mentioned above. In his journal, Southey clearly eliminates other literary forms that had less proximity of autobiographical nature, by giving proper definition and conceptual framework. Since then numerous critics have offered varying definitions on autobiography. By the time of First World War, many popular or individuals of fame like Charlotte Bronte, Dickens, Darwin, T. S. Eliot and many more had written their live accounts and added much more to today’s
autobiographical form. Therefore, a French critic gives a befitting definition and says, “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, particularly the story of his personality” (Lejeune 4). Thus, autobiography, having classical roots, has undergone drastic changes in its concept, and has become a unique act of creative writing. Keeping those shifts from epoch to epoch, here is a critical analysis of few well-known autobiographies from the West.

Augustine was ecumenical bishop of Hippo, in North Africa from 396-430, in his early forties. He had resigned from professor’s post of rhetoric in Milan. He was baptised hesitantly and came to Africa after losing his parents in 396. His *Confessions* was written while he was a Bishop, and this is the fact of significance that will be seen now.

The term Confession is generally understood as ‘an acknowledgement’ or ‘admission’ of having committed a sin or wrong in past. The act of Confession in Christianity has a vital role as the confessor asserts his past deeds; an act of expiation, by surrendering himself. By doing so he acknowledges his faith in God. Later the confessor is honoured with martyrdom though he does not die really. This explanation holds relevance when we talk about Augustine’s *Confessions*, because he had a sense of committing sins only after his ‘Christian soul’ was awakened. His realization of ‘self’ came after association with Christianity, where his past sins, which may not be harming or big enough to feel penance. But petty issues make us realize our ‘self’ and make history by correcting our misdeeds. Misch writes, “The writing of autobiography has not seldom resulted from crucial events in a life, which compelled the individual to depart from every day routine; the sense of the contact of a man’s own existence with that which transcends our petty person life emerges and clamours for record by the reflective mind” (Misch Vol. II. 625). The emergence of ‘self’ with critical and reflective mind, Augustine
created history by writing *Confessions*; this became a great autobiographical form first ever written from author’s sincere viewpoint about life and world. Though many Confessions were existing prior to Augustine, there was no document with explicit personal life events that form an autobiography. It is significant that for the first time a Confession asserts the individual identity that kept recurring in Europe during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Its theme, form and narrations had set the standards for today’s autobiographies.

The *Confessions* is divided into twelve main parts and each part is further divided into chapters; Augustine calls the parts ‘Books’. From Book I-X he records different stages of personal life. Books XI, XII and XIII are written as independent pieces like appendix, but they be read collectively as a high standard discourse of Christian philosophy. Here, Georg Misch splits the ten Books into three portions in accordance with the incidents The first section, from Book I to V, is about author’s childhood, youth and nativity that reveal the growing perplexity with world; second section, from Book VI to IX, leads up to his conversion to Christian faith which is a turning point of the narration. The final portion, Book X, describes the narrator’s current Christian life. The interconnection of these separated parts form a systematic growth of the narrator’s ‘self’ from ordinary to philosophical mind. The author’s philosophical desire to make others follow the true faith (in fact many critics have called it a conversion document) and acknowledgement of sins is recorded from Book IX to XIII. Hence, in this philosophical treatise to God, he urges for the pronouncing on sin, confession and redemption that lead to salvation.

It is remarkable that *Confessions* on one hand provides space to the protagonist who commits sins over and again, on the other hand it gives the protagonist a respectable life by providing him a chance to his life story through confession. This is where *Confessions* stands as a model to many writers who dwell upon autobiography. Yet, the motive is unclear to us, but one can make out
from the formation and style that it is his inner urge to confess to God for his sins, and to guide others in this way. There might be one more reason that he was forced to confess his Christian faith to the Church in order to prove his sincerity, because, as he mentions in it, he kept converting from one to another faith. Therefore, it was necessary for him to confess in front of God about his previous misadventure. This Confession, as a predecessor of autobiography, is an important literary document that speaks for individual identity within the realm of Christianity and provides a blueprint to modern autobiographers.

The European Renaissance had begun to witness the value of Confessions written by Greek and Latin masters, and their emphasis on individual life. The trends of Memoirs and journals had brought in many changes into Confessional forms, both in form and theme. So, the Confession mode of writing had underwent change since Augustine; the change was a shift from spiritual mode to secular one were the focus got displace from sin and religious doctrines of person to emphasis on individual’s day-to-day worldly sins. Due to Enlightenment and many cultural transformations in Christianity, Confessions were being modified to secular tone. From Augustine’s *Confessions* to Rousseau’s *Confessions* of eighteenth century, the change is marked by the priority of their authors to write autobiography. Though Rousseau followed the footprints of Augustine in the form of Confession, Rousseau delivered on his contemporary socio-political expectations and wrote less abstract and more practical matter.

Rousseau, the French philosopher, influenced the Enlightenment in France and world, the French Revolution, and many political and educational thought. His idea of ‘return to nature’ was impetus of Romanticism of nineteenth the century, and his *Confessions* initiated modern autobiographical trend that had blazed a new way of self-assertion.
From the structural point of view, like Augustine, Rousseau called the chapters of his *Confession* ‘Books’. The *Confessions* was a distinct work. Each part consists of six chapters or Books totally twelve Books. Book I to VI were written between 1765 and 1767 and Books from VII to XII were written between 1769 and 1780. Speaking from thematic formation, it can be briefed into Books I to IV mostly talk about Rousseau’s childhood and teenage experiences explaining his robustness and dreams. Books V to VI describe him in good light as a young man who after realizing his past misdeeds tries to amend his life. But I Book VII to VIII the young man falls again into disgrace, ad he partially covers in Book IX. But then follow disaster after disaster as described in Books X to XI from which Rousseau hardly recovers until he completes his last Book XII. Thus Rousseau’s Confessions is all about decline and fall. The autobiography is ‘Rousseau’s account of humiliation and shamefulness. For instance, Rousseau recounts an incident when, while a servant, he covered up his theft ribbon by framing a young girl- who was working in the house- for the crime. In addition Rousseau explains the manner in which he disposes of the five children he had with Therese Levasseur. Certainly one requires strength to admit such dark side of truth.

One noticeable aspect that distinguishes the *Confessions* from the traditional Confessions is the focus of the narration. The focus is not on human vices in terms of a Christian morality or the necessity of conversion, but stresses larger significance on the confession to the public, forming a discourse of selfishness and unrefined while at the same time recording own thoughts, impulses, and desires. He does not uproot the tradition of Confessions but modifies them to fit into the cultural context. For instance, Rousseau, like Augustine, confesses to God to judge his past deeds and thoughts, at the same time he proposes the toast of judgment to
his fellowmen to scrutinize his character and study in the light of their own experiences. So, he writes:

If I were to take it upon myself to draw conclusions from all this and to say to my reader, ‘Such is my character’, he might think, if not that I am deceiving him, with total simplicity, everything I have felt, I cannot, except by design, lead him astray; and even if this were my design, I would not easily achieve it by the means. It is for the reader to assemble and all these elements and to determine the being that they constitute; the result must be his own work. So that if he is mistaken, all the error is on his side. (France 170)

The statement bringing a modern sense to confession and makes it a secular mode of writing a confession. His humble tone, endeavor to anticipate criticism and self-scrutiny have made his work unique by setting a benchmark in autobiographical writing tradition.

Over the years the influence of Rousseau’s thoughts continued to inspire many people to write their life stories. Benjamin Franklin, a multifaceted scholar, might have come under the influence of European pre-Romantic ideas, but it is difficult to say whether he had influence of Rousseau directly on him to write Autobiography. Franklin’s uninterrupted contact with Europe and classical literature, particularly Confessions, and his extensive reading ability would have made him get acquainted with confessional literature. Being born in America and one of founding fathers of USA, Franklin was a renowned polymath, leading author, printer, political theorist, politician, freemason, postmaster, scientist, inventor, civic activist, statesman, and diplomat, his endeavor to write his life story definitely deserves attention and appreciation.
The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, a fragment record, was written between 1771 and 1790 by Franklin, which he himself called it a memoir and it was published posthumously. The autobiography was written in four parts, describing the different periods at which they were written. It is a fragment because none of these parts is coherent and complete, factually and thematically. It was written in a span of nineteen year. The first part was written in 1771 while staying at home in Hampshire, in England. This part deals with his childhood days, early years spent in Boston, his adventures in England, and his married life in 1730. His inability to compose second part persisted until 1784 in Passy, Paris. While writing second part he missed the rhythm of the first part. With great difficulty he had to finish the second part. By this time America had become free, both America and England had come to an agreement; therefore he had become busy with official tasks. Thus, he started his third part and completed it in intervals. The fourth part, a brief account of his life as a business man, was written just before his death in 1790. It is obvious that the autobiography lacks a compact structure, and loosely connected. Therefore, it is an incomplete autobiography.

As a matter of interest, the autobiography is written in the forms of letters, addressed to his son William Franklin. This was an innovative idea (may be he did not do it consciously) that influenced many in the following years. In the opening chapter itself he explains his motive to write his autobiography; he wanted to celebrate the ‘vanity’ of life. Born in a poor family of 20 members and humble background, Franklin had grown to higher degree of reputation, crossing many hurdles of life. He thought his life story deserved to be recorded so that it can be a guiding star to those who wish to come out of poverty and obscurity of life. It is explicit throughout his autobiography that he wants to assert his identity, and he never hides his social background and fearing humility. But the problem arises
when the reader looks for his identity. Because the autobiography does not give all facets of him; he was a printer, swimming coach, tallow chandler, seaman, merchant, soap boiler, an apprentice, etc., he fails to construct particular identity due to vivid nature of his life’s occupations. It is “an elaborate fabrication, truthful in its details yet subtly misleading in its overall plan. He does not disguise and disown his ambitions, does not pretend; he deliberately presents worldly comforts and human vanity before us which have a constructive role in building an individual’s life as well a nation. He seems to have written everything, though incoherent, carefully and watchfully. On one side he is humble enough to deny that he was not good public speaker in school days and was hardly correct in language. But later he claims that he should probably be proud of his humility.

This adventure of writing of autobiography by real struggler received appreciation and criticism equally. For the loosely aligned and unfocussed narration, it was attacked being middle-sized, sturdy, snuff-coloured Doctor Franklin. But when we look at innovative style, publication and critical response it is evident that it has received more positive responses. As Raj Kumar says, “Franklin’s legacy to American literature in general and American autobiography in particular remains invaluable even today” (Kumar 33), it is difficult to ignore and by-pass the Autobiography while we study the genre as it is a successful story of a social animal.
References


