REVIEW OF WELL KNOWN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF INDIAN WOMEN WRITERS

The present chapter reviews the autobiographies written by the women writers of Indian English Literature. The autobiography or memoir is an old and favorite form of women writers to express their feelings. The autobiographies studied here are from women with political background and with ordinary homemakers. They share a common message of courage and determination to prove their might.

2.1 Etymology of Autobiography

Autobiography by its very nature brings to us an increasing awareness of the nature of our own selves and our share in the human condition. It appeals to us not only because of the excitement of recorded gossip information whispers but also because it helps to find an order and meaning in life that is not always to be found in experience itself. A genuine autobiography is both an essay in truth and an experience in being, thus combining the most significant features’ of philosophy, psychology and history.

Autobiography as a distinct mode of literary expression is yet to be recognized. There is a total dearth of critical literature on the subject. The writing of autobiographies is of recent origin in our country and is essentially the result of English education. The autobiography, the memoir, diary and letter writing constitute what is termed literature of self-revelation. The memoir is mainly concerned with the affair of a select number of people often in high society.
Just as the motives for writing an autobiography are varied so also are the motives from which it is studied. Autobiographical details such as clothes, in fiction or as in the novels of Dickens, Thackeray and Jane Austen interest us. According to, R.C.Sinha,

“In the context of the rise and growth of Indo-Anglican autobiography it would be more appropriate to consider the ferment in the collective consciousness of the Indian mind as basic and the political unrest as an expression of it. “

The ever-changing reality of life inevitably reflects itself in literature. The position of women in society is no exception to this phenomenon. The status of women all over the world particularly in India has been undergoing a rapid change in recent times. Woman defined, as the center of culture, but actually imprisoned in the walls of the family and shackled by tradition, now looks upon herself from a different angle. The Indian women writers have voiced their feelings through their sensibilities, their awareness about feminine problems. It is the male society, which compels her to choose her roles according to their convenience. She if forced to act as either a slave or an idol. Kamala Das, the noted poet and writer of English fiction in her memoir,

“Often, I toyed with the idea of drowning myself to get rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way, is natural to all. I wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvement.”

Women Autobiography Theory is the first comprehensive guide written by Simony Smith and Julia Watson. It reflects the burgeoning field of women’s autobiography drawing into one volume on women’s life writing since 1960. As Carroll Smith writes,

“It is more than a collection on women autobiography theory; it is significant scholarly achievement reflecting the full spectrum of studies in feminist autobiography.”

It is observed that the mainstream literature written by men has represented women as meek, self-sacrificing and chaste all the time.
These women have expressed freely by writing poetry, short stories and autobiographies. A number of autobiographies written by women were published in the nineteenth century. Women’s identity is defined by relationships as in India a woman is associated with the community in which she is born. Who defines this community of women? Are women brought up in well-defined patriarchal community? Do women represent themselves, as an entity of this patriarchal society? Alternatively, do they break away from it? These are some of the searching questions, which remain to be answered by the society.

In writing a woman’s life Carolyn G. Heilbronn says that a woman’s life can be described in four ways:

“The women herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write a biography, or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously and without realizing or naming the process.”

An autobiography is a literature of personal revelation and its main interest lies in conscious or unconscious self-portrayal by the author. The writer must not give an account of his external life and largely in chronological order, but he must give an account of his inner life. i.e. Sensation. The ideas and emotions that keep floating not only through his/her conscious self, but also through the unconscious one. Both this external and internal life should find a literary expression and this need not only command over language but also an artistic self-control and ordering of material.

Different social, cultural, literary, and political others that have gone in to the making of author’s personality should be fully brought out without any minimization. According to R.P.Sinha,

“The literary renaissance that began with India’s contact with England made a remarkable contribution as it excited and stimulated the autobiographical impulse in Indians.”
Prof. Meena Sodhi has advocated women’s capacity of critical resistance in her critical work, ‘Indian writing in English- The autobiographical mode,

“However, we find whole women autobiographers who consider women’s culture, as a ‘sub-culture’, men’s culture being the main culture, with the women confirming mainly to it. A woman is taught to be selfless, submissive and is only a daughter, a wife or a mother.”

According to Andre Maurois,

“Autobiography is a prolonged speech for the defense and is of two types; one is where the writing is as interesting as novels and as true as the finest life. It has truth tone and a fidelity and impartiality in portraiture of a very high quality indeed. Best autobiographies are those, which expose the inner journey of the self and depict the inner struggles of the person. It establishes a coherent and individual identity of the person.”

The autobiography depicts the hidden form of inwardness and the writer has to establish the portrait of the self in the public eye. One has to consider whether a woman reveals her unique self-indulges in self-exploration. A woman’s autobiography generally deals with the various relationships like those with her parents, siblings and with her spouse, children and other women of her family set up. Her identity is established only because of these relationships in her life. A man’s autobiography is mainly concerned with his success story, achievements and the world of work. He rarely focuses on his family relationships.

Thus, women’s autobiographies deal mainly with the emotional turbulence of women and their relationships in the social setup. Nevertheless, twentieth century came up with a set of women writers exposing extraordinarily intellectual and dashing women writers like Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Shobha De, Mrinal Pande, and Dilip Tiwana. They are no longer passive, submissive ‘Sita’ or ‘Savitri’ but dashing, bold and innovative in their techniques of writing also.
2.2. **Well known Autobiographies of Indian women writers**

The writing of Autobiography form in India in its existence from the early 19th century. In the initial stage, the Autobiographies of Kings and Queens were in Existence. Later on the political leaders have started writing their Autobiographies. In Indian English literature, very few Indian women writers have written their Autobiography in the pre and post-Independence era.

2.2.1 **Autobiographies in the pre-Independence era**

Now, let us examine the famous autobiographical works of women writers. To begin with, the super cop Kiran Bedi.

Dr. Kiran Bedi is a virtual treat for the reader. The book traces her life right from childhood to her career as a daredevil woman cop. Honestly depicting an honest cop’s fight for survival, her problems with the bureaucracy. Then moving on to her soul searching experiences as the I.G. prison, Tihar Jail, Delhi and the consequent spiritual journey on which embarked trying to reform hardened.

Kiran N. Peshawaria was born on 9 June 1949 in Amritsar, the second of four sisters. She is widely recognized as a woman with sense of mission. She is keenly aware that her life is different that most of other woman in India.

Kiran’s father a talented tennis player and her mother a brilliant student whose education has been curtailed by early marriage; they determined that their daughters would have every opportunity to achieve their own life goals. At the age of 14, Kiran began to compete as an amateur tennis player travelled all over the country by winning prizes at several universities and state level. She also became an international women’s lawn tennis champion of Asia in 1972. However, she had a craving for N.C.C to fulfill her inner sense and desire to serve the people so she participated in N.C.C, which gave her the first taste of khaki.

Kiran decided to dry up bootlegging and the illicit liquor business in order to fight drunken crime on street corners. She has started a ‘beat box ‘system in which
complaints were received from each ward. Kiran received her nickname ‘Crane Bedi’ during the 9th Asian games in New – Delhi in 1982. After Asian Games Kiran was posted as a police commissioner in Goa to handle drug trafficking. She wanted a challenging role and asked her superiors and she was posted to Aizwal, the capital of Mizoram where she completed her doctoral dissertation on ‘Drug abuse and domestic violence’. In 1993, she was appointed I.G. Tihar jail New Delhi. She carried out number of reforms for the prisoners such as prison schools, yoga classes and meditation for all prisoners to uplift their spiritual life. Her well documented achievements at Tihar jail attracted worldwide attention. She was a recipient’s of multiple awards, Bureaucrats were however successful in removing her from I.G. Tihar jail in May 1995, under the guise of ignoring statutes and long lasting procedures.

Media has played an immense role in appreciating her activities for either traffic management at Asian games or the lawyers strike or her reforms at Tihar. Press has always remained on her side. At the same time, they have grilled her also in the case of Rajan Pillai’s death in Tihar Jail.

‘I Dare’ is not only a book to be read as a biography but it is a force to be installed by each Indian to fight against either wrong traditions or to oppose the bias precedents with honesty and firmness.

Indian women writers have established a permanent place in the arena of literature, because they have written with a women’s point of view. They have not initiated male manner of writing. Majority of Indian women autobiographies belong to the first category of autobiography described by Andre Maurois. They have expressed a genuine female experience. According to Andre Maurois,

“*Autobiography is a prolonged speech for the defense and is of two types: one is where the writing is as interesting as novels and as true as the finest ‘life. It has truth tone and a fidelity and impartiality in portraiture of a very high quality indeed.*"
The best autobiographies are those, which expose the inner journey of the self and depict the inner struggles of the person. It establishes a coherent and individual identity of the person.

The autobiographies from Sunity Devee’s, ‘The autobiography of Indian Princess’, (1921) Mrinal Pandey’s’ Daughter’s Daughter’ (1993) and Taslima Nasserin’s ‘My Girlhood Days ‘express the inner search of women with women’s point of view. Until the end of nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, women autobiographies lacked an authoritative voice to speak. They could speak only of family or religion.

In the later part of twentieth century, we find autobiographies of Amrita Pritam (The Revenue Stamp), Kamala Das (My story), and Shobha De (Selective Memory). As well as the other modern women, writers like Dilip Tiwana, Saranjeet Shan, Mrinal Pandey and Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin. They have boldly expressed the social inhibitions and cultural taboos laid down by the society .Their autobiographies have a tone of truth and fidelity.

Women writers like Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Krishna Hutheesing and Nayantara Sahgal have written their autobiographies about the Indian struggle for freedom. Hence, their autobiographies have political learning’s too. The autobiography depicts the hidden form of inwardness ‘and the writer has to establish the portrait of the self in the public eye .One has to consider whether a woman reveals her unique self-indulges in self – exploration .

There are many women in India, who have felt the urge to express their inner selves to the reading public. These women have been lawyers, political activists, women from royal families and so on. There is a remarkable distinction between the writings of a woman and a man. This is evident not only in India but round the world.

A woman’s autobiography generally deals with the various relationships like those with her parents, siblings and with her spouse, children and other women of her family set up. Her identity is established only because of these relationships in her life. A man’s autobiography is mainly concerned with his success story, achievements and the world of work. He rarely focuses on his family relationships.
Thus, women’s autobiographies deal mainly with the emotional turbulence of women and their relationships in the social set up. Nevertheless, twentieth century came up with a set of women writers exposing extraordinarily intellectual and dashing women writers like Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Shobha De, Mrinal Pande and Dilip Tiwana. They are no longer passive, submissive ‘Sita ’or ‘Savitri ’but dashing, bold and innovative in their techniques of writing also.

India achieved freedom in 1947. Hence, forth began a new era of challenges and changes in Indian life. The new social scenario inspired creativity of the Indian writers in English as well as in other regional languages .Once the country become free and the society gained stability, people became candid and self- assertive. The social upheaval got expression not only in poetry and fiction but also in the autobiographies. The autobiographical genre got a new meaning and opened up new vistas of knowledge for all.

The autobiography of an Indian princess (1921) is one of the earliest writings by an Indian woman. Sunetee Devi, a daughter of Brahma follower of Keshav Chandra Sen, who became the Maharani of Cooch Behar, she lost her husband early in life. The book is a stepping-stone in the realm of Indian women autobiographies as it depicts the inner feelings of most of Indian women of 19th and 20th century.

Sunetee Devee’s parents demanded that their daughter should be married as per the Brahma rites and rituals .At first her in laws protested but the prince showered his choice on Sunity Devee only. Sunity Devee was well educated yet felt proud in following her hubby’s commands. She never wore pearl ornaments, as her husband did not like them. She also did not participate in partying, dancing or horse riding. She readily accepted restrictions of Maharaja and followed his footsteps like a true ‘Pativrata’. One has to give a second thought. Did Sunetee Devee achieve her identity in her society? One is not assured if her life turned out to be a role model for other women of India. Looking to her emotional and intelligence quotient. Her discontented inner wishes might have led her to write autobiography wherein she has portrayed herself as an ideal Indian woman.

Another remarkable woman autobiography is India Calling (1934) by Cornelia Sorabji. It is the autobiography of India’s first woman lawyer, who raged a struggle
against the suppression of women. Sorabji belonged to Parsi-Christian family. She was inspired to choose her job by observing the plight of women who visited her mother. Her book depicts the gender discrimination encountered by her not only in India but also in England where she went to study on a Government of India scholarship. She emerged victorious from her ordeals and succeeded in becoming a lawyer. Her autobiography deals mainly with her concerns for improving the sad condition of the women in the Indian society.

Krishna Hutheesing, “With No Regrets: an Autobiography” (1943) is an account of memories and reminiscences. Her autobiography has been termed as a simple picture incarnated in a simple frame. Sarojini Naidu also considers this autobiography as a simple and intimate depiction of the events. Krishna born in 1907 was the youngest child of the father Motilal Nehru and mother Sarup Rani. She used to judge those got honor and love of all other family members. She was wondering why her mother took so much trouble to please her son. She was also not happy in the first meeting with the Mahatma.

Like Nayan Tara Sahgal, she was also in the jail, which she has glorified in her memoir. She had contributed for India’s freedom struggle. She also takes pride of being the family member of the historical Nehru family. She had never expected to do a paid job but a job with dignity. Fortunately, she could get a job of a teacher and later on, she joined politics. Her autobiography is a true account of India’s freedom struggle. There are some concerns over the memoir as there is no individuality of the writer and she was isolated during freedom struggle.

The other famous autobiography we come across is of Indira Goswami, celebrated Assamese writer of contemporary Indian literature. Her autobiography is titled as, ‘The Unfinished Autobiography’ which describes the problems faced by an upper caste woman who is expected to behave according to the set by the patriarchal society. She demonstrates her resistance towards unjust religious customs and practices in India. She shares her experiences as a young widow and questions the patriarchal Hindu society for its cruel behavior towards widows. She went against society to find her own independent existence.
She is so bold and forward to describe about her sexual passion, her existence as a teenage girl and her reaction to the physical changes. She married outside her community. She did not hesitate to talk about her yearnings for physical pleasures that she had suppressed after her husband’s death. She could not come to terms with the shock of an unforeseen end to eighteen months of happy conjugal life. In an impulsive outburst of emotions, she spends a night with her husband’s friend, Kaikos Satarawala. She later questions herself,

“It was a time for self-assessment…. Then, why this sense of self-reproach?”

She also refused to acquiesce with the advice of her well-wishers who believed that faith alone can and bring her solace. She lost faith in religion and customs and sort refuge in her father’s diaries and letters that she had long preserved. In her anxieties to search for peace, she visited a number of sadhus and sanyasis but to no avail. She mentions,

“The sight of the holy saint could not bring any change to my heart. I (have) no desire left to go ... and ask for his guidance”.

By questioning the beliefs and customs, she confesses that these social customs do not provide solace to an agonizing heart.

Goswami also expresses resistance towards widowhood in her autobiography. She shows contempt towards society’s attitude against widows. She describes how widows in Vrindhvan known as ‘Radheshymis’, were poor and survived on a meager wages that they earned from singing Bhajans in temples. There was no one to provide them a shelter. Goswami, a widow herself, also faced such aversions in the society. In one such instance, she was made to sit separately from others for a lunch on some occasion, but she showed her aversion by immediately getting out of that place. Such resistance towards prevalent practices of the time shows that Goswami led an independent life without bothering much about customs in patriarchal society. By defying certain practices prevalent in her times and reaffirming her own beliefs and faith, she valued her individuality.
Women autobiographers have subverted the importance of the concept of marriage. Goswami was never interested in getting married and binding herself within the confinement of domesticities. She was interested in Madhu, an engineer by profession, and got married to him. She felt that she could accompany him to meet and record the life of the laborers. After Madhu’s sudden death in a road accident, she came across a well-to-do person who wanted to give her a new lease of life. However, she never showed any inclinations towards and decided to remain Madhu’s widow all her life.

2.2.2 Autobiographies in the post-independence era

India achieved freedom in 1947. Hence, forth began a new era of challenges and changes in Indian life. The new social scenario inspired creativity of the Indian writers in English as well as other regional languages. Once the country achieved freedom and the society gained stability people became candid and self-assertive. The social upheaval got expression not only in the poetry and fiction but also in the autobiographies. The autobiographical genre got a new meaning and open up new vistas of knowledge for all.

After independence, more and more Indian women feeling confident in expressing themselves through life narratives. Ishwani pseud is another writer catch the attention of the readers with her autobiography’ Girl in Bombay’ (1947) The book reveals the writer’s determination to pursue her own religion that is Shiya Khoja creed rather than pursuing religion of her husband that is Afghani Khoja. She becomes determined that she divorces her husband Rashid. After, the death her mother, Ishwani’s father had remarried. The stepmother laid down strict inhibitions on Ishwani and her sister. Marrying an educated Afghani Khoja youth meant freedom for Ishwani. However, after the marriage, she encountered the same conservative environment at her in laws. She disliked the hypocritical manner in which all the other daughter-in-laws pretended at the dining table and tried to satisfy their appetite by hiding the food in their handkerchiefs and eating it later in their bedrooms. At last, Ishwani abandoned her thralldom.

Savitri Devi Nanda is another not much known woman writer has written her autobiography as An Indian Girl (1950) She was born at her maternal home and for three years she did not meet her father. When at age of three her father came to take little
Savitri and her mother with him, she was overwhelmed with joy. She considered her father as most handsome man on the earth. Her father always encouraged her as a tomboy and wanted to give her good education. On the other hand, her mother did not appreciate her boyish behavior and sent her back to her grandparents’ house for a disciplined upbringing. Her life story reveals the training she received in domestic chores. By her maternal grandmother, she was not allowed to enjoy a carefree childhood, but was taught to be a docile, cute girl like all her cousins. Her father understood her truly and could not see the child being crushed under the social taboos. Hence, one night he took her way from the grandparents’ home and got her admitted in a convent school. Later, she pursued medical profession and wrote her story on the banks of Thames.

The subtitle of her autobiography needs consideration. It does remind us of what Germaine Bree argued in her chapter entitled Autobiography. Why should there be a separate section for ‘women’s autobiography? It seems autobiographical writing both by men and women are determined by the socio-historical background of the era.

The other less famous autobiography is of Brinda named as Maharani, the story of an Indian Princess (1953). In the royal family of the early twentieth century, male supremacy was predominant which is evident in this work. Here the father in law of Brinda abused and insulted her for not bearing a son. The autobiography is a tragic story of a helpless girl in a male dominated society. Engaged at the tender age of ten, Brinda was taken under the guardianship of her future father-in-law. She was sent to Paris to learn the western ways of life and etiquette along with a French governess appointed by her father-in-law. There she fell in love with a French man whom she called gay. Brinda possessed royal elegance, woman like extreme individuality of disposition. Her autobiography is a story of a conflict between the opposite poles of two-value systems of the East and the West. The autobiography is a story of dilemma in the mind of western-educated Indian woman. She never wanted to return to the Indian way of life and adapt herself to the old customs and traditions once again. It was a paradox that he father-in-law, who had sent her to Paris to become sophisticated modern woman, expected her to follow the ideal of a docile, timid, obedient wife. She started defying her in-laws and husband. The drift between them widened when she gave birth to three daughters subsequently. She established a girl’s school in her area to empower girls of the area and decided to do some social work. Her father-in-law insisted on a painful operation for a son but unfortunately failed and her
husband marries a second wife. In order to get the queenly crown, Brinda had to continue her conflict—habituated life in the same home with her three daughters Indira, Urmila and Sushila.

The concluding chapter of the autobiography depicts Brinda’s relationship with her three daughters among whom Indira, the eldest one was very independent like her. The other two were docile, modest, and had a happy marriage life. Brinda also passed her remaining life among friends and relatives in foreign land. The last chapter concludes with Brinda’s discussion with her daughter Indira.

Similarly, another autobiography written by a famous Bengali actor Binodini Dasi shows subversion and resistance to the norms and conventions of patriarchal society. Binodini Dasi is a marginalized woman by class, gender and profession. She is a legendary name in Bengali Theatre. Her autobiography My Story and My Life as an Actress portrays the life of a woman and pursuing the expedition of redefining her individuality. It is a major document of the Bengali theatre and portrays a life of a woman who showed resistance towards the prevailing attitude of Bhadralok against actors. She questions the very beliefs of society and adopts an individual existence in portraying her story, which she values as her own individuality.

Binodini encountered many hurdles and had to face criticism from people during her career as a theatre artist. She refused to succumb to it as a critic Eugenia DE LaMotte rightly mentions,

“Binodini fought to participate in the career she loved and refused to accept her culture’s reductive definition of her character.”

It is evident from her autobiography that she is highly self-respective. She gives importance to herself and her career, as she is the sole earner of her family. She is not at all hesitant in expressing her contempt for society that was responsible for making her prostitute and says,
"A prostitute’s life is certainly tainted and despicable, but where does the pollution come from? Surely, they were not despicable from the time that time that they were in the mother’s womb."

Like Goswami, Binodini asserts her individuality repeatedly in her book. Despite of the fact that she was very young as an artist; she very confidently presented herself in front of her senior actors. However, they loved her, especially by her mentor Grish Chandra Ghosh; she behaved very professionally with them. In an incident, which she mentions in her autobiography, the owner of a theatre named Pratapbahu refused to pay her due wages for a period of time when she was on leave. She protested against him and threatened to leave his theatre. When Girlish Bahu tried to placate her, her professional attitude is evident when she demands,

"I want a higher salary, and whatever money is due to me has to be put down in a contract; otherwise I shall not work."

After renouncing theatre, Binodini stayed with a man whom she addresses as Hridhoydebta in the autobiography. She fearlessly displays her emotions and love for him without bothering about people’s criticism. She also question’s people that while playing various mythological characters on the stage, did anyone from the enthralled audience have ever tried to see her inner self? She thus interrogates,

“When I had the opportunity to pronounce Krishna’s name, with what absolute yearning had I called out to him; was the viewer ever able to perceive this?”

For Binodini writing was an important means to express her emotions. After taking leave from theatre, she sought a refuge in writing. As a critic Bhattacharya, mentions that after being,

“Stripped of from everything that she considered precious the theatre, her last protector, her daughter—she can only live her writing.”
It seems in her writing she is reliving a life as an actor. She transmutes her acting skills into her writing. She lays bare the reason for writing this autobiography:

“I have written for my own consolation, perhaps for some unfortunate woman who taken in by deception has stumbled on the path to hell.”

Nayan Tara Sahgal is another woman from the Nehru family who used the autobiographical form of writing. She is novelist and columnist of great repute. She has written two autobiographies’ Prison and Chocolate Cake’ (1954), and ‘From Fear set Free’ (1962). Sahgal considers writing as an invaluable aid has great therapeutic cathartic function of literature.

Prison and Chocolate Cake is full of reminiscences from the family record, with emphasis on the political life of the family at Anand Bhawan in Allahabad. William Walsh,

“Thinks that it is a significant trend, started by a woman that of bringing politics in her works. Nayan Tara Sahgal’s writings have qualities of dashing journalistic prose, which exhibits her interest in the minute details of the political life.”

Prison and Chocolate Cake is like going behind the scenes of the freedom movement. There is a narrator, in this case Nayan Tara Sahgal. Jawaharlal’s niece, who is closely associated with the main action but is not a direct participant,There are larger than life heroes who shape larger than life-events in this case the Pandit Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Vijya Laxmi Pandit etc.

She has narrated Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination in 1948. There is the sense of history being relived but in different form. She gives an excellent account of an insider’s history of the Nehru family from the time that Sahgal starts observing her life to Gandhi’s assassination. There is a present history and journey both away from freedom movement a chronicle of Sahagal’s own growth. From a precocious child to a wise young
woman, founder moment like a comparison piece to the actual history in history books. Right from her days at Woodstock school, she has been overwhelmed by the tumultuous events before partition when many of her family members suffered at the hands of British dominance. Prison and Cake is a memoir, both heartrending when it speaks of the death of her father or the repeated visits of her mother Vijya Laxmi to prison. As she writes,

“I wrote Prison and Cake because I didn’t want the special magic of that time to disappear without a trace. I also felt I owed it to my three parents-the third being my uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru, to recapture this whole experience and keep it alive, rather than just let it become an event in a history book. For readers today, especially the young, it is remembering the love and laughter and high ideals that went into my parent’s contribution to the Non-violent fight for freedom.”

Sahagal’s another autobiography from fear set free is a sequel to the first one. It unravels Ghandhian influence on the writer. Here, Sahagal’s personal experience is emphasized more than the political activities. The core of both the books is personal experience through which the writer reaches for the liberation of her spirit. The first autobiography was not written with a view to publish and the writer had or maintained records. Hence, the chronological order has not been maintained.

Just like Sunetee Devee, Shobhila Das was another girl who loved to dress up like a boy. Nevertheless, her life story ‘A looks before and after’ (1956) does not express any feeling of inferiority for being born a girl. She is a born fighter and a blunt woman. She is bold and assertive. She received high education, often in boy’s college; she transformed a boy’s college of Cuttack in a co-education college. She never liked to mix up with docile and modest girls. Her friend circle consisted mainly of boys.

Women writers across the world have used memoirs, rather than the grand narratives of autobiography, to express their lived reality. In fact, some view the genre as a ‘female gendered act that exposes the duplicity of patriarchy and the sub-human, subaltern status accorded to women in male dominated societies.
Ismat Chagatai’s ‘A life in words’ is another memoir representing a powerful woman’s history. Mostly known for her path-breaking stories like ‘Lihaaf’ or ‘Chauthi Ka Joda’, Ismat was castigated as vulgar by her contemporaries. Her memoir ‘Kaghazi Hay Pariah,’ first published in full in 1994, and now translated as ‘A Life in Words,’ offers a glimpse into the turbulent and unconventional life of the author who refused to be bogged down by societal norms.

Born in a large upper-middle class family with eleven children, Ismat was born rebel as she says,

“There is something in me that militate against putting faith in anyone uncritically... One should first examine all points of disagreement before coming to a consensus.”

Her revolt started with ‘Prada’ system and protested against women’s segregation. She worked with her husband Sahid Latif and wrote stories and scripts for a few films including the iconic film Garam Hawa. Ismat also had her moments of weaknesses, her hidden sufferings, her nightmares and her many liaisons. All these pour out through the meandering memoir. The genre allows Ismat the scope to follow the terrains of her furrowed thoughts, combine her head with her heart, even while performing her ‘self’ in a dramatic manner, a quality that brings this work very close to the fictional world of her stories and novels.

Episodic in nature, the memoir bring to life many characters like is mat’s parents, her siblings and cousins, her aunt, her teachers at Aligarh, Mumtaz Jhan and Rashid Jhan. Ismat dissects through the facades of the largely feudal society that she came from with the precision of surgeon’s knife.

The other prominent but not much famous author in literary world is Popati Hiranandani, who has penned her autobiography as ‘The Pages of My Life’. The autobiography poignantly captures our attention towards the two world of pre and post partition India with their attendant losses and pains, joys and triumphs. The Pages of My Life maps her journey as a homeless, community les, displaced woman, caught in the web of nostalgia, agony and the pain of separation. The memoir traces the life of a Sindhi woman poised between two vastly different worlds, from childhood losses and joys to triumphs of
early youth in Hyderabad Sindh to profound realizations of adulthood. Her female protagonists bring to life critical junctures of unbecoming as they make their way in post-partition India. Tracing the migration of the Sindhi community and becoming as they make their way in post-partition India.

Marathi Dalit Sahitya has its founder writer as Shantabai Kamble. Her memoir in original Marathi version is ‘Jalmachi Chittarkatha.’ Here the protagonist Naja withstands the worst of class, caste and gender bias. Naja is from Mahar communities, which are the biggest Dalit communities in Maharastra. Shantabai was the first Dalit woman teacher in Sholapur district. She began teaching at Sholapur District Board School in 1942. Later on, she became Education Extension Officer in Jal Taluka of Sangli district. She was retired from teaching in the year 1981. This autobiography was first published in chapter wise scheme in Purva magazine in 1983 and was teleserialised as Najuka on Mumbai Doordarshan in 1990.

As Chhya Dattar speaks about memoir or biography, form her views as strong social worker for women’s causes,

“My understanding of Feminism deepened in March 1980 with the Mathura rape case. Many of us in Mumbai organized a demonstration and rally demanding changes in the rape law within the Marxist framework. We had analyzed patriarchy, under which women are suffering, but we never looked at the conditions that sustain exploitation. We understand that lack of education and access to property and employment were the casual elements. However, the rape issue dawned upon us the role of violence in women’s lives. Lack of education and employment were the symptoms or consequences of women’s lack of mobility, their vulnerability to violence within the home and in the public demand.”

Indian literature has not only attracted attention of the readers overseas but even their writers too. In case of Kamala Das, it has happened like that the Canadian filmmaker and award-winning writer Merrily Weisbord flew to India and decided to co-author biography of Kamala Das. The biography is The Love Queen of Malbar: Memoir of a friendship with Kamala Das.’ This literary biography is meditative and sexy. The book
offers insights into Kamala Das as writer and poet and her unusual relationship with a gay husband, whom she married as a 16 year old, when he was 36. The marriage lasted for 43 years, until Madhav Das’s death. Das talks of love affairs and weisbord is puzzled that Kamala’s relationship with her husband’s boss was never sexually consummated. Kamala expresses her inner,

“A writer moves away from family, old relationships, very far, with the speed of a falling star....Otherwise, the writer is destroyed, and only the member of the family remains: the mother, sister, daughter, wife,.....she will have to write against her loved one, put him under the microscope, dissect him, analyze his thoughts, his words. After a while, he is no longer the man you held in your arms at night. You have cut him in little silvers, everything is burst open, he is seeds and pulp and juice.’’

‘Because I am a Woman’ by Haimbati Sen is another other important and noted autobiography in Indian English literature. This detailed and intimate chronicles of the life of India’s earliest women doctors Haimbati Sen. Born in 1866 and married before she was 10. Haimbati became a widow within a year. Unwelcomed in her deceased husband’s and her natal home she travelled to Banaras and back to Calcutta seeking education. She eventually remained trained as a medical practitioner and became, a woman doctor. This is an account of her life and time illustrates the hard lives of girls and women’ who flouted social conventions. Originally, written in Bengali in lined school notebooks. Haimbati’s narrative texts were discovered and translated by Tappan Rayechaudhuri and edited by Geraldine Forbes.

Another significant autobiography of the period is ‘On the Wings of Fire’ by Kamal Dongorkery, written in 1968. The book deals with some prevalent customs and traditions in the country. Kamala Dongorkery received good education but was married at the age of eleven. She had been trained to respect patriarchy and to believe that the male child was the primary supporter of the family. She had a remarkable capability of adjusting herself in a large family, which helped her a lot in her in-law’s home. Kamala discusses the dictatorial behavior of her mother-in-law, on whom she depended financially also as her husband handed over his salary to his mother. The mother-in-law tortured Kamala, as she
was childless. Even in unfavorable circumstances, Kamala established her individual identity by becoming a social worker in Maharashtra. She also achieved success as a handicraft critic and published many books on Indian Handicraft.

Another heart wrenching but unique autobiography is by a tribal girl Sita Rathnamala. She wrote ‘Beyond the Jungle’ (1968). She lived in jungles of the Nilgiri Hills. She had a very happy and protected childhood with a caring father. Her autobiography depicts her childhood escapades into the jungle with her friends. As a child, she always wished to go beyond the jungle and explore the new world unknown to her. Later on, she received a scholarship by the Department of education, government of India to study in the Dodo boarding School. Here, she acquired sophistication of the civilized society.

In her childhood when she was injured and taken to the hospital. Dr. Krishna Ranjan nurtured her. Later, she joined nursing and went for training in Dr. Krishna’s hospital. Her adoration for Dr. Krishna turned into love and Dr. Ranjan also confessed his inner feelings for her. However, being a son of an orthodox Brahmin parents, Dr. Ranjan was unable to accept Non-Brahmin girl’s hand in marriage. Disillusioned Sita returned to her small town in the lap of nature. She always strived to go beyond the jungle, but the reality which she found there was not digestible for her.

A woman is expected to be modest, shy, passive, soft-spoken and attractive. She is not encouraged to be active, assertive, competitive and unattractive. Women writers do not write about the condition of being born honestly.

Catherine Drinker Brown remarks,

“Every girl who lacks beauty knows instinctively that she belongs to an unprivileged group and that to climb up and out. She will have to be cleverer, stronger, and more ruthless. Perhaps, then she would choose to be.”

The above statement is most suitable to Urmila Haksar. In her life-story ‘The future that Was’ (1972). Urmila recounts that her grandmother never forgave her rebel like against the established norms of gender prejudice. Urmila was not only conscious of her unattractive looks but also of the winsome looks of her sister. Hence, she concentrated more
on her studies and being intelligent, excelled in her student life. She never accepted the conservative, suffocating world of female sex and developed friendship with male cousins of her family. Her father appreciated and fostered her carefree outward personality. Her elder sister learned the fragile homely chores from the other female members of the family. Her mother imposed so many restrictions on her during periods without giving any solution to her inner most worries. She disgusted her menstrual period and never followed rules imposed by the family.

She taught Political Science in Kamala Raja Girls College, Gwalior after achieving high qualifications in her subject. In 1952, she married to N. Haksar, popular history scholar. Shri Haksar has mentioned that Urmila condemned her premarital life so much that she never liked to mentioned her parental surname ‘Sapru’ along with her name. Prof. Meena Sodhi in giving the structure of women’s autobiographies asks,

“How many of these women autobiographies have been able to establish their identity through their writing? Have any of the women autobiographers can answer the crucial question put forth by cock shut? There are not many but undoubtedly, some women autobiographies have revealed their true self successfully through their life stories.”

India in early nineteenth and twentieth century of Kings and queens, we find many autobiographies written by Princesses and Maharanis, which at the time of publication provided the much-needed revelation of the royal women.

Gayatri Devi’s autobiography ‘The Princess Remembers’ (1975) is a landmark in the autobiographical writings by the Indian Maharani. It is the story of the Queen of Jaipur who gave up ‘Purdah’ to join politics and won every election. She played a vital role in the welfare of her state of Jaipur. However, her life-story concentrates more on the personal elements of her life than on politics.

Another important life-story of the time is of ‘An Introduction’ (1977) by Dhanwantari Rama Rau. Her autobiography exposes the marking of a woman. Right from their childhood, Indian women are given the inheritance of their culture to imbibe the
womanly virtues of ‘Savitri’ and ‘Sita’. They were supposed to conform to the conservative male-dominated rules.

Dhanvantari’s mother was much concerned about the education and well-being of her daughter. Despite the familial opposition, Dhanwantari was admitted to the presidency college of Madras in 1909. It was a brave decision in those days. Her mother gave her approval to take up a teaching job for economic independence. Dhanwantari Rama Rau was married to an ICS officer in a registered marriage. However, her Cambridge educated husband did not call his wife by any name and showed no intimacy towards her in public. He did not like her interaction with people. Nevertheless, Dhanwantari developed into an individual in her own right.

Another woman of substance is Sudha Majumdar Her autobiography ‘A Pattern of Life’ (1977) describes how the woman of the house lived in the manner in the rooms of the house, while the father occupied the outer rooms. Her fathers a western style of life and gave Sudha a good education in a Christian school. Sudha’s memoir expresses her awareness of being a female as she narrates that as a child she was taught that the female was inferior to the male. Sudha naturally considered women as a ‘Second Sex’ and followed the path led by all common women of her times.

Sudha was married at the age of thirteen to a man who was in Bengal civil service. He persuaded Sudha to give up ‘Purdah’, learn to read, and write to become a perfect wife. She also became a social worker, adapted new ways of life, but never abandoned her traditional values learnt at her parent’s house. After her husband’s death, she defied the social norms, wore, colored sarees, and attended meetings abroad.

Indira Gandhi seems to be only woman from the Nehru family, apart from her mother, who did not want to write her life-story. Her aunt Vijya Laxmi Pandit’s ‘The Scope of Happiness’ (1979) in an impartial work revealing the affluent life style of the Nehru’s and their contribution in the freedom struggle. She was a powerful woman who fought for the inheritance rights of the women of India. She served as India’s ambassador in many countries. She has an arrange marriage at the age of twenty and willingly changed her maiden name ‘Sarup Kumari, which she had never liked to ‘Vijya Laxmi’, the conquering Goddess, Laxmi. Later, both the husband and wife became actively involved in the freedom
struggle. She felt guilty for neglecting her domestic duties, but she did not sacrifice her
career. She was elected the president of the' Eighth Session' of the General Assembly of the
United Nations. Later, she was made the Governor of Maharastra.

Another outstanding women autobiography is that of Durgabai Deshmukh. There is a marvelous presentation of her childhood days in her autobiography ‘Chin Taman and I’ (1980). Her father taught her to be ‘selfless’ and have a humanitarian approach towards life. She was quite aware of her womanliness.

She joined the worked of social service at the tender age of twelve. Her parents have always encouraged her for her outspoken behavior with the help of women’s organization. Durgabai protested ‘Purdah’ system and ‘Devdasi’ culture. She belonged to a traditional Hindu-family. She got married to the son of Zamindar at the age of eight. Later, she divorced him at the age of twelve. She organized a meeting for the women of her town to be addressed by Gandhi so that they could abandon ‘Purdah’. In 1940, she established the ‘Andhra Maha Shaba’. She did her matriculation from the Banaras Hindu University in 1939.

Despite all her education Durgabai was considered almost a rustic and was hesitant to accept the marriage proposal of C.D.Deshmukh, the then finance minister in the Nehru ministry. However, the marriage proved to be happy and successful as the two individuals adored and respected each other. Durgaba states in her autobiography,

“When I look back over the twenty-five years our married life, I cannot find even a single incident where we differed significantly. Thus, there was no question of adjustment because adjustment and compromise arise only whenone differs from the other on a significant matter. We have assimilated in one another and were integrated as soul like Paravti and Parmeshwar”.

Dr. Shubha Tiwari has illustrated the childhood of various women autobiographies in her book Children and Literature’. She remarks that,

“Childhood is usually associated with happy memories.”25
However, autobiographies of Kamala Das, Saranjeet Shan, Dilip Tiwana and even Shobha De reveal the social stigma attached with the birth of a girl child.

Dr. Shubha remarks that as a child Kamala was very ordinary in her looks. At the tender age of nine, she was made conscious of her dark complexion. Her grandmother rubbed raw turmeric all over her body before the oil bath. Her father found her to be too rustic for his likings. So Kamala was admitted to a boarding school run by the German catholic nuns. Kamala was given proper education but her father was quite orthodox. At the age of fifteen, Kamala was forced to marry a person double her age. She comments,

“I was a burden and a responsibility, neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore, with the blessings of all, our marriage was fixed.”

Saranjeet Shan in her autobiography ‘In My Own Name’ (1991) she writes,

“My book is merely a narration of the tragic events of bright young girl’s life; life that was transformed indeed cut short because of the orthodox marriage. It is a statement of agony for hundreds of girls who go through the same trauma even today.’

Another such life-story narrating a conflict-habituated childhood is ‘Daughter’s Daughter (1993) by Mrinal Pande. It is a book about growing up as a girl. Mrinal also faced gender discrimination in her early childhood days. In the preface of the book Pande writes,

“I know, even as I write this, girls are being, tortured and burnt for dowry...no, survival is not easier for our girls today than it was for us.”
2.3. Conclusion

We find that a deeper study of women’s autobiographies unravel the hidden recesses of feminine psyche of Indian society. What so ever the position of women may be, behind every social stigma, there is woman, either in the role of mother-in-law, sister-in-law or wife. Most of the autobiographies reveal that fathers always encouraged the bold and broad outlook of their daughters. Especially in case of Sunetee Devi and Shobha De, father rejoiced the birth of a girl child. Most of the times father-in-laws turn out are father figure for daughter-in-laws. Woman herself should come out from the age old, customs, disbeliefs, and treat that newly entered woman in the home as her own sister.
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