Chapter I

Theoretical Framework

The urge and the desire by to express oneself can be found from the beginning of the human civilization. Human beings have always tried to express their inner feelings, their desires and their life through the medium of art. They have tried to depict self-creation and leave behind some testimony of their existence. The form of writing autobiography records the life-history of human beings.

The simple definition of an autobiography is that it is an account of the writer’s life written by him. The act of writing an autobiography is a discovery, a creation and an imitation of the self. James Olney has emphasized a shift in the autobiographical writings in the modern times from bios, the life of the writer, to autos, the self. This shift has made the autobiographical study seek recourse to philosophical, psychological and literary methods for analytical purposes. The pre-eminence of autos allows the “I” to take a form of its own and has decided the nature of autobiography:

It was this turning to autos – the “I” that coming awake to its own being shapes and determines the nature of the autobiography and in so doing half discovers, half creates itself – that opened up the subject of autobiography specifically for literary discussion, for behind every work of literature there is an “I” informing the whole and making the presence felt at every critical point, and without this “I”, stated or implied, the work would collapse into mere insignificant. (Olney: 21)

So, the autobiographical writing is concerned with viewing history, philosophy, psychology or sociology by other viewers/readers.

However, a variety of voices raised by the structuralists, the deconstructionists over the complete extinction of the author’s personality from his created work, found its culmination in Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author”. The arguments and debates by the supporters of this theory tried to annihilate the author’s biography from the text. It was an anti-thesis of the Romantic cult of Narcissism, the fascination with one’s own image. Man’s reflection or his encounter with himself was not considered to be a taboo

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or a mythical death sign by the Romantics. For them, the image reflection became a part of a person’s everyday life.

T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1917) was written mainly to combat the idea that a poet should be praised in proportion to his originality. According to Eliot, no poet or artist could be understood solely in terms of himself. It was a reaction against the excessive expression of personality, the exaggerated display of ‘I’, the uninhibited revelation of the self by the Romantic writers. Eliot remarked:

... the poet has not a personality to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the human being may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the human being, the personality. (56)

Eliot compares the mind of the poet to a platinum shred, which remains unchanged and neutral during the process of a poetic creation and he concludes that “…the more perfect the artist, the more completely separated in him will be the human being who suffers and the mind which creates...” (Ibid: 54).

Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism (1957) recommends Eliot’s stance in writing including literary criticism as objectively as a scientific effort. Wayne C. Booth’s The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961) too finds out a number of synonyms for the Eliotian act of “depersonalization”: “impersonality, detachment, disinterestedness, neutrality etc” (Fry: 67). Booth says that for a writer to forget his “individual being” and his “peculiar circumstances” would be to underestimate the relevance of his individuality: “As he writes, he created not simply an ideal, impersonal ‘Human beings in general’ but an implied version of ‘himself’ that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men’s works” (70).

Augustine’s Confessions was a landmark in establishing the conversion of experience into narrative, that is, in an autobiography. It is conversion of life into textual self-representation. The life of the writer is made to conform to certain narrative forms which appear unique. Yet, Paul de Man was prompted to take an extreme stand:

“... he argued that the whole referential foundation of autobiography was based upon an illusion, that autobiography was not a life but a text. Such an argument, tendentious as it may be, is
quite unsettling to most Americans and all readers who would like to believe, with Whiteman, that when they touch a book they are touching a living person – or coming as close to one as they can.”

(in Sayre: 20)

Paul de Man’s “de-facement” often uses the metaphor of murder for biography and suicide for autobiography. Yet Robert F. Sayre summarizes that it is necessary to remember that while reading an autobiography we only metaphorically read “a life”. We read a book. The writing of an autobiography is an act like any other act performed by the human beings. Hence, the supremacy of the “implied” author and his importance in the literary sub-genre, the autobiography, is seen where the self of the writer is remade through the process of writing and therefore the text does not exhibit “The death of the Author”. The autobiographical process is not only the depiction of the author’s personality, but rather a revelation of his personality, which is seen in retrospection in his autobiography. The *autos*, the “I” of the autobiography determines the “bios” or the life and the *graphe* or the act of writing, which is of real importance. It combines the self and the life and gives them a certain form, and enables them to reflect the image back and forth as between two mirrors. Thus, the artist’s activity helps the autobiographer in establishing his true identity and enables him to present an accurate picture of himself.

Autobiography takes the form of the narrative and the structure of the work which is self-interrogative. Autobiographical writing is a process of self-alteration. The life which he has lived belongs to the past, whereas the life about which he is writing or creating belongs to the present. It does remind us of the importance of the Eliotian concept which de Man asks the writer to be conscious not only of the “pastness of the past, but of its presence” (Eliot: 49).

W. B. Yeats states in his autobiography “It is myself that I remake”, that the art of autobiography involves a process of reconstruction of the writer’s life; it is the self-picturing in which he indulges. It is a contradiction of the theory of the “New Critics” and later of Eliot and Barthes. The urge to portray is “Self-portraiture... is a synonym of self-knowledge” (Yeats: 166). Coleridge too observed: “When a man is attempting to describe another’s character, he may be right or he may be wrong – but in one thing he will always succeed, in describing himself (Coleridge: 74).
Autobiography as a genre was transformed during the Romantic period, from an objective memoir to a personal subjective remembrance, “the attempt to connect, by retrospective reflection, disparate and discontinuous experiences and states of mind into a self-conceived almost solely in terms of a maturing consciousness, rather than embodiment” (Olney: 143). The real or embodied self is replaced by a new, self-made object, an artistic artefact – the “implied self” of the autobiographical text. Pointing on the death of the author, Roland Barthes says,

“The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after” (Barthes: 170).

Even if we accept the death of the author in a text, the writing/creating process results in the birth of a new person/new self in an autobiography. The autobiographical act collects the separated material of an individual’s life to give a comprehensive vision of the writer. Gusdorf in his book “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical compares the autobiographer to a historian, who narrates his own history. According to Gusdorf, he is the hero of his own tale and wants to unfold his past “in order to draw out the structure of his being in time” (40). It is a reconstruction of life in its entirety; the path, which he traverses in tracing his history of life, is a very long one; but it always leads him to himself.

Autobiographer, unlike the historian, is not engaged in an objective endeavour but in a personal exoneration, in a search for himself through the history of his life. He can overcome all the difficulties which he encounters quite impartially. He struggles against the loss of memory in portraying the course of events and there is always the temptation to reject the obsession with truth. But a sense of moral alertness checks him from deviating from the path of factual truth and he succeeds in giving a mirror image of his life.

Autobiographical process, according to Gusdorf, is “integral resurrection of the past” which can seem meaningless due to its complete relation to the present. The autobiographer, who is also a historian of himself, is faced with a complex situation in revisiting his past. Gone is the child, the young human being and the mature human being of yesterday; the human being of today knows the end of his story. The tension
faced by the writer in trying to overcome the time gap between the lives lived in the
past and its depiction in writing, should be evident in the narrative. Gusdorf says:

... the original sin of autobiography is first one of logical
coherence and rationalization. The narrative is conscious, and
since the narrator's consciousness directs the narrative, it seems to
him incontestable that it has also directed his life. In other words,
the act of reflecting that is essential to conscious awareness is
transferred, by a kind of unavoidable optical illusion, back to the
stage of the event itself. (Gusdorf: 41)

Criticism against this meaningless historical method tries to substitute the
completely formed for something which is in the process of being formed. The motif of
the narrative is to be caught from his past to the future. The past events which were
probably meaningless or had multiple meanings at the time of occurrence acquire a new
meaning. This makes him choose the details of his past life in a presupposed intelligible
manner. So, an autobiography "cannot be a pure and simple record of existence, an
account book or a log book; on such and such a day at such and such an hour, I went to
such and such a place ... A record of this kind, no matter how minutely exact, would be
no more than a caricature of life' in such a case, rigorous precision would add up to the
same thing as the subtlest deception" (Ibid: 42).

For an autobiographer the factual truth is subordinated to the truth about him; he
presents to us a dialogue with himself; the narrative becomes an affirmation of the
individual who finds the innermost fidelity. S/he does not try to repeat the scene but
gives it a new perspective. It is an enactment of the drama of life of a person who tries
to reassemble himself at a certain time in history. According to Gusdorf it is a
"document about a life" and its historian has every right to check its accuracy. But more
than that it is a work of art; the literary writer is well aware of its style, beauty and the
harmonious image, which he desires to project. So it is primarily valuable for its artistic
excellence; its being termed fiction or fraud becomes irrelevant. And consequently the
literary value of an autobiography is of far greater signification than its historical or
objective function. Gusdorf says, "Every work of art is a projection from the interior
realm into exterior space where in becoming incarnated it achieves consciousness of
itself" (Ibid: 44).

Hence, as a work of art the autobiography is not only a focus of the author's life,
but an artistic creation which employs all narrative devices and restrictions like
accuracy, impartiality and inclusiveness; it is not merely a recapitulation of the past but also an attempt by the autobiographer to reconstruct himself in his own likeness. Gusdorf rightly points out: “Confession of the past realizes itself as a work in the present: it effects as true creation of self by the self” (Ibid: 44).

The autobiographer emphasizes the past “I” to be different from the present “I”. Jean Starobinski, in his “The Style of Autobiography” says that “The narrator describes not only what happened to him at a different time in his life but above all how he became – out of what he was – what he presently is” (79).

Stephen Spender in “Confessions and Autobiography” detects objectivity in the depiction of the autobiographer’s subjective experiences and feels that unless he is able to achieve this transformation; his experiences are of no value to his art. It does not remain his own experience but it becomes that of everyone. He creates a life, which is new and revealing. He is himself the thesis of his book but views himself as if he were another person writing about himself. Since the autobiographer is the “unique and unknown I”, it is a case of depersonalized autobiography.

Olney thinks that the views expressed by phenomenologists have been conveyed metaphorically in a classic expression from Heraclitus, which more or less emphasizes the autobiographers’ dilemma (237-238). Recollection or recapitulation is dependent upon a creative memory, “that apes and reshapes the historic past as in the image of the present, making the past as necessary to this present is the inevitable outcome of that past” (Ibid: 243).

Factuality is an important part of all which involves perception, consciousness; memories, which Heraclitus thought to be, like a flowing of a river. Memory and the present reality bear a reciprocal relationship: the now, shaping the memory just as the present moment, the now, is shaped by the memory. The autobiographer, while trying to remember the past in the present imagines himself to be another person and lives in another world of existence. Barthes too points out the estrangement between the two personalities of the writer: “When a narrator (of a written text) recounts what has happened to him, the I who a recount is no longer the one that is recounted” (Barthes: 276).

The means of language is important for the communication of meaning. The autobiographer shapes his past according to the restriction of the language and the
language is shaped to suit the restraints of his past. The recomposition, re-examination or to use the word appropriated by John Sturrock, a “conversion”, takes only through the medium of language. Sturrock concludes that the work is a “textualization of that pretextual life”, and “that autobiography is not life itself but a certain artful representation of life” (Sturrock: 24-25).

A deconstructionist might argue that language is an abortive gesture, since it cannot mean anything beyond itself; and he will not hesitate in dissolving the text of an autobiography into thin air. But Gusdorf believes writing to be a second incarnation and language to be “an outpouring of the thought” and also “thought’s externalized form, which once expressed, is able to return to its point of departure.

Thus it becomes consciousness, an inner speech, man’s discourse to himself, self debating with self, by virtue of which the individual’s destiny is formed. Deprived of speech, the mind would fall back into confusion analogous to an animal’s, with an unclear consciousness clinging to the present moment... like the torpor of sunbathers on the beech who have made their minds a blank” (Gusdorf: 113-114).

Eakin’s opposed the viewpoint of the deconstructionists, which says that since an autobiography is supposed to refer to a past context, the act of reference distorts the image of the past as it really was. So, they argue all the historical references are mere fictions by nature. Defending the autobiographical genre as a recreation and not only as a creation of the past, he contends that the deconstructionist unnecessarily bothers about the unbridgeable gulf between “the things itself (the experiences of the past) and the “picture” (the representation in the language). His submission is that whereas on the one hand, the language cannot encompass anything beyond itself, the “picture” in language maybe taken for the human beings’ experience or “the thing itself”. Since we experience in language, we cannot analyze pure experience outside its linguistic experience or the verbal text. He finds similar viewpoints expressed by Ricoeur, Fleishman and Janet Varner Gunn who postulate a phenomenological correlation between temporal structure of autobiography and what they take to be the essential narrativity of individual experience.

The created self is resultant of the autobiographical process, where it is not only created, but discovered and asserted in the process of writing; and it requires the reader or the student of autobiography to participate fully in the process.
The act of self-creation is everlasting. The self is forever in the process of making itself, it never takes a complete shape. Man is a complex creature and in order to establish his identity in his own social sphere, it is necessary for him to re-establish himself to find out the denominator which helps him to understand his life, actions and values.

The recent but rapidly growing endeavor, to collect and comment on examples of what for several years, probably centuries, has been a neglected mode of writing in terms of critical attention- the canon of Indian Women’s life writing has been often rendered “usefully problematic” the ideal that autobiography is a “naked and transparent presentation of existence (Swindells:1).

All autobiographical statements show some process of meditation between the subject and author of autobiography, and the ideological environment they inhibit. This demystifies the notion that the autobiographical act stands alone as a testimony to individuals, removed from their relationship to the social world.

Social human being is surrounded by ideological phenomenon. ... All of these things in their totality comprise the ideological environment, which forms a solid ring around human beings. And man’s consciousness lives and develops in this environment. Man’s consciousness does not come into contact with existence directly, but through the medium of the surrounding ideological world (Smith: 48).

The problem with this version of the autobiographical tradition is its claim that in their autobiographical testimonies these authors of autobiographies articulate the model relationship between the individual and the social world.

This way of analyzing autobiography fails to accommodate any sense of tension, struggle, contestation, or outright conflict between consciousness and environment, between people and their surrounding ideological world. The drive is towards “the inscription towards an autobiographical norm” (Swindells: 2), to define and enumerate the characteristics of a genre rather than to differentiate the characteristics of different authors included in the tradition. The prominent character attributed to autobiography is James Olney’s proposition that “an autobiography is synchronic, born of the vital impulse to order that has always caused the human being to create” (Swindells: 3). An autobiography, according to Olney, transcends history in attempting to construct
homology between the "formal organization of the person's mind and the formal organization of nature" (Olney: 36).

This need of the individual autobiographer to impose order via subjective experience is dangerous not only in its social aspect, whereby the individual appears to bypass society in his relationship to nature, but also because it transcends history. If history is being transcended, Swindles says, what is standing in its place is the Western European autobiographical tradition. This argument presents a systematic challenge to historical empiricism. If an autobiography is a (male) self speaking synchronically for history, out of the authority of themselves as subject (as against the notion that historical developments can be traced through autobiography) one can turn around and say that the writers of history organize the events of which they write according to their own private necessities and the state of their own selves. Historians impose, and quite properly, "their own metaphors on man's past" (Ibid).

Juxtaposing autobiography and history and reading the autobiographical text in such a manner as to understand as how the autobiographical and the historical narrative agree/disagree with each other seems to be a relatively less problematic way of reconstructing the past. However, "Self-portrayal has become an integral part of modern culture and India equally shares this universal mood. There has been in existence a distinct mode of autobiography in India, but it has not been so prominent as to become a significant feature of the national taste. The full flowering of the genre could, however, take place only after the coming of the English to India" (Sinha: Preface).

For ages, everywhere in the world, 'self writing' and personal testaments have been produced, but the western forms of autobiographical writing – autobiography, reminiscences, memoirs, diaries, among other cultural transplants – are the more prominent ones in practice in the modern times. While there is evidence to say that such writings were indeed produced and interested people for ages in the Arab world, Tibet and India, China and Japan and elsewhere at least since the middle ages, 'autobiography' in mid-twentieth century came to be projected as a cultural product unique to modern western civilization. A unique expression of a concern peculiar to Western human beings (Gusdorf) and essentially European (Roy Pascal), autobiography was believed to have emerged within the cultural influence of Christianity (Georges May).
Western scholars' imperial pronouncements apart, this serves to distinguish "fully formed authentic modern western selves" from "the incomplete individual consciousnesSES of earlier periods and inauthentic, facsimile selves produced by modern and non-western cultures in imitation of their superiors" (ibid. p. 3) and privilege a defining discursive market for what it is to be modern/western. Colonial, non-Western writings generally, and particularly autobiographies have frequently been discounted as immature and undeveloped as pale shadows of the real or true autobiography known only in the modern West. Expressions of the Self from other cultures, mediated as they ought to be by different conventions, may fail "to reveal an interior self different from, and even at odds with the exterior public self" (ibid: 15).

In the West, autobiography has been recognized since the late eighteenth century as a distinct literary genre, and has subsequently provided theoreticians across disciplines an invaluable testing ground for ideas such as authorship, selfhood, representation, and the division between fact and fiction. Olney observes, "In addition to being the simplest and commonest of writing propositions, autobiography is also the least 'literary' kind of writing... [and often] the most rarefied and self-conscious of literary performance" (198).

Considering a critical/theoretical history of a 'literary' genre that often defies all sorts of 'genre' boundaries, Olney observes that the three-part word 'auto-' 'bio-' 'graphy' raises "very large, very difficult questions": "What do we mean by the self, or himself (autos)? What do we mean by life (bios)? What significance do we impute to the act of writing (graphe)?" (ibid: 6) and points out its potential complexity and range of controversial possibilities. As a label fabricated in the eighteenth century to describe a literature already existing under other names such as 'confessions' and 'memoirs' – classic instances including Plato's *Seventh Epistle*, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Montaigne's *Essays* and Rousseau's *Confessions* again –its significance will depend for us on the priority we assign to "the rigour and twist of definition" we give to it.

While the practice of autobiography has a long history, theoretical and critical writing on the subject has been a relatively very recent preoccupation, beginning in effect with Georges Gusdorf's essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (1956), which laid out fully and clearly all the questions and concerns – philosophical, psychological, literary, and more generally humanistic – that have preoccupied students
of autobiography (ibid: 9). Olney believes that this new critical attention to autobiography is a manifestation of something deeply embedded in the contemporary psyche, in the intellectual and spiritual atmosphere. He recalls how his own interest in autobiography was spurred by a perception, while discussing Joyce, Lawrence, Yeats and Eliot, that they "were autobiographies that presented themselves as works of art (Joyce and Lawrence in all their works, and Yeats in the Collected Poems, Eliot in *Four Quartets*), while some others "were works of art (Montaigne’s *Essays*, Newman’s *Apoligia*) that presented themselves as autobiographies". His own *Metaphors of Self* began "as a study of the way experience is transformed into literature...as a study of the creative process, a humanistic study of the ways of men and the forms taken by human beings consciousness" (ibid: 10), and only after he came across Gusdorf’s essay, he came to discover its significance to the study of autobiography.

Roy Pascal’s “Design and Truth in Autobiography” (1960) is another important book which looks upon autobiography as a creative act demanding seriousness of personality and of intention in writing, and calling our attention to the way the autobiographer half discovers and half creates a deeper design and truth, even as he may insist on strict adherence to historical and factual truth.

Critical reflection on the subject soon prompted writers to attempt to establish, in the history of western culture, the moment of a modern autobiographical self-consciousness as a philosophical / psychological / literary phenomenon. Important articles, especially by Philippe Lejeune (“Le pacte autobiographique” 1973) and Karl J. Weintraub (“Autobiography and Historical Consciousness” 1974), which were later extended into full length books, concern themselves with the early moments of modern autobiography. Weintraub offers a comprehensive history of the emergence of the elements and types of autobiography, even as he analyses the historical and cultural conditions under which that emergence became possible, even inevitable of how a secular, literary autobiography gradually developed out of autobiography as a confessional act; of how in spite of extensions, alterations and transformations through the intervening centuries, it has retained a constant essence, and remained a recognizable autobiographical act, ‘an epiphenomenon and mirror of cultural history. Weintraub’s book is a landmark effort to ‘trace a discernible history of the gradual formation of the modern self conception... a task that ideally requires a history of our
Western culture,' covering a formidable range from classical antiquity through St. Augustine to Goethe in the eighteenth century.

Olney says:

Autobiography becomes possible under certain metaphysical conditions. To begin with, at the cost of a cultural revolution humanity must have emerged from the mythic framework of traditional teachings and must have entered into the perilous domain of history. The human being who takes the trouble to tell of himself knows that the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future, he has become more aware of differences than of similarities; given the constant change, given the uncertainty of events and of men, he believes it a useful and valuable thing to fix his own image so that he can be certain it will not disappear like all things in this world. History then would be the memory of a humanity heading toward unforeseeable goals, struggling against the breakdown of forms and of beings. Each human being matters to the world, each life and each death; the witnessing of each about himself enriches the common cultural heritage (198).

This crucial reflection marks for Gusdorf the birth of the individual in western culture and his entry into history, which is akin to the Copernican Revolution. Humanity finds itself engaged in an autonomous adventure, according to its own desires. So a person knows himself as a responsible agent; all activity and reflection begins to be organized into a new and developing human centrality, foreshadowing the emergence of historic personages, of monuments and statues and biographies, asserting desire to endure in men’s memory. So the autobiography requires another revolution – "a new spiritual revolution" – which makes the artist/historian and his model coincide, and he tackles himself as an object. The social classes are turned about to make more or less obscure intellectual worthy of remembrance, and common interest is occasionally turned from public to private history, alongside the great men who make official history. Obscure men and women after historic struggles carry on their own silent spiritual lives and battles, their triumphs and reversals come to merit a place in the universal memory. This "conversion", which is a late evolution in history, Gusdorf would prefer to call an 'involution of consciousness.'

Weintraub says that autobiographic genre "took on its full dimension and richness when Western human being acquired a thoroughly historical understanding of
his existence... (and) autobiography assumes a significant cultural function around AD 1800... (as) part of that great intellectual revolution marked by the emergence of the particular modern form of historical mindedness we call historian or historicism” (821). Thus an autobiography turned to a matured genre capable of properly historizing individual existence. The essential subject matter of all autobiographical writing is 'concretely experienced reality' rather than the realm of external fact which is 'embedded' in experience, and 'viewed from within the modification of inward life.' Its objective is life interplay of an 'I-and-its circumstances' – and autobiography is more likely to reveal its generic potential 'the more its real subject matter is character, personality, self-conception'. This ultimately determines the inner coherence and the meaning of life. As Weintraub concludes:

Real autobiography is a weave in which self-consciousness is delicately threaded throughout interrelated experience. It may have such varied functions as self-explication, self-discovery, self-clarification, self-formation, self-presentation, self-justification. All these functions interpenetrate easily, but all are centred upon an aware self aware of its relation to experiences. (824).

Citing instances from Augustine, Descartes, Rousseau, Gibbon and Goethe, Weintraub says that 'genuine autobiographical effort is guided by a desire to discern and to assign meaning to a life,' usually dominated by the writer's 'point of view' including its most literal sense. Such a point in time, akin to the 'conversion' experience of an Augustine, would be a 'crisis-point' with the potential to illuminate a whole course of life, showing 'connecting lines previously hidden' and 'converging now to a direction where uncoordinated drift and wandering prevailed before”. The author perceives an order and meaning in life. Augustine, filled with wonder of illumination, turned his entire account of life into a hymn of praise to a divine power guiding and directing the erring wanderer. In other lives, where a radical turning point is lacking, 'a pattern and meaning may be discerned through the effect of more slowly setting experiences'. According to Goethe, many repeated experiences signalled a pattern and an essential harmony became visible in the vicissitudes of an eventful life. 'Only after this point could be present his life with the supreme detachment 'of irony in the highest sense'.

Weintraub, without such prior illumination securing the all important retrospective view, argues that the autobiographic function tends towards a self-
orientation and essentially cripples the form: "The very act of writing is the attempt to find the new setting of the compass; the very quest for meaning displaces the artistic intent to render the pattern of a life having run its meaningful course" (825). Where self-discovery and self-orientation predominate, the art of presenting the essential wholeness of life is impeded:

... the aging Montaigne picks up any one of a myriad of concrete experiences, and by holding it up against the light of his marvelous lively mind he discerns the ever-changing reflections of his Human beingsy-fold self in the experience and in the act of understanding it. He weighs, he tests, he experiments, he assays, and by the activity signaled by the verb essay he creates a literary genre which he himself filled with such autobiographic content that it left him with the feeling his book had become consubstantial with himself. Thus the essay form itself suggests that the writer is only on the way of finding the vantage point from which the fully coordinated view could render the essential structure of that life (ibid: 825-26).

When the author gains a firm vantage point, he can impose the order of the present on that past, making it meaningful in terms of the present understanding. "Past life is being rearranged because it is being interpreted in terms of the meaning or meanings that life now is seen to possess" (827), which makes the autobiographer's moment of writing all-important. Autobiography and history derive value from rendering significant portions of the past as interpreted past”. In both, incoherence of the constituents is sorted out and their fitting places are assigned in a more complete and meaningful pattern.

In its form and process, autobiographic writing is inseparably linked to the problem of self-conception. The form of self-consciousness called 'individuality' evolved in the Western world since the Renaissance, as the hold of compelling cultural forms which guided medieval men weakened (a gradual change whose signposts are found in the history of autobiography since the middle ages.). With the weakening of the power of traditional models, man becomes less secure in his cultural context, in his political and economic reality – he “will be thrown up against the questions: who am I? What do I mean to be?” In the absence of valid models, one is thrown upon one's own inner resources to find answers to such questions and critical processes open up for self-searching. “Most of the early modern autobiographic writing did not press hard on
The processes of self-searching absorbed complicating questions from Western human being's discoveries of various non-European cultures, aside from the political processes of nation forming, and gradually opened up the 'self' to a world-wide geographic and cultural horizon. Individually as a self-conception drew its elements from traditional personality conceptions too, as a fuller sense evolved beyond all ideal models. The conviction that ultimately no general model can contain the specificity of the 'true self' led to the perception that the individual self is ineffable: Individual difference came to be seen as a great value in itself; individuality meant a precious aspect of human existence. Each and every person is individually distinctive, and every person unique and therefore, incomparable, unrepeatable, and ultimately indescribable - which makes it a sacred duty for the individual to be 'oneself'. Self-conscious cultivation of individuality becomes living in the world with historical consciousness of the world, which implies a responsibility to the self and to the world. The growing fascination with the traits of individuality and for self-representation made several early modern writings "interesting experiments in form fitting the interesting search for the content," but not "autobiographies in the full sense" (843). According to Weintraub, it was Goethe, profoundly influenced by Herder and Moser in his youth, who was the first to write his own life as the history of an individual:

He saw his personal formation as the effective interplay of his self and his world. It was thus fitting that his self-conception should incorporate one of the most fundamental changes in outlook wrought by men of the generation preceding his own. And by rendering his own life story as the history of his self in harmony with the history of his world, his autobiography was both the history of his own individuality and the history of an individual age. History of a self and history of a world are linked. Hegel, in a heavily weighing Teutonic formulation summed this up by saying that individuality is whatever is, in its world, its own- *Die Individualität ist, was ihre Welt als die Jhrige ist* (847)

Lejeune proposed a working definition of the genre: "as the retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (19). An early and
straightforward definition, by which he proposed a form of contract between author and reader which explicitly commits the author to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life, it sought to establish a boundary between factual and fictional modes of discourse. However, the central issues of intentionality and identity surfacing from it continued to demand clarifications and even qualified revisions from Lejeune in response to his critics’ objections, in a long career of sustained and distinguished work in the field, producing an amazing range and amount of scholarship. In 1973, with the publication of “The Autobiographical Pact”, he modified his position with his discovery of the role of the proper name as “the deep subject of autobiography” (in Eakin: 20), by identifying a textual criterion – the identity of the proper name shared by the author, narrator, and the protagonist. That put Lejeune on the course of building a reader-based poetics.

Putting himself in the place of the reader “who attempts to distinguish a mass of published texts, whose common subject is that they recount someone’s life,” Lejeune looks at a slightly modified definition: Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality. Examining its elements against the four different categories (Forms of language, Subject treated, Situation of the author, and Position of the narrator), he finds the definition fairly satisfactory, providing for “some transitions with other genres of personal literature... and a certain latitude to the classifier in the examination of particular cases” (in Eakin: 5). But, as for the author-narrator and the narrator-protagonist identities, they are “all or nothing” conditions. “An identity is or is not. It is impossible to speak of degrees, and all doubt leads to a negative conclusion” (ibid: 5), for what defines autobiography for the reader and for the author, is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name:

As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are referential texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to provide information about a “reality” exterior to the text, and so to submit to a test of verification. Their aim is not verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. Not “the effect of the real,” but the image of the real. All referential texts thus entail what I will call a “referential pact,” implicit or explicit, in which are included a definition of the field of the real that is involved and a statement of the modes and the degree of resemblance to which the text lays claim. (Lejeune in Eakin: 22)
In the case of autobiography, unlike history, geography or journalism, we are not to be concerned with practical difficulties with the test of verification, for the narrative tells us what it alone can tell us. Thus to Lejeune, “the history of autobiography would be above all, a history of its mode of reading...where we would be able to bring into dialogue the reading contracts proposed by different types of texts... and the different types of reading really practiced on these texts” (Ibid: 30).

The significance of autobiography has in fact been a subject of much debate among literary scholars in recent decades, and Philip Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact” (10) offers one explanation of how and why readers respond to autobiographical writing. The “autobiographical pact” involves the textual assertion that the author, narrator and protagonist are the same. In making this self-reference, the author enters into an agreement with readers that they will be reading about an actual person whose existence is legally verifiable (Lejeune: 11). Autobiographies, according to popular discourse, often provide an insight into the lives of individuals (as community members). Their discourses, interpretations and records of experiences are thought to provide capital for readers to decipher their own life experiences. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson examine how life writing produces and reproduces discourses of community arguing that autobiographical narratives, their citation and their recitations have historically been one means through which the imagined community ... constitutes itself on a daily basis (4). In the community that consumes autobiographical writing, how is the author positioned and what are the implications of this positioning are some of the questions posed when ‘experience’ is understood as a category over and above genre and gender.

Gender is a highly relevant issue in the commodification of autobiographical authors. In an age when celebrity authors and public appearances by authors are at an all time high, examining the marketing of female authors allows for a further contextualization of the impact of gender on marketing. The fact that a female autobiographer has already disclosed information about her personal life allows questions about her love life to be fair territory. Michelle Robert and Jane Tompkins both explore how the autobiographical form has been utilized by women to assert the value of traditionally private/personal concerns in the public domain (1105), marketers and ‘blurters’ of female autobiographies have made this trend profitable by
constructing women authors according to enduring myths of femininity, women as the honest and truthful gender, or women as more self-aware, emotionally attentive, generous or saintly.

In “The Autobiographical Pact”, Lejeune presents the most comprehensive and searching analysis of autobiography. He sticks to his concept of the pact and reaffirms that nothing less than a confession of identity can establish autobiography’s very existence. He stresses again the crucial importance of excluding by definition, anything that would paralyze the reader’s trust in reference. Here is his famous statement of personal conviction from “The Autobiographical Pact”:

... it’s better to get on with the confession:... I believe in the transparency of language, and in the existence of a complete subject who expresses himself through it; I believe that my proper name guarantees any autonomy and my singularity (even though I have crossed several Philippe Lejeunes in my life); I believe that when I say “I,” it is I who am speaking: I believe in the Holy Ghost of the first person. And who doesn’t believe in it? But of course it also happens that I believe the contrary, or at least claim to believe it. Whence the fascination that Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes (Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, 1975) has held for me; it seem to be the anti-pact par excellence and proposes a dizzying game of lucidity around all the presuppositions of autobiographical discourse – so dizzying that it ends up giving the reader the illusion that it is not doing what it nevertheless is doing. (131-132).

The purpose of his study of modes of autobiographical self-expression, for Lejeune, right from the 1970’s, was at once literary and historical; an exhaustive inventory he began to compile, of all the autobiographies written in France in the nineteenth century, would lead him to the “micro-forms” of such discourse, and a grammar of personal narrative; and would enlarge the historian’s knowledge of ‘What the social atom, the individual, is living, feeling, doing, thinking, at a given moment in the unfolding-of culture.’ He would conceptualize a social history of the discourse among changing networks of practice, in which the life of the individual is articulated. “Every person”, says Lejeune, “carries within himself a rough draft, perpetually reshaped, of the story of his life: this is what oral history tries to capture on tape. All around us, there are people, far more than you might think, who put this draft of their
life in good order, they write and no one reads what they’ve written. We can have access to this hidden continent by reading the autobiographies published at the author’s expense...” (132).

If the concept of the self is derived from models supplied by the ambient culture, as argued by Weintraub, Lejeune’s argument would be that it becomes necessary to determine how such models of self and of life story function and evolve in a culture, whereas traditional autobiography is largely predicated on a belief in the autonomous self – the fully constituted subject – who pre-exists the language, Lejeune contends that this individualist ideology blinds us to the fact that both self and life story are culturally determined constructs. The individual’s private, autobiographical act can only be derived from a public discourse structured by class, code, and convention (Lejeune in Eakin, p. 192).

Meanwhile, Jacques Derrida showed in his famous essay, “The Law of Genre” (1980), how received conception of genre had taken on the authority of a law that legitimized certain writings and not others:

Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity...If a genre is what it is, or if it is supposed to be what it is destined to be by virtue of its telos...genres should not intermix. And if it should happen that they do intermix, by accident or through transgression...then this should confirm...the essential purity of their identity. This purity belongs to the typical axiom: it is a law of the law of genre, whether or not the law is... “natural” (57).

This law, proposes Derrida, could have a condition of its possibility the a priori of a counter-law, “an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order, and reason,” engendering any number of “disruptive anomalies” by repetition.

Paul de Man’s essay on autobiography, “Autobiography as De-facement”, argued that autobiography was plagued by a series of unanswerable questions arising fundamentally from conceiving it as a separate genre. He thinks it is no genre at all but “a figure of understanding” that operates within autobiography as also across a range of texts. De man sees a linguistic dilemma in the self-reflexive moment is a figure or a face called into being by “the substitutive trope of prosopopoeia,” the giving of a face
or personification. According to de man, autobiography reveals a more or less general fact: that all knowledge, including self-knowledge, depends on figurative language. Autobiographies can thus only produce fictions or figures in place of the self-knowledge they seek. The autobiographer inscribes within the text all the attributes of a face in order to mask his own fictionalization or displacement by writing. ‘Giving of a face’ also implies disfigurement or defacement through tropes. De Man’s reading of Wordsworth’s *Essays Upon Epitaphs* illustrates his argument that autobiography posits a face and a voice that speaks to us, as if beyond the grave. De Man’s essay constitutes a supremely deconstructive moment for Romantic self-hood,” comments Linda Anderson, “quite literally turning its assumptions on their head: instead of a subject who is unique, unified and transcendent, the Romantic self—post-de man— is fatally divided, threatened by representation, forced to summon up rhetorically the ghosts of a self they can never hope to be” (14).

As a genre, the autobiography solicits and promotes even deeper connections between an author’s personal life and the written work produced. There is much evidence to suggest that it is the author-protagonist link that has made autobiographies marketable in the ‘blurb’ age. Michel Foucault has written that “the author is ... the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (159). The author becomes a way to confine the meaning of a text, an easy way to mark the meaning of works of literature. In relation to author, Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact” can be read as a guarantee that the author is the book. When this contract is supposedly violated – the author may not only be branded a liar, but perhaps more seriously, be accused of false advertising.

Significantly, Barthes explains that the critic has much to gain from elucidating a work in terms of its author: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on the text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Once the author has been found, the text is ‘explained’ – victory to the critic (147). Those who now resurrect authors have found similarly specific and empowering functions for them: to sell books, to manipulate the economic power of the celebrity product, and to strengthen the social importance of the arts community and its cultural capital. Authors are useful to consumer culture. Yet further to this, the author has an important and optimistic ideological function for contemporary cultural production. In response to the threat
posed by post modernists, the author becomes symbolic of the existence of individual, autonomous creativity.

Author resurrection is perhaps best achieved through renewing the connection between biographical details and authorial control over the text. And yet, even in autobiographical writing, using a biographical reading can create interesting dilemmas for literary interpretation. The selected autobiographies are written in first person (past) tense and their narrators have the same names as their authors. Blurbs of contemporary autobiographies make especially good use of this "autobiographical past", constructing the author’s biographical details as essential to the reading, and effectively marginalizing other readings – a practice also common to literary texts where the biography of the authors is well known. As Alan Collett observes, the "non fictionality" of a text can often cloud the features of a text that would confer "literary status" upon it (351). Such clouding is even more pronounced in autobiography, where the biological details dominate the form, style, plot and characterization of each text. In short, the more attention that is given to the text’s non-fictional characteristics, the less attention that is presumably given to its art.

If the text’s non-fictional characteristics are highlighted, consequently the realism of the autobiographical text is emphasized. But if autobiographical writing is mere observation and recollection, then perhaps the author is indeed dead. As Michele Roberts notes, autobiography has traditionally been considered an inferior writing craft to fiction (5). But yet, if present day marketing or review blurbs are anything to go by, they have found it profitable to assert contradictories; representing autobiographers as creative geniuses and/or observant recorders, commonly allowing these assessments to merge, contradict and sometimes even sustain each other.

Paul John Eakin argues that thanks to "the post structuralist critique of the self", this is one way in which literary autobiography has separated itself from other forms such as biography and history: "in this last twenty years, the pervasive initiative has been to establish autobiography as an imaginative art, with special emphasis on fiction." (qtd. in Herman: 353). In other words, autobiography may not only be closer in valuing of artistry, at least in some critical circles.

The first evidence of autobiographical writing in India is found as early as 1500 B. C. in the Rigveda (10:2:34) in The Lament of the Gambler, where a gambler, who
was once a Rishi, confesses how he ruined his life by gambling. Later on Moughul Period, Sultan Firoz Shah wrote his autobiography *Futuhat-i-Firoz Shahi, Babar-nama* in 1351. Then in 19th century, Indian Renaissance Raja Rammohan Roy and then Lutfullah wrote the first work in 1854, which can be identified as the modern autobiography. However, since the *Vedic* period and at the time of *Upanishada*, man and the self have been glorified in India. The *Upanishada* admonish man to know his true self, “know thy self” (*atmanam vidhi*) and the Socratic ideal “know thyself” becomes the ideal of the Indian philosophy. Socrates did not separated the “self” from “thy” and would not have said, “know thy self” which the Indian did. The Indian philosophers assert that the Indians have a tendency to see God in the external nature.

The writing of the life history breaks a spell and the writer attains a deep sense of peace for the first time in his life:

...self-observation becomes an instrument of self-change. Letting thoughts take their course, they are brought under the magnifying glass of critical examination, being looked upon as another than the present individual, the energy frozen in them is broken and detachment reached. (Jacobs: 118)

The world is the right place for man’s self-realisation, the process through which he realizes his inward reality. The *Upanishad* also says that the realization of one’s self can never be lost. The aim of education in human being’s life is to help him realizing his true inwardness. The duties in his life have also to be performed with this aim in mind, the aim of self-realisation. Buddhism also supports this theory:

... Buddhism overemphasized inwardness and said that man, if he is intent upon self-realisation, need not bother about pleasing Gods and ancestors. To a person of self-realisation, God themselves pay homage, as they did to Buddha. (Raju: 256)

The uniqueness in man was emphasized by Rabindranath Tagore in *Sadhana*: “I am absolutely unique, I am I, I am incomparable. The whole weight of the universe cannot crush out this individuality of mine. I maintain it in spite of the tremendous gravitation of all things” (57).

Tagore states that the wish for self-gratification is strong in everyone, but the self can attain higher heights only if its fulfilment is accompanied by some desire for the good of the society too. This attitude helps in the attainment of *bodhi* or the true
awakening, as also in the acquisition of infinite happiness. All the things in this world have two aspects, *maya* or appearance, and *satyam* or truth. The self is only *maya* where it strives to be only individual, finite and considers itself separate from all the other things. But once it recognizes its quintessence in the universal and infinite, in the supreme self, in *param atman*, then it achieves the distinction of being termed as *satyam*.

Robert F. Sayre defines the autobiography as a “loose self-history”. Roy Pascal states that “True autobiography can be written only by men and women pledged to their innermost selves” and therefore the form requires dedication to internal and external events. Sayre states this viewpoint: “Autobiography is an examination of the self as both a sovereign integrity and a member of society. In fact, the self is at all times both these things, and autobiography is an endless stream of demonstrations of their inseparability” (6).

As Patricia Meyer Spacks remarks, “To read an autobiography is to encounter a self as an imaginative being” (19). An inward concentration has a complete absorption with the self. This view also has been stated by V.S. Naipaul in *India: A Wounded Civilization*. While analyzing Gandhi’s *My Experiments with Truth*, discussing the Indian concept of self, he states:

> The outer world matters only in so far as it affects the inner. It is the Indian way of experiencing; what is true of Gandhi’s autobiography is true of many other Indian autobiographers, though the self-absorption is usually more sterile. (101)

Naipaul gives long articles of the conversation he had with Dr. Sudhir Kakar, who was of the opinion that the Indians use the outside reality only “to preserve the continuity of the self amidst an ever changing flux of outer events and things” (Ibid: 103)

The western style of an individualistic and assertive personality is out of place in the Indian context. It explains the concept of ashram life in India and the concept of communal life in it. This gives coherence to the statement made earlier that the community life helps in the establishment of the individual’s self-identity.

Lal Behari Day’s *Recollections of My School* (1873-1876), Mahatma Gandhi’s *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927), Jawaharlal Nehru’s *An Autobiography*
Mulk Raj Anand's *Apology for Heroism* (1946) were written when the fundamental changes occurred in the nation's cultural consciousness. The post colonial autobiographers chose "to focus on specific episodes in the greater narrative of journeying, the idyllic childhood and the dawn of self-consciousness; or the time following, of severance and departure, and the loss of roots, home or motherland ... And, indeed, the culminative event in the journey narrative is that of homecoming, a moment which appears under a range of moods, extending from celebration to disillusionment" (Ibid: 201)


The Indians are slowly and cautiously getting ready to write their life-stories and the nostalgia season has finally arrived. Life stories are suddenly hot material and are finally coming of age; writers are brushing up their memories to make literary debuts. Manifestation of ideas in person and the tales of their happiness, pain, hope, strength, sacrifice, courage in autobiographies have more appeal to the readers. The autobiographies make them familiar with the Indian culture, the Indian festivals, and the folk traditions and so on. The Indianness in the writings is important and autobiographies are a good medium for expressing it since they have to recount the past events of the writer's life in the form of a story.

The Indian panorama of women's autobiographies in English is rich with some exceptional writings by outstanding women of the country. Since many of the women autobiographers have written their books during the period of the Indian struggle for freedom, there are bound to be some political leanings also.
The establishment of identity by women autobiographers is based on the relationship with some chosen ones, without any affiliation; they feel constricted to write candidly and unreservedly about themselves. Most of the Indian women autobiographers reveal their tendency to treat their culture that is women’s culture, as “sub-culture”: men’s culture being the main culture, with the women conforming mainly to it. Elaine Showalter feels that denouncing of “female self-assertiveness” (13) was one of the methods used by the women of “feminine” culture to expiate for their literary and public activities. Genuine female experience expressed in writing will always have a universal value.

The birth of a female child is still not a very joyous event in many of the Indian families, where the arrival of a girl child is announced as “It has arrived”. Many women autobiographers have not elaborated upon it, but some have discussed the attitude of the other family members at the time of their birth. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit’s The Scope of Happiness (1979) gives a detailed account of the birth of a girl in the Nehru family. The autobiography The City of Two Gateways (1950) by Savitri Devi Nanda which has a sub-title, The Autobiography of an Indian Girl, shows the frustration of the girl. Her discontent at being a girl made her father dress her in a boy’s clothes. The same discontent is seen in Brinda’s Maharani: The Story of an Indian Princess (1953), who was filled with “black rebellion” at the injustices which girls had to suffer. The rebellion burning in her heart made her “defy convention”. Urmila Haksar’s grandmother, and that also the maternal one, could never forgive her for her sex. The Future That Was (1972) opens with anguish at being born a girl, in which there is already had the first born as a girl. So the second girl child did not make anyone very happy.

It is seen that despite of having a sense of failure and achievements of success throughout the lives of these women, many of the autobiographers continue their lives but they felt discrimination against them in their childhood and therefore, as Carolyn D. Heilburn says: “Nostalgia, particularly for childhood, is likely to be a mask for unrecognized anger” (15). Childhood for these women has been projected as the happiest of times of their writings; because by the time they had understood that their births were not very happy events for their families, they had already enjoyed the best part of their lives, their childhood:
For women, adulthood – marriage or spinsterhood – implied relative loss of self. Unlike men, therefore, they looked back fondly to the relative freedom, and power of childhood and youth (Sparks: 48).

The childhood memories are often secondhand; parents and grandparents narrate incidents from early life and they are the recollections of what the writers heard from others. These are then the ‘edited’ versions of childhood memories, written by adults. But these can be instances of genuine, first-hand memories of childhood and these can give the notion of being really true. Most of these girls were allowed to play with the boys of their own age, with a freedom, which was restricted later in life as they grew older. What is significant is “that accounts of childhood were somehow freed from the terrible anxieties induced by adult female ambition and encounters.” (Heilbrun: 18)

Kamala Devi Chattopadhya’s marriage to her friend Sarojini Naidu’s brother was a failure. So her autobiography does not discuss much of her married life. Virginia Woolf had recorded in her diary that she was forty years old when she found that she could talk freely about her life. When she has reached the middle age, she felt that she can indulge in the act of self-creation and confessed herself. For the confrontation one need the daring attitude of youth or the shrewd cold and calculating mind of the middle age. Erik Erikson has observed that autobiographies “are written at certain late stages of life for the purpose of re-creating oneself in the image of one’s own method; and they are written to make that image convincing” (Erikson: 21).

A woman is expected to be petite, demure, passive and an attractive; she is not encouraged to be active, assertive, competitive and attractive. Most women writers do not write “about the condition of being born homely”. It is something, which is important for every woman from the moment she becomes conscious of her physical appearance.

“Every girl who lacks beauty knows instinctively that she belongs to an underprivileged group, and that to climb up and out she will have to be cleverer and stronger and more ruthless perhaps than she would choose to be.” (Bowen: 18-19)

It is true of Urmila Haksar who was conscious not only of her uncomely looks but also of the winsome looks of her sister. So, she concentrated more on her studies and, being intelligent, excelled in her student-life. Kamala Das says that her grandmother was
anxious for her dark skin and would rub the turmeric on her body and would oil her curly hair regularly to make her more beautiful.

The society, with its conventions and taboos, puts some barriers for women, which restrain them from rising above a certain level. But women have proved, through a latent consciousness that they can ably break all the hurdles of conventions fixed by society for them and can liberate themselves and also establish their identity. Kamala Das’s *My Story* reveals the individuality. Like Kamala Das, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Urmila Haksar, Durgabai Deshmukh, Sudha Muzumdar, Cornelia Sorabji, Sita Rathnamala and Dhanwanti Rama Rau and the other autobiographers wrote their own developments in their autobiographies. They were generally the princesses, political activists, and social workers, but their autobiographies were very “traditional” and provocative as they delineated the women and their lives lived in the socially defined slot for them; their roles were well defined on the basis of their relationships with others. Writing an autobiography for each of them has been a novel experience where a woman’s “own gender status and her female models (mother, grandmother, mentor friend) contribute to a concept of self and quality of writing voice that are distinctly of women.” (Watson:181)

Concerned with the Indian context, the stock of the autobiographical effort in modern India in terms of some critical and historically influential descriptions of the postcolonial Indian self, and of the general constitution of an Indian ‘autobiography’ should be referred to for the autobiographical studies. Gandhi’s *My Experiments With Truth*, Nehru’s *Autobiography*, and Nirad Chaudhuri’s *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, Tagore’s *My Reminiscences* and others come to mind, as some of the better known among a very considerable number of works produced in the last 170 years or more, since the publication of Raja Rammohun Roy’s short autobiographical sketch. While most of these were written in English (prior to the reorganization of the states in Independent India) and some translated into English, an equally large or larger number have been written in the indigenous, regional languages in the second half of the 20th century. Autobiographies, both in English and in the Indian regional languages, continue to be written to this day: Poets, novelists, artists, teachers and scholars, philosophers, scientists, politicians, bureaucrats, industrialists, actors, social workers and activists, men and women of every distinction are wont to make an autobiographical effort and publish their life-stories.
To think about such matters is to think of the very interesting phenomenon of 'bhadramahila atmacaritra' (autobiography, as it has come to be called in Bengal particular. In a way, while writing their autobiographies the women autobiographers are following a contemporary trend and also an old tradition. While re-viewing and criticizing these autobiographies, it is possible to commit the fallacy of simply situating the texts within a larger tradition.

The most important point to make here relates to the marketability at a veritable, accomplished, autobiographical author, who gets elevated to the status of a proven and authentic social commentator with a 'message' for the reader. As Smith and Watson note, this is one way in which consumerists discourses are circulated:

In telling their stories, [autobiographical] narrators take models of identity that are culturally available. And by adopting ready-made narrative templates to structure experimental history, they take up culturally designated subjectivities. Their recitation of personal narrative thereby attests to and verifies their participation in culture (9).

Reading the autobiographies as a proof of the authors' participation in their contemporary culture is unlikely to reveal any new cardinal point to plot the cartography of femininity in the modern Indian public sphere. Such a 'reading' would be ridden with a priori opinions and bias and the autobiography ceases to be an archive of the self. The autobiographies archive is a personal collection of 'things' or 'items' important and unimportant information and events, desires and hopes, ideas and thoughts. The impulses behind the writing of all autobiographies are as strong as living and of storing objects and things, for one's self and for others. And when such a personal archive is reviewed it is not advisable to start by sorting out the items according to their value; to pick out those 'things' which would corroborate the larger history and tradition.

According to colonial historians, the late emergence of autobiographical writing in India is/was a sign of civilizational difference or historical lack: it was argued that the idea of a reflective individual subject, essential for the development of the genre of self-writing, was alien to Indian culture or unavailable in the country until the colonial encounter. This position has been contested in recent years, with a growing acknowledgement of figures of individuality in the pre modern and early modern India.
Excessive concern about the origin and development of the genre always distracted the attention of scholarship from another more important question what is the nature of autobiographical practice in India? One of the prominent scholars on autobiographical writing in India, Udayakumar notes,

‘Readers schooled in the Western canon are sometimes struck by the indifference that Indian autobiographies – especially those written by male authors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – often display towards the private interior lives of their protagonists. Most of these self-narratives present themselves as resolutely public utterances’ (419).

All autobiographies written with a view to publication, whether they contain the private interior lives of the authors or not, may be considered public utterances in a larger sense. The ‘publicity’ effected by the majority of Indian self-narratives, is different in kind from that assumed by personal confessions. Unlike Western autobiographers who justify their autobiographical effort by pointing to their singularity as a person, the Indian autobiographer often highlights the typicality or representativeness of his/her experience.

Udaykumar observes:

Even Gandhi, whose autobiography displayed a clear differentiation of himself from others, stated in his Preface that the book was the story not of his life but of his ‘experiments with truth’; his narrative had taken the shape of an autobiography only because his life contained nothing but such experiments. Gandhi’s autobiographical gesture, according to this claim, was not one of intimate self-revelation, but of an experimenter sharing notes with others engaged in a similar project – there was nothing private about this exchange. The periodicals in which Gandhi’s autobiography first appeared and the range of audiences it addressed showed that the space of such exchange was clearly tied to modern notions of publicity (419-420).

This disavowal of the private in the majority of Indian autobiographies is often regarded as a sort of silence adopted by authors in deference to social norms. Even in the Indian women’s autobiographical writings, the apparently private confessions are highly filtered and censored. Such a view assumes the prior existence of a desire for the act of autobiographical composition within the author, upon which the normative structures of
society enact their constraining forces. Social norms are seen as external to – rather than shaping – subjects and their desire for self-articulation.

The intersection of autobiography and history provides a useful site for exploring the issue of the public nature of autobiographical writing in India. A large number of Indian self-narratives written in the 19th and early 20th centuries were preoccupied with the experience of historical change. Using the life of the author at times a mere pretext and at other times as the pivot, they sought to provide their readers with a ‘slice of history.’ In their Introduction to *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History* David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn theorizing:

Truth claims made in these narratives were simultaneously historical and personal: the veracity of the account of the past was grounded in a testamentary claim made by the narrating voice. Even as they made statements of an intimate nature about the personal life of the author or of other individuals, they were also intervening in ongoing processes that shaped a collective memory. The autobiographer in these texts is, simultaneously, the author of an individual of truth-telling and the subject of a shred historical memory (15).

It may be erroneous to regard the confluence of these two elements as an accidental feature of particular autobiographies. Given the frequency of such convergence, it should be looked upon as a vital feature of the genre in India. In fact, an important challenge that autobiography studies in India face today is how to investigate the “mutual involvement and interpenetration of the personal and the historical” (Udayakumar, 421). While the former connects the autobiographical text to a history of subjectivation, the latter links it to a process of collective memory-making.

The task of reading the ‘silences’ in the text is inextricably linked with authorial intention, which is a major post structuralist concern. Post structuralists have tried to theorize it away. But, however hard we focus on the autobiographers’ masks and personae on the one hand, and the cultural institutions, language and genre that construct a self on the other, it is nearly impossible to examine autobiography without raising questions regarding intention: for what purpose has these women undertaken the task of writing an autobiography? Why have they chosen to depict their ‘self’ as they have done in their autobiography? For that matter, has there been a conscious exercise of choice? Why have they chosen to remain silent on those episodes in their life which
reiterate the fact that a woman in the patriarchal world of Indian society faces difficulties faring well?

Stanley Fish has argued that "meaning is a function of what a particular speaker in a specific set of circumstances was intending to say": he insists on "the contextual circumstances of ... intentional production" (qtd. In Porter, xii). The one sure way of making out the intentions behind the act of writing is to examine the intentions that exist 'outside' the text via statements in interviews or letters.

The intention, it can be presumed, must have been the construction of a coherent self which, unlike the 'real' self, is impervious to the pains inflicted by the forces of Life; an attempt to reconcile with the rapacity of life. However, the integral self turns out to be an illusion which, critical scrutiny will reveal, to be the emergence of shifting, contentious subjects who speak in a range of discourses. This in turn will lead to the tension(s) in the professed intentions and the political and cultural ideologies that gave rise to these tensions.

The author is able to connect with the reader, perhaps even gaining the fruits of critical readership and interpretation, while maintaining the position as named author. Instead of interpreting the first person narrator "I" as the reader, reader of autobiographical writing attribute this "I" to the author, whose artistic presence is so strong. This form of comprehension again relates to certain established literary traditions involving the ways in which readers are conditioned to read. As an author makes us read a text, George Poulet remarks, the author "awakens in us the analogue of what ... [he/she] thought or felt. To understand a literary work, then is to let the individual who wrote it reveal himself to us in us." (61). Contemporary authors of autobiography therefore owe a significant part of their authority to the readers of their work, and to the particular reciprocity a written work elicits between writer and reader. In autobiography, this connection is largely due to the constructed accessibility of the autobiographical author. Unlike the 'great figures' of biography, loft academics or mysterious writers of fiction, the present breed of literary autobiographers are constructed as 'everyday people' with notable achievements.

The women's' questions in the Indian scenario become highly relevant in the cultural matrix, and open a window to the formative stages of modern Indian
femininity, as it mould the ‘new image’ of the public woman. Partha Chatterjee elaborates:

The ‘new’ woman defined in this way was subjected to a new patriarchy. In fact, the social order connecting the home and the world in which nationalism placed the new woman was contrasted not only with that of modern western society, it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition ... the new patriarchy was also sharply distinguished from the immediate social and cultural condition in which the majority of the people lived, for the ‘new’ woman was quite the reverse of the ‘common’ woman who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical suppression by males...It was precisely this degenerate conditions of women which nationalism claimed it would reform, and it was through these contrasts that the new woman of nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the westernized women of the wealthy pavenu families spawned by the colonial connection as well as the common women of the lower classes. Attainment by her own efforts of a superior national culture was the mark of woman acquired freedom (244-45).

Along with the form of autobiography, we must also examine the discourse of Feminism. The concept of feminism is not uniform and homogeneous. It changes with the change of historical and spatial frames. Yet feminism in female autobiography is essentially engaged with the representation of women in a society and their subordinate positions. Most of the attempts to define a woman assume a universal connotation in that woman is considered more as a product of cultural norms. This defines her as subordinate to man and less with the creative interventions she makes in changing perceptions at various levels. The present study has made a critical inquiry into the literary world of the women writers as Das, Goswami, Durrani and Ahmed in order to examine the kind of intervention they have made in the way women’s worlds are represented in their autobiographies.

The term ‘feminism’ indicates woman’s struggle for the advocacy of her right and the promotion of political, economic and social equality. It has been variously interpreted.
Linda Gordon describes feminism as “an analysis of Women’s subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it” (14). Adrienne Rich chooses to define feminism as an act of ‘revisioning’ when she says that “Feminism is the place where, in the most natural, originic way, subjectivity and politics have come together.” (114)

Stuart Hall has identified five major features of feminism in his work The Question of Cultural Identity:

i. It questions the basic distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, private and ‘public’. The slogan for feminism is ‘the personal is political.’

ii. It poens a whole new arena of social life such as the family, sexuality, housework, the domestic division of labour and child bearing.

iii. It also exposes, as a political and social question, the issue of how women are formed and produced as gender subjects. It politicizes subjectivity, identity and the process of identification.

iv. It began as movement challenging the social position of women and this has expanded to include the formation of sexual and gender identity.

v. Feminism challenges the notion that men and women are part of the same identity- ‘Mankind’- replacing it with the question of sexual differences.

Feminists believe that oppression of women is based on sexual differences. The division of labour between men and women, as argued by Engels in Origin of Family Property and State tells that private property relations and the institution of marriage have come to be regarded as ‘the world’s historical defeat of all women’. Woman is perceived as a piece of property and granted ‘a secondary status.’ According to Engels, as the civilization advanced and patriarchal family established firmly as part of the capitalist development, women were assigned the status of chattel. The institution of marriage obtained patriarchal control over the women’s sexuality and ensured reproduction of society. The sexual division of labour has ever since tied women to child care, care of the household and other responsibilities while freeing man of the bondage of household work.

Betty Freidan’s The Feminine Mystique extends the feminist argument beyond the confines of patriarchy. The later literary writings focus a shift to the idea of psychic fragmentation of the weaker sex rather than on the theme of social oppression which

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has slowly assumed a secondary position. In the beginning of 1970, three revolutionary books, *Sexual Politics* (1970), *The Female Eunuch* (1971) and *Patriarchal Attitude* (1970) created a storm of theories. Millet accuses male writers of presenting female in their works by distorting sexuality according to the masculine culture in their books. Eva Figes in her work *Patriarchal Attitude* argues that women have been largely man made and Germaine Greer laments women’s passive response to ‘Patriarchy’ to be the cause of their malady.

Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* tries to relate feminist theories to literature. She identifies the female sub-culture of three phases- feminine, feminist and female- the feminine signifying the phase of imitation where a woman writer imitates norms of male writers. The feminist is the second phase of protest against the standards and values of male writers in favour of autonomy, and the third phase is that of the realization of the ‘female’ i.e. the phase of self discovery, of a search for identity, an inward looking gaze.

While Showalter has explored into the development of women’s writings, later approaches have tried to link women to their sexuality and language. These concerns of the feminist movements find articulation even in their approaches to the study of literary texts. Views expounded by Helene Cixous, Monique Witting, Luce Irigaray and others claim that language is seminally important in creating a patriarchal worldview and therefore writing as woman is important as the act of writing means reinventing the language of the body. Women have grown conscious as themselves as writers, speakers and auditors. These poststructuralist feminists establish that there is an essential difference between men and women. According to them, the consciousness of the ‘self’ is the postmodern interpretation of feminism. Women writers, claim Cixous and Irigaray, should focus on the female body, women’s feelings and desires.

According to Cixous, ‘woman must write herself: must write about women and bring woman to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself in the text, as into the world and into history – by her own movement.

The ideas of Carl Jung have also attracted some feminists. Jung believes that each person needs to incorporate certain aspects of the opposite sex into his/her personality, only then can he/she achieve wholeness. While some feminists approve of
Jung's idea of fusion of the masculine and feminine, there are many who believe that by such a hypothesis Jung only reinforces the stereotyped notions of gender. After Freud and Jung, psychological theories have undergone a transformation. It is now being emphasized that early social interactions in the family, rather than biological aspects, alone determine psychological structures. These ideas have resulted in newer theories of identity, narcissism, and pre-oedipal relations etc which assume varied connotations in male and female texts in the present times.

Recent feminist theories assert that any attempt to formulate a universal concept of woman is futile. This decentering of woman is almost akin to the decentering of man in the postmodernist episteme where there are no essential subjects or objects but only individuals caught in a network of historical and psychological power relationship.

Taking into account all these considerations, the category of 'experience' attains a prominence which cannot be contained within the boundaries of genre or gender. The politics underlying the conception of 'experience' in the female autobiographical discourse cannot be theorized within the framework of autobiography as a genre or within the framework of women's experience. Autobiographers (male and female) are held responsible for recording authentic experience, rather than for creating it, for being in effect social biographers as well as autobiographers. They may be allowed the imagination of form but not of fact.

The female and the feminine experience, since the advent of feminism, have always held a special place in the literary ramparts as well as in popular culture. But this does not mean that the female experience or women's experience is 'different'. The past in an autobiography comes across as recollected. However, in the act of autobiographical composition, the experiences of the past get reprocessed, assimilated and analyzed. Lives, as seen in autobiographical discourses, are composed in most instances as if they were mosaics. Mosaics, as Leon Edel suggests, before they are composed, "are not fiction; they are an accumulation of little pieces of reality, shaped into an image" (16). The pieces of reality are sometimes the elements of the author's community. It suggests that the autobiographer's representation of reality is unconsciously endowed with, archetypal or communal meanings and attitudes. Therefore, the little pieces of reality (or 'experience' as they may be referred to in the most ephemeral sense) are not what differentiate the male and female autobiographies into separate categories. The difference happens in the reprocessing, assimilating and
analyzing stages at which points the archetypal or communal meanings and attitudes get (un)consciously integrated into the discourse.

The usefulness of poststructuralist theory for an *understanding* of autobiography remains uncertain. For all the theoretical equipment at its disposal for a thoroughly neat overhauling of all things *textual*; these modes of reading (one might have called it abstraction) seem to relegate all meaning, intention and apprehension of value and truth into a limbo of arbitrary and questionable significance. In a world of mere ‘effects’ of language, what do we make of history, politics, culture and religion, with which humanity has lived for millennia? That text can have political and historical effect which revives the question of referentiality or truth. “Indeed the notion of multiple locations, both as contexts and positioning for the subject, becomes one of the ways autobiography (offers)... itself, as a site for new theoretical and critical insights... both productive and diverse” (Linda Anderson: 16). Feminist and postcolonial perspectives suggest this productive diversity, beyond poststructuralist theorizing, determined by vital political and historical questioning.

Traditionally, a woman writer anywhere in the world was expected to deal only with the romantic narrative concentrating on romantic love leading to conventional marriage. Such form of writing was desirable and unobjectionable and it was thought to be the métier of a woman. There have been many hurdles on the voyage of inner discovery. The initial obstacle which had to be overcome by a female writer on this quest for identity was her encroachment on the hitherto male-dominated stronghold of autobiographical writing. An autobiography is expected to reveal the “hidden forms of inwardness”. So the question often asked is can a woman, who is marginalized and is taught from her birth to be self-effacing and selfless, indulge in the luxury of self exploration which should provide an answer to the question “How did I become what I am?” This problem has been associated with gender prejudice and has been very tersely put forth by Susan Stanford Friedman:

“A..... man has the luxury of forgetting his ...... sex. He can think of himself as an ‘individual’. Women ...... reminded at every turn in the great cultural hall of mirrors of their sex ...... have no such luxury.” (2)

Women have revolted against these established prejudices and have been successful autobiographers. There is not anything unnatural in a woman’s literary
creativity, which is an extension of her biological creativity. She is quite capable of writing her life’s account. A woman’s autobiography generally focuses on the various relationships like those with her parents, her siblings and later with her spouse, children and her mother-in-law. It is as if her identity is established and proved only on the basis of these relationships in her life. They reveal the discrimination against them since their childhood. And since marriage, generally an arranged one, was thought to be the ultimate goal of a girl’s life, she was taught various domestic chores. Her married life was not always a happy one but the woman did not have the courage and the inclination to revolt; this was due to the teachings instilled in her from her very young days that a woman always needed the support of a woman.

Much before the dawn of twenty first century, women’s literature came to be accepted as very different from the male-centred philosophy of writing and frame of reference, including subjectivity. The issue of identifying and formulating the distinctiveness of feminine narrative in autobiography has involved a great deal of controversy. Female fiction writers had faced a similar handicap of using a prose “which is essentially a male instrument fashioned for male purposes”. (Peter: 126)

Feminist writings – both autobiographical and critical – focus on issues of identity and difference, cultural and gender hybridity, embodiment and transgression of generic and other boundaries, especially on how theory and practice are related. Shari Benstock, for instance, addresses the gaps and exclusions of the autobiographical canon, examines the theoretical claims of a traditionally patriarchal criticism, and points out how ‘enthrallement’ to theory often jeopardizes the site of writing and the relation of the text to its author – making women’s writing vulnerable in addition to their being traditionally marginal. Her 1988 essay, “Authorizing the Auto-biographical” examines “the reigning attitudes in autobiographical theory and practice that do not take women into account, how ‘woman’ is situated under patriarchy; how metaphors of self and writing write her out of the account; where she is placed with regard to the “I” that structures the autobiographical account…” (7). Her reading of Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Sketch of the Past’ demonstrates how Woolf’s account shows that “the relation of the conscious to the unconscious, of the mind to writing, of the inside to the outside of political and narrative systems, indicate not only a problematizing of social and literary conventions – a questioning of the symbolic law – but also the need to reconceptualize form itself” (19). Traditional conceptions of the autobiographical rest on the firm belief
in the conscious control of artist over subject matter, and in the authority to represent life history; those who question such authority of the phallic power ought to be women. The very genre of autobiography raises questions of gender and difference: "... the difference within women's writing: the female autograph dramatizes alterity and non-presence" (Stanton 1984: 16)

For Liz Stanley, it is in fact a range of differences. If for the reader, one of the most important reasons for reading autobiography is to find out about other people's lives, it becomes politically necessary to recognize the plurality of women's lives: "The differences of women's lives matter, not differences from an assumed exemplary make life, but rather differences from each other" (Stanley 1992: 120). A "comparative referential reading" of women's autobiographies should tell the reader something of the vast material differences within 'women's lives,' for example, of black women. A return to contexts and to identities had for feminism a "strategic usefulness" in terms of "the part played by autobiography in changing or reconfiguring the theoretical issues. Autobiography has been one of the most important sites of feminist debate precisely because it demonstrates that there are many different ways of writing the subject... enabling critics to replay the problem of the subject in ways that are often experimental, which seemed to lie outside the terms of theory as it was currently thought" (Anderson: 87). That point to a political imperative for women to constitute themselves, which clearly should recast their question in relation to autobiography: not 'what is it' but instead 'what does it do' (ibid: 90-91). This return to contexts necessitated by feminist perspectives of difference and alterity has profound significance for 'other', especially postcolonial, subjects.

The relation between theory and practice, discursive positions and material locations, and the play of 'identity' and 'difference,' and much of the substantial analytical baggage of Theory, will seem to need a great deal of reformulation when faced with a postcolonial situation. The very change of 'location' brings in many new kinds of difference, layered with crossings, displacement and diasporic mobility generated by colonialism. The 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' produced as an effect of colonial rule make a return to the 'wholeness' prior to the encounter inconceivable. Hence there seems to be no such thing as uncontaminated white or European culture, neither an ethnically and culturally stable black identity, nor any essentially other identity we can link to a place of origin. A postcolonial 'identity,' therefore, seems to

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arrest and gather all differences under one head, a multiplicity of locations and
countries. However, within the language of dispersal, there is a need and the possibility
of constructing a place from which to speak, necessary fictions that make both identity
and politics possible (Hall 1987: 44).

Anti-colonial movements and struggles for freedom and self-determination in
different parts of the colonial world, and eventual decolonization in the 20th century,
have shown that questions of identity – national, cultural, and even civilizational – do
carry a politico-cultural charge in the postcolonial world. But postcolonial ‘selves’ from
the erstwhile colonies, as yet relatively ‘young, independent, modern’ nations, need
practically to re-learn their own language and understand their own cultures, if at all
these things exist in accessible forms, for colonialism and imperialism have played
havoc with them; their own histories have, by and large, been annexed by Europe.

In such literary changes, women autobiographies have become the
representatives of the psyche of a woman who is struggling for articulating the conflicts
of identity in the contemporary spatial frames.

The present study deals with the work of select Indian and Pakistani women
autobiographers and their representation of the turbulent life of the Indian and Pakistani
woman.

It is argued that the autobiography, which reveals the innermost secrets of the
writer’s life, is not an appropriate medium for the Indians to take up; they are being
mostly introverts and not so forthcoming in sharing the secrets of their lives. For that a
study of the historical survey of Indian autobiographies is necessary.

In the vedic times, as Sucheta Kriplani states: ‘... the woman of India enjoyed an
exceptionally high status. Her entry into the husband’s home was regarded as an
auspicious event bringing blessings to the household. The Vedic word dampaati used to
denote jointly the husband and the wife. Etymologically it means the joint owners of the
house. The girl like the boys underwent upanayana ceremony at an early age and this
practice continued even in the later stages. Her education was regarded as a necessary
accomplishment for being well placed in life.’ (212) The Vedas illustrate that before
2000 B.C., women enjoyed equality with men for they sat next to men and performed
yagnas.
With the advent of time Manu, propounded Manusmriti and established a compendium of code of living in society. In one of his sections of the books he disallows any freedom for a woman. As the Hindu population constitutes the majority of the masses, the subjugation of the women as pronounced by Manu has played a considerable role on Indian social consciousness. Alladi Uma writes:

The Indian woman has carried the burden of the family, has slaved for her husband, her children. In a need to accept a lower status through the mythical models of Sita, Savitri and Gandhari, she has been taught to be passive accepting the dynamic role of men in her life. She was taught to be shy, gentle and dignified as a person pure and faithful as a wife, a selfless, loving and thoughtful as a mother. (1 & 2)

It is against this position that debates on women's position in Indian society started even before colonialism. For the issue of whether women could join the order and become nuns has been debated by Budddha and his followers in the 6th century B.C. Even in the 18th century, there was a fear among Indian masses about educating women. It was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who under the influence of British colonialism agitated against Sati and women's enslavement. These efforts received support from several reformers like Vidyasagar, Paramhansa, Tagore, Gandhi, Syed Ahmed Khan who raised numerous social and political issues concerning women's welfare. Pandita Rama Bai attacked Hindu religious orthodoxy and spoke up for women's cause. With such efforts made by reformers, educated women and social groups, Indian society went into turmoil with debates on women's issues.

The lives of women were developed in post-independent India. After Independence, reforms in marriage rules, property rights, rules for equal pay, equality of opportunity have come into being. Women's question has also become a political issue. Partha Chatterjee remarks:

Infact, it became a belief that if women from respectable families learnt to read and write, that would result in doing no harm to their caste or honour. Nationalism has brought in its wake a wave where men have started believing that by educating women the condition of the country would improve and that there would be happiness, welfare and civilized manners in social life. (118)
The situation in the post independent nation has brought Indian women out of the darkness of the pre-independence era. They have been granted democratic rights—rights to education, employment, franchise etc. Still women's oppression in India has not changed as the declining sex ratio has created a threat to the existence of women. They have been captured by the very institution which attempts to safeguard and protect their lives and interests namely family, marriage, educational institutions, employment establishments, political outfits, legal machinery and so on. Indu Prakash Singh writes:

Whether it is child marriage, rape, dowry death, bride burning, child abuse, wife battering sexual assault or domestic violence, each form of oppression pins down her sordid tale from womb to her tomb that map and draw the contours of our decedent, capitalist, casteist, criminal patriarchal society. (24-25)

A woman spends more than half of the time of her life in her family and for the housewife it is full time work place. Therefore it would be no exaggeration to lament that family is the origin, the root of all female subjugation. Engels in his book *The Origin of Family, Property and the State* considers various stages of man's progress from savagery, barbarism to civilization when human beings started living in families. He believes that men enjoy the economic advantage as woman's lack of rights to lay claim to possession for herself on her children as the overthrow of mother's right is the world historical defeat of the female sex.

It has been argued that women are not helplessly trapped in the family but have willingly identified marriage, children and family with their own happiness. Living in the 'man's world since centuries, women experience pleasure in looking after her children, tending home and caring for families. If man is the administrator, the woman is the manager and the one expected to run the house skilfully and efficiently. She loves offering her services to family members and finds tremendous satisfaction in doing all this because the psychology of patriarchised socialization and genderised anesthetisation inbred in them over the generations has so much got into their nerves that they do not consider that sometimes it can land them into trouble. Hence with feminism as with socialism there is no united call for abolition of family and those who do so address only imaginary consensus. Michele Barrette points out the deep rooted ideology of family:
Family is a place that stands for progressive human values. It offers a range of emotional and experimental satisfaction not available elsewhere in the present organisation of social relation as Ogden Nash once said, 'Home is where you have to go there, and they have to take you in.' Kinship, love and care however weaker in the contemporary nuclear family, still operates as this level.... and women occupy a vexed place in the family as they have willingly identified marriage, children and family with their own happiness. (11 & 40)

The institution of marriage in the Indian context is still defined by traditional norms of family and culture. In India, we have more than 70% of marriages still governed by the rules of ‘kinship’ rather than courtship. Marriage is still considered a matter of interfamily not an interpersonal concern. So domestic violence has assumed a demoniac stature. Man and woman are biological complementary to each other, as two wheels for running the cart house of family, malfunctioning of the one breaks the family cart house. Women in families are subjected to terrible violence and the situation in some cases becomes so worse that police in many cases does not intervene calling it a ‘domestic quarrel’ or a ‘personal family affair.’ Even if the woman is killed in the cruel encounter, men confessing as murdering their wives are acquitted in the name of “honour killing”. And these very women, if they somehow reach the police, are frequently raped by the very men charged with their protection- the police, military officers and other agents of the state.

The way gender relations as articulated in family invest more power with men to inflict violence on women. Even the legal machinery fails to support the violently assaulted woman in the private sphere of family, as the members of family play an active role in destroying all evidence and getting the ‘murder cases’ at home seen as accidental or suicide deaths. Even the practice of ‘dowry’ only prevalent in India has aggravated the degradation of women in the family. Advocated by Hinduism, this sinister custom is still prevalent in the domains of poor as well as educated elite. Women are brutally burnt and murdered for not bringing adequate dowry and familial-social norms contribute to make the situation worse.
In India and in many South Asian countries, it is the patriarchy that dominates. It signifies a social system where power is invested with the eldest male member. It operates with a hierarchical power structure where all males are considered superior to all females and elder male dominate the younger. Universally found all around the globe, this practice has created a set of social relations between men, a material base that establishes or creates interdependence and solidarity among men that enables them to dominate women.

According to the biological ideology of patriarchy, motherhood is the true vocation of woman whereby she has to produce a male heir. The true happiness of a woman, according to patriarchal culture lies in the fulfilment of her family role. It works to keep women tied to their home. Customs like wearing mangal sutras and sindoor, keeping fasts without water, curtailing the physical mobility of women have undermined their self-esteem. Further, dowry deaths, female infanticide, female foeticide have emerged as the dominant patriarchal practices.

Hindus who constitute the greater part of Indian population bind Indian women through rigid and conservative beliefs. More than half of the Hindu community believes and accords preferences to ‘the laws of dharma’ over to ‘the laws of state.’ In fact all aspects of female independence are annihilated in Hinduism. Brahminic brainwashing of men against women still rules and that has led to their degradation.

The Brahmin ideology has legitimized the most oppressive discrimination against women by claiming that the female were born to suffer on account of their sins in their last births. The conservative Brahmins still in many remote parts have brainwashed woman that they should be reborn as jackals if they did not submit to the lecherous rape by their barbaric husbands. It is with this conservative background that Hindu women have been struggling. This orthodox culture is practiced in many Indian states in north and well as the south where Brahminism still holds the strings of religion very tight. The situation of widowed women is worse all the more, with their heads shaved off, they are forced to leave their houses as they are the ‘sinners’ who have brought death to their husbands and have been subjected to spend rest of their lives at Haridwar, a religious place from where they would attain moksha.

The condition of Muslim women, a minority is even worse, all the more. Poverty, subjugation, lack of education and employment opportunities make the
Muslim women the worst affected in a severely marginalized community. With the rise of communal politics in the nation after independence, lack of security within the community and outside has become a huge issue of Muslim women. Further the custom of burkah, Islamic divorce has led to women’s oppression. All a Muslim husband is to say is talaq thrice and he has divorced his wife. Several Indian Muslims have given divorces to their wives by mail, over phones and mobile text messages, under the shelter of law even though their holy book Quran spells out a detailed process of how to issue a divorce over a long period. It has to be spread over three months allowing the couple sometime for reconciliation. Further there is nothing in Qurran that allows triple verbal instantaneous talaq that has become the greatest black mark against gender in Islam. Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana have commented on this in an insightful way:

The violence these women experience within their society and religious terrains is still a big question mark to women’s emancipation in present times. The Muslim woman is caught in a zero-zero game. Either way she loses. She cannot really be a woman any more than she can be an Indian. As a woman and as an Indian she cannot really be a Muslim, as hindutva seems well set to becoming hegemonic. (252)

Thus, the autobiographies under the present study offer a variety of analyses of the position of women (as a ‘private’ individual and as the ‘public’ figure); explores the female subjectivity, and brings out to the open, the effect of the various strategies adopted to negotiate social change, on the ‘construct’ of femininity in the modern Indian public sphere.

The study theorizes the phenomenon of autobiographical writing and explores the history and development of autobiographical writing in general and South Asian autobiographical writing in particular to determine the position and significance of Das, Goswami, Durani and Ahmed in the history of South Asian autobiographical writing. The study examines how women have broken the silence and let the world know about the male-dominated society and plight and misery of the women and exposed the hypocrisy of the elite ruling class and picturised the victimization of women in a patriarchal society and presented their quest for identity which is the hallmark of all contemporary female autobiographical writing in South Asian Literature as women writers of the Indian subcontinent depict the suffering, struggle, tolerance, socio-
economic oppression of women and present the reactionary attitude in response to the repressive strategies adopted by men.