Gender and literature are very closely related to each other in the sense that neither can be conceived apart from society and culture. Sex is a biological term and gender is more of a socio-cultural expression. No wonder literature offers the best possibility of exposing the politics of gender. A crucial question that demands our attention is how has woman been portrayed in literature.

The depiction of women in literature has been in accordance with the social status enjoyed by women. All over the world women have always enjoyed secondary status vis-à-vis man as Iqbal Kaur in her Gender and Literature puts it.

The images of women in literature have been of the slaves who could be easily sold or bought by men who were their masters. It was not inconvenient for Hardy, for example, to show Henchard selling his wife and daughter at a country fair and that too for an insignificant price (Kaur XII).

However the descriptions like this did not shock the Victorian readers as most of them being male, shared with the other the patriarchal notion of male monopoly over women. Men relegated women from the realm of literature. Over the years men dominated the field of literature. Kaur argues,

In fact, it was difficult for men to read literary works, which portrayed women as self-adualizing beings who rejected the ‘Angel in the House’ image and refused to be female stereotypes. They enjoyed reading about women who existed as non-entities (Kaur XI).

Virginia Woolf in her a room of one’s own discusses that in order to become a writer, women had to kill the “Angel of the House” - a woman who would willingly be submissive to male dominance. Even after having taken to writing, ‘She’ was not allowed to open anything about her physical desires as well as anything that was considered to be ‘anti-men’. Therefore, literature offered pleasures to the readers - particularly male readers - by depicting women as passive docile, dependent, helpless victims at the mercy men. The inner experiences of women were rendered invisible because they were considered to be trivial, insignificant and not worth considering. The rates of women were confined to their womanhood. Showalter in a literature of their own clearly states:

Victorian women were not accustomed to choose a vocation; womanhood was a vocation in itself. (Showalter, 1987: 21).

The chief vocations that were open to the 18th century women were teaching music, teaching alphabet to small children, reading to old ladies and making artificial flowers.

What does Nature ask women?

- Give to him that needeth.
- Employ the hour that passeth.
- Be resolute in submission.
- Love thy Husband.
- Bear Children.

(Jacobus:171)

Creative writing was almost a taboo to a woman because for a woman to write meant insubordination which was intolerable to the male dominated society. A woman who wanted to write was designated as ‘deviant’. Kaur states:

Women’s writing was treated as trivial, sentimental and sensational and was not taken seriously. Thus the Victorian society’s concept of femininity had its strong impact on literature. (Kaur: XVI)

The fact that many women authors used pseudonyms would testify the claim. In most of the cases the pseudonyms too were like men. E.g. George Eliot, Acton Bell and Currer Bell. At the end of all the hardships women were not allowed to try their hands at ‘serious forms of literature’ the literary forms like epic or drama had become prerogative of male writers. The novel alone was young enough to be soft in-the hands of women writers. Woolf argues:

A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write a fiction (Woolf, 1954: 6)

Woolf clearly expounds the inevitability of four prerequisites. According to her the pivotal principles are:

1) Having a room of one’s own.
2) Having one’s own income.
3) Killing the angel of the house.
4) Telling the truth about one’s own body.

Showalter argued that women have always lived in a different world from that of men and have always had a literature of their own. Showalter believed that women’s ability cannot be judged by applying male critical theory to their work because mate critical theory is a concept of creativity, literary history or literary interpretation based entirely on male experience and put forward as universal. Gynocritics believe that women’s writing differs to that of men due to four major reasons: Biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. Interestingly Luce Irizarry interprets the nuances of language in women writing in terms of the physical organs.

The labia, those lips which embrace each other continually and which ensures that every woman is in touch with herself, by herself and in herself. In somatic terms, the definition of feminine sexuality, therefore is ‘that sex which is not one’ the labia make it always twofold at least and therefore ‘plural as well’. The consequence of this (in Caroline Burke’s summary) is that women’s
Benstock in her Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings (1988) notes:

"The self that would reside at the center of the text is de-centered and often is absent altogether - in women's autobiographical texts." (Benstock: 20)

The view is echoed in Vijayalakshmi Pandit's autobiography, The Scope of Happiness (1979). In the initial stages, she was under complete sway of her father as is evident from the following excerpt.

"I was my father's child in all respects. He was the dominating influence in my life. I love him deeply and he was my ideal of all that was great and good and honorable:" (Pandit: 40).

Later, the role model changes as she associates herself with her brother and writes:

"A brother occupies a very special position in an Indian family, and the brother-sister relationship is a cultivated and meaningful one. He is the protector of his sister, and in many cases their hero." (Pandit: 55)

Moreover, men in their autobiography project their self image with confidence; a thing very much absent in women's autobiography. The self-image projected in women's autobiographical writings reveal self consciousness and the motive is to convince the reader of her self-worth, to authenticate her self-image.

Men tend to idealize their lives to make it seem heroic and often desist from revealing crisis in their childhood, and are more likely to relate adult crisis, usually turning points in their professional failures that ultimately become stepping-stones to their success. On the other hand, women's autobiographical writings suffer from the haunting fear of failure. Ellen Glasgow in her The Women Within states (1994).

"I wrote always in secret, but I wrote ceaselessly in dim corners, under beds or in the blessed summer days, under the deep shrubbery and beneath low hanging boughs." (Glasgow: 41).

This tendency to camouflage is indicative of the lack of confidence. Echoes Vijayalakshmi Pandit in the Scope of Happiness. She admits that for many years her daughters had been urging her to write her autobiography. She hesitated partly because of laziness but mainly because she lacked confidence in her ability to do so.

Women's lack of confidence owes a great deal to the way in which men rate them. The predominant of most critics consider women's lives as 'insignificant'. The difference in attitude is manifest in the manner in which female autobiographies won acceptance by merely changing the gender of the name of its author. This is pretty evident in the case of two women authors. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton becomes Alexander Stanton, Eighty years and More becomes the extraordinary career of one of America's leading social reformers. And when, Kate Millett is transformed into Michael Millet, Flying (1974) becomes the confessions of a contemporary revolutionary thinker and artist. As men, the experiences of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Kate Millett would be described in heroic or exceptional transformation, identity crisis and symbolic journeys. And as women, their experiences are viewed in more conventional terms: heartbreak, anger loneliness, motherhood, humility and confusion.

Moreover, the focus of an autobiography written by men is on chief professional success - a reason behind its unity of chapters. By means of a chronological, linear narrative, they unify their work by concentrating on one period of their life, one theme of one characteristic of their personality. Not surprisingly, men are socially conditioned to pursue a single goal of a successful career. Such harmony and orderliness can be seen in their autobiographies.

In contrast to this, irregularity rather than orderliness informs the self-portraits by women. The narratives of their lives are often not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary or organized into self-sustained unity rather than connecting chapters.

Thus, the final criterion of orderliness, wholeness or harmonious shaping with which critics characterize autobiography is not applicable to women's autobiographies. The various forms in which women write their life studies are often appropriate for rendering the author's intensions and/or personalities and autobiographical critics do a disservice to these many fine works and to the genre itself when they saddle the autobiographical mode with their confining criteria. Jelinek in her Women's Autobiography: Essay in Criticism (1980) notes:

"From the earliest times this discontinuous forms have been important to women because they are analogous to the fragmented, interrupted and formless nature of their lives."

Dr. Ranjana Harish in her article In The Cultural Hall of Mirrors writes:

When such a person who doesn't possess the proverbial isolate self which could reside at the center of the text, holds the pen to write her autobiography, the product is going to be different both in form and content

Here we must acknowledge that Gender does play a very important role in autobiography writing.

Women are different from men, and so is their writing, but as it is said, "Contrast is the best matching" we should enjoy this variety. Thus celebrating difference is a better option than fighting over the issue of superiority or inferiority of one gender over the other.
THE ROLE OF GENDER IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Hiral Brahmbhatt
M.A. : M.Phil English
Associate Professor
Shri. Sahajanand Arts & Commerce College, Ahmedabad – 380015

Literature offers the best possibility of exposing the politics of gender. Assuming that one’s gender identity has a telling effect on his/her life, we can safely say that autobiography is one of those forms that exposes gender discrimination clearly.

To begin with, the tradition of writing autobiography is not entirely novel. It has been with us for quite some time. Plato in the 5th century BC wrote Seventh Epistle, which was known as his letter. Montaigne in the latter half of the 16th century wrote Essays.

Though the genre existed in its loose form, it was only towards the end of the 18th century that the word autobiography was coined. It is made up of three Greek elements “self (auto) - life (bio) - writing (graphy)” (Olney: 6). Prior to that, it existed under the names such as memoirs and confession. Thus, autobiography as a literary phenomenon is new to literature.

“There is the dual, paradoxical fact that autobiography is often something considerably less than literature and that it is always something rather more than literature (Olney: 24).”

The first autobiography - The Autobiography of A Dissenting Minister - was written in 1834 by W.P. Scargill. It was only after World War I that autobiography gained attention as a literary genre. As the two major works before World War I are George Misch’s History of Autobiography in Antiquity (1907) and Anna Burr’s Autobiography a Critical and Comparative Study (1909). Autobiography too was men’s monopoly.

Women writers did express their feelings. But, it was mainly in the form of diaries, memoirs of journals such as Agrippina’s Memoirs and Teresa Constantia Philip’s Life (162-65).

As Shumaker’s English Autobiography (1954) mentions, 18th and 19th century saw few women writers. Before 1965, only white powerful rich man was eligible for writing autobiography. It was only during seventies that women stepped into the field of autobiography writing. For classic critic like Gusdorf autobiography is a genre that belongs to men.

Gusdorf’s concept of autobiography is deeply rooted in individualistic self. According to him, an autobiography is ‘the celebration of self. Gusdorf asserts:

“Autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist,(Olney, 1980: 30)”

Hence, the classic critics of autobiography dismissed all the marginal writers like Jews, Dalits and women, as “consciousness of self” never existed for them in any society worldwide. Chodorow suggests that the concept of isolate selfhood is inapplicable to the women due to sociopolitical, biological as well as psychoanalytic reasons. Chodorow argues:

“The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate.’ (Friedman: 41)”

Nin explores and defines, her identity through relationship. When a male friend advises her to become more egocentric and to live for herself, write for herself and work for herself, she responds:

“But I feel alive only when I am living for or with others.”

(Diary I 223)

A woman cannot; Rowbothom argues, experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is defined as a woman, that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture. There is always this dual consciousness - the self as culturally defined and a self as different from cultural prescription.

George Gusdorf, the dean of autobiographical studies, in his famous essay Condition and Limitation of Autobiography (1980) writes:

‘Autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image.’ (Gusfort: 33)

In Women’s Consciousness, Man’s world (1978) Rowbothom, uses the metaphor of mirrors to describe the development of women’s consciousness. But her mirror is the reflecting surface of cultural representation into which a woman stares to form an identity. Emily Carr notes:

‘To show mother, I must picture Father because Mother was father’s reflection – smooth, liquid reflecting of definite, steel gold reality.’ (Carr:4)

However, instead of reflecting her own self, a woman autobiographer’s work very often reflects an image of a male member.

In an autobiography penned by a man, ‘HE’ is always at the center of the work. Unlike men’s autobiographies, women’s autobiographical writing goes in circles. She does not stand in the center: There is always a man at the center and she exists only in the periphery. Shari
language will be plural, autoerotic, defused and undefinable within the familiar rules of (masculine) logic.  
(Ruthven: 100)

Along with the language, the subject also is indicative of their psyche. It is surprising how many spinster writers there have been: Jane Austen, Charlotte Mew, Steve Smith. Anne Stevenson, in Writing as a Woman, says:

These women may have-suffered, but they suffered as women who attempted neither to fight male domination nor compromise themselves to suit it. There was a narrow independence, even a selfish one, but it was real. It was bought at the price of what use to be called 'womanliness' - Sex, marriage, children and the socially acceptable position of wife. (Stevenson: 163)

Whatever women writers achieved, they did at the cost of their personal lives. And this is one of the reasons why we have fewer women writers. The subjects around which their writing revolves, too, were depression, humiliation, suffering and to a certain extent, self-hatred.

Literary tradition of women's writing has evolved through three historical phases. In looking at literary subcultures such as Blacks, Jewish, Canadian Anglo-Indian or even American. We can see that they all go through three major phases. First there is a prolonged phase of 'imitation' of the prevailing models of the dominant tradition, and internationalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second there is a phase of protest against these standards and values and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally there is a phase of self-discovery of forming inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these phases

(1) Feminine - 1840-1880
(2) Feminist - 1880-1920
(3) Female - 1920-1960

Toni Moi defines 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristic, 'feminism' as a political position and 'femaleness' as a matter of biology. Like any other subculture women's writing also began with the protest against the mainstream culture. All ideas are infected by patriarch ideology e.g. Mary Wollstonecraft was inspired by male dominated ideas of French Revolution. De Beauvoir was influenced by Sartre's Phallicentric categories. Women writers had to follow a single and universal standard of critical judgements. Women had to follow male critical theory. The women's movement of late 60s indicated both a feminist critique of male culture and a female aesthetic celebrating women's culture. By late 70s the movement entered a new phase of Gynocritics. The programme of Gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature to develop new models based on the study of female experience rather than to adopt male models and theories. In late 80s we found the rise of gender theory, the comparative study of sexual difference. Gynocritics believe that of men due to four major reasons: Biological, linguistic, psycho analytic and cultural. According to Showalter there are two distinct modes of feminist criticism:

1) Woman as a reader
2) Woman as a writer

Johnathan Culler asks:

If the meaning of the work is the experience of a reader, what difference does it make if the reader is a woman?

(Kaur: 47)

Showalter stresses the importance of feminist reading as method of articulating the feminist experience. There are several ways of reading a text and one of them is gender based. Kaur asks:

What does it mean for a woman to read without condemning herself to the position of the other? What does it mean for a woman, reading as a woman, to read literature written by a woman as a woman? (Kaur: 47)

The second mode of feminist criticism is the study of women as writers. Its subjects are the history, style, themes, genres and structures of writing by women. Woolf feels that a woman's writing is always feminine - it cannot help being feminine and at its best it is the most feminine but the Only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine. However, some critics believe that there are no such literary qualities which are present in all works by women and absent from all works by men. Woolf says:

It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only? (Woolf, 1954: 84)

WORKS CITED


www.ssrn.com
www.tandf.co.uk
www.questia.com
www.theguardian.com