Chapter 5 – Projecting the Self in a Socio-political Context-Krishna Hutheesing’s *With No Regrets*

Krishna Hutheesing’s autobiography *With No Regrets* is remarkable for its projection of the self in a wide socio-political context. The book was published in 1944, around 8 years after the publication of Lakshmibai Tilak’s autobiography. In the intervening period, the Gandhian movement had reached its peak and women’s participation in social and political life had increased with it. Naturally enough, the horizons of women’s social and political consciousness had widened. Krishna Hutheesing’s autobiography reflects this wide social and political consciousness, as she makes references to the Jallianwala Bag massacre, the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, the Gandhian movements like the Dandi march, the non-cooperation movement, the movement of Individual satyagraha, the second world war and India’s being dragged into it. The book also shows how the Gandhian movement made women go to prisons and thereby brought them into contact with the world of poor criminals, which was so far completely unknown to them, and created sympathy for those criminals in their minds. With this reflection of wide social and political awareness, this
autobiography may be considered to be a milestone in the history of the Indian woman’s autobiography.

The autobiography was published by Padma Publications, Mumbai in 1944. Unlike Ramabai Ranade or Lakshmibai Tilak, Krishna Hutheesingh did not require anybody’s request to write the autobiography- she wrote it on her own, which reflects the improved condition of the women of the times. The book was written at a time when death or imprisonment had taken away her near and dear ones from her- while her husband and brother were in prison, her parents and sister-in-law had passed away. So the book was mainly written to relive the days spent with those people. Krishna Hutheesing wrote a sequel to the book called *We Nehrus* in 1967 and it was published by Pearl Publications Pvt. Ltd., Mumbai in the same year.

The title is significant as it does not refer to the husband but to the self. It reflects her patriotism- even though she and her family have suffered a lot for the nation, she looks back upon those sufferings with no regrets. The title suggests a challenge to fate. As Pandit Nehru observes in a letter to the writer regarding the book,

> There is a tinge of sadness throughout the book, as of an adverse fate pursuing us...Occasionally, as in the title of the book, there is a challenge to that fate, and that is right, for if the chronicle has any meaning it is this: that we were continually challenging fate, defying it if you will,
and accepting, without murmur, what it had to say in reply.  

The foreword runs into two pages, which means that the woman was no longer reluctant to talk about her book or the self. Unlike Ramabai Ranade’s foreword to her autobiography, this one does not talk about the daughter alone- it talks about the self.

The writer’s foreword contains a significant statement. While talking about Sarojini Naidu, the writer says,

I have known her for a very long time and her friendship and deep affection for my family is well known.

This shows that even after her marriage, the writer still considered the Nehru family to be her own. This is in contrast with traditional Indian culture, which demands that after her marriage, the Indian woman should consider only the husband’s family to be her own. The title of the writer’s sequel to the autobiography -We Nehrus- is also significant in this context.

The self-portrait that emerges from the book is sufficiently comprehensive, though it is not as comprehensive as the one that emerges from the book We Nehrus. The reason may be that With No Regrets was written to relive the days spent with the near and dear ones, which has naturally delimited the scope for self-projection in the book.
According to Jung,

... children are only nominally descended from their parents, but are actually born from the ancestral stock. Occasionally you have to go back several hundred years to see the family likeness.  

The same is true of Krishna Hutheesing, who has inherited stubbornness from her long line of ancestors and that stubbornness seems to somewhat distort her personality as a child. As her father is against the idea of sending daughters to school, she has no schooling at all- instead, she has been entrusted to the care of a governess. This shows how the conservative ideas of the old patriarch in the patriarchal system could be detrimental to the development of the personality of the child, for schooling is often necessary for the personality development. Jung has also acknowledged the significant role school plays in the development of the child-

The individual consciousness gradually frees itself from primitive identity and in this battle for freedom the school plays a not unimportant part, as it is the first milieu the child finds outside his home. School comrades take the place of brothers and sisters; the teacher, if a man, acts as a substitute for the father and, if a woman, for the mother.  

A school can thus extend the boundaries of the child’s family environment but unfortunately, such schooling can not come Krishna Hutheesingh’s way due to the father’s orthodox ideas. The governess treats her very strictly, which is not right from the Jungian point of view. The Jungian theory
demands that the teacher should deal with the student with only a right amount of authority—

The teacher, as a personality, is ... faced with the delicate task of avoiding repressive authority, while exercising that just degree of authority which is appropriate to the adult in his dealings with children.\

Unfortunately, the kind of authority that the governess brings to bear down upon her is ‘repressive’, as Jung would have liked to call it and it stunts the development of her personality. With the stubbornness she has inherited from her ancestors, Krishna Hutheesing is not the one to give in to severe punishments but one gentle reproof is sufficient to make her feel ashamed of herself. Unfortunately, reproofs are rare and punishments frequent, which makes her hate the governess and all kinds of authority.

Apart from this, she also has a lonely childhood, as her father is always too busy to attend to her and her mother is always invalid or engaged in domestic work when she is well. This may also have something to do with the social, cultural milieu of the age, in which the child - the girl child especially - was always neglected. Even though she has a number of questions to ask about the world, she can not raise them as in the patriarchal system of the age, children are not supposed to be inquisitive. All these factors seem to have further distorted her personality. They seem to have
given her some kind of inferiority complex, as by her own admission, she grows up into a shy, awkward kind of girl.

According to Adler’s theory, inferiority complex can easily transform itself into superiority complex. Krishna Hutheesing also seems to suffer from superiority complex, as she always longs to be made much of. It is probably because of this superiority complex that she is jealous of her brother- Pandit Nehru- who has been made much of by her mother and sister. It is probably because of this superiority complex that she is firstly indifferent to Gandhi just because all others worship him. She attributes the cause of this indifference to ‘a streak of perversity in her character’ but the cause actually seems to be superiority complex, for reveling in being indifferent to someone just because others worship him is nothing else but superiority complex.

Fortunately for her, the governess gets married and Krishna Hutheesing gets rid of her, which gives her some independence. Swarup, her elder sister who takes the place of the governess for her, becomes a good friend, guide and philosopher for her. After the marriage of Swarup, her father gives her as much of his companionship as he can. After the marriage of the governess, Krishna Hutheesing often demands permission to go to school from her father and even though the father is initially reluctant to
send her to school, he finally gives in. After joining a school, her loneliness is completely dissolved— the happiness of school life takes away her shyness and awkwardness. She seems to have got good school comrades and teachers, who seem to have fulfilled her emotional need for the parents and the brother as well as the sister. Unlike the earlier autobiographers like Ramabai Ranade or Lakshmibai Tilak, she has formal schooling, which has given her an edge over them by widening her knowledge and vision of life. Her education also seems to have liberated her from the parental influences. Even though she has to leave the school after some few years as the Nehru family plunges into the Nationalist movement, her life then becomes so exciting that she has no reason to feel lonely again. The family’s going in for the Nationalist movement broadens her outlook upon life in different ways—she has another advantage over the earlier autobiographers in this matter. After joining the movement, the family gets into contact with the humble and the ordinary in place of wealthy and prestigious visitors. When the family travels from Allahabad to Gandhiji’s ashram at Sabarmati, the masses shower a lot of love and respect upon it and it strengthens the family’s bonds with the masses. In place of the early ways of the rich, the family has to adopt the ways of the poor. While travelling to Sabarmati, the family has to travel in a third-class railway compartment for the first time in life. Thus
mixing up with the humble and the ordinary and adopting their ways seems to have given a big jolt to her superiority complex. She also grows more tolerant to others' weaknesses—when the police raid her house and take away valuable things, she firstly boils with anger and resentment but later on she gets used to it. She has an opportunity of visiting England at the age of sixteen and working as a secretary for her brother- Pandit Nehru—over there and this is an education for her- she has yet another advantage over the earlier autobiographers in this matter. As the brother feels that she has led too easy an existence and a little roughing up would improve her enormously, he deliberately inflicts some hardships upon her. She comes across poor and maverick people like Virendra Chattopadhyay or Dhan Gopal Mukherji over there and makes friends with them. All these experiences of abroad further mature her personality. Her exposure to life abroad may have also made her more independent-minded. After her return from abroad, she has been imprisoned for joining the Nationalist movement, which brings her into contact with criminals. She learns that they are just human beings like us and as such deserve sympathetic consideration, which also further matures her personality. After her imprisonment, her superiority complex seems to have completely vanished- so much so that she is attracted
towards Raja for the very fact that he is indifferent to her while others are all attention to her.

As far as her relations with the father are concerned, like all daughters, she has immense love for the father- after the death of the father, the whole world seems to have crashed at her feet. She projects the image of the father upon Gandhiji. At the time of her marriage, she sorely misses the presence of her father and is happy about the fact that she receives the blessings of Gandhiji in his place. In spite of this, she does not blindly follow in the father’s footsteps. On her return from England, she feels like going in for the job of a Montessori teacher but the father refuses to let her join the job. With the inordinate vanity of the old patriarch, the father does not like the idea of his daughter standing on her own feet. The father becomes ‘terrible father’ when she insists upon getting his consent and strictly turns down the permission. She loves the father too much to defy him but for the first time she resents his authority. She decides to rebel against him but she does it silently, seeking others’ help for it. She firstly seeks the help of the mother, which she does not get. The mother is in a hurry to get her married and she feels that the daughter’s going in for a job might diminish her chances of getting married. This shows that the patriarchal ideas of women could be detrimental to women’s liberation – for them, getting married was the sole
aim of a girl’s life. Then she seeks the aid of Pandit Nehru, who readily agrees with it— he becomes ‘the wise old man’ in this case and gets the father’s consent for her. Though she later on leaves the job and joins the Civil Disobedience movement, it is significant to note that she has differences with the father in this matter. It is also significant that now ‘the wise old man’ is not a source of inspiration, the woman herself wants to break patriarchal fetters. ‘The wise old man’ is now reduced to an assistant in breaking up patriarchal conventions. It is also noteworthy that this is the single case in which his help has been sought.

Krishna Hutheesing’s mother is a brave woman, who bravely takes leave of Pandit Nehru and his father when the police firstly arrest them. Krishna Hutheesing also inherits bravery from the mother—it is her bravery that enables her to go abroad unescorted at the age of sixteen. It is the same bravery that prompts her to join the Civil Disobedience movement—after joining the movement, she is not daunted at the prospect of a problematic future but feels elated and courageous to face all that the future has in store for her. When it comes to allow her husband to join the Nationalist movement, she does it even though she and her family have suffered a lot on account of joining it, as she knows that her husband can not do without it. In this matter, she seems to be more progressive than Lakshmibai Tilak, who
would not have liked the idea of losing the husband. Even after the husband has converted to Christianity, Lakshmibai Tilak propitiates God to bring him back to her but Krishna Hutheesing is ready to lose the husband for the nation. Of course, this bravery has its own limitations- at the prison, she shivers with fear when she hears jingle bells in the night.

In spite of inheriting bravery from the mother, she does not blindly accept the conservative ideas of the mother- she does not hesitate to go abroad unescorted at the age of sixteen even when the mother is against the idea. She sticks to the idea even though the mother tries to dissuade her from it. She does not like the mother’s opposition to modern things like bobbed hair or sleeveless blouses – she goes in for a job against the wishes of the mother.

In Indian culture, apart from the parents, the guru often plays a significant role in shaping the personality- the guru has been often treated with blind, unquestioning veneration. Krishna Hutheesingh also seems to find such a guru in Gandhiji - Gandhi is something like a father for her. She at times blindly follows the decisions that Gandhi has taken-when Raja joins the movement of individual satyagraha and has been arrested for it, she also wants to follow suit. Gandhi does not allow her to do so as she has to look after her small children and she abides by his decision. Yet she does not like
certain things regarding Gandhi. When she visits his ‘ashram’ for some few days, she does not like the kind of food that has been served over there and looks forward to going back home and having a square meal. She also does not like the fact that some people ask for Gandhi’s advice on personal problems and he also gives it and later on if the advice proves to be wrong, he has been unnecessarily blamed for it.

She has immense love for nature- she is fascinated by the sea at Mumbai and is never tired of watching the waves tumbling over each other or dashing angrily against the rocks. Just like Ramabai Ranade’s book, this one also reveals a single dimension of the man-nature relationship- man admiring the beauty of nature.

In the ultimate analysis, it may be said that she has a lot of independent individuality -she has the ability and courage to question some of the father’s values, though not without the help of ‘the wise old man’. She can also question the values of the mother and the guru, though at times she blindly follows the guru’s decisions. With her having formal education and wider exposure to the outside world as well as prison life, her world of experiences is richer and wider than that of Ramabai Ranade or Lakshmibai Tilak.
The self-portrait has been delineated with honesty. Uncomplimentary things like the writer’s initial jealousy for Pandit Nehru or the stupidity of her falling in love with a person without even trying to know his full name have not been hidden or glossed over. Similarly, the writer’s patriotism has not marred her honesty—she has not hidden her grief at the sufferings the Independence movement has caused to her family. As Pandit Nehru observes in a letter written to the writer regarding the book,

"There is a tinge of sadness throughout the book, as of an adverse fate pursuing us. That is a true reflection of your mind and perhaps of many minds, and indeed is the natural consequence of the unrolling of events as we look at them backward."

The book fails to deeply probe her mind. It is only at few places that the writer brings out her emotional conflicts. In a letter written to the writer, Pandit Nehru has also noted this shortcoming of the book—

"It is a family chronicle in the main, and even that chronicle is dealt with in a series of sketches rather than as a connected whole. Nor do you go deeply into the conflicts of the spirit which often form an essential part of biography and autobiography."

Having noted this fault of the book, Nehru goes on to justify it—

"But to have gone into these would have been outside the scope of the book, and would have involved you in all manner of difficulties. You did well to choose this particular form and texture."
All this justification does not hold water—depiction of emotional conflicts can not be outside the scope of any good autobiography, a good autobiographer should deeply probe his mind even at the risk of getting involved in ‘all manner of difficulties’. Even though Pandit Nehru has exonerated his sister on this score, he has written his own autobiography with a keen psychological insight—he has depicted all the emotional conflicts which raged in his mind at various times, unconcerned with whether it would land him in difficulties or not.

The book does not draw a very comprehensive portrait of the husband. It is in striking contrast with the earlier autobiographies, which portray the husband very comprehensively. The reason may be that unlike the earlier autobiographies, the focus of attention in this one is on the other members of the writer’s family—her parents, brother, sister-in-law etc. This shows that now the life of the woman has ceased to revolve around the husband. Another reason may be that unlike Justice Ranade or Rev. Tilak, Raja Hutheesing—Krishna Hutheesing’s husband—was not a famous or popular person. Being related with the Nehru family was his only claim to fame—at least at the time the book was written. Naturally enough, the husband has been relegated to the background and the book brings out only some few aspects of the personality of the husband. Raja, as the book
portrays him, is an over-sensitive person, a patriot, a kind husband, a man of
reserve, childlike simplicity and honesty, faith in certain ideals and
openhearted nature. We have to believe in some of these things just because
the writer tells them- she has not given any supporting evidence for them.

The portrait has some objectivity, as the writer indicates that Raja has
his own faults and weaknesses and that they make him very human.

However, she does not specifically tell us what those faults and weaknesses are-his over sensitiveness is the only fault that she
mentions. This shows how the patriarchal idea that a woman should not
criticize the husband plays upon the mind of the woman autobiographer.

The number of other characters in the book is limited, as the book
was written to relive the days spent with the near and dear ones and so it
does not offer scope for other characters. Unlike the characters in the earlier
autobiographies, the characters in this one include characters from abroad
like Virendra Chattopadhyay and Dhan Gopal Mukherji and also criminals
like Bachuli or Mary, which shows the expanding world of the Indian
woman

These characters have been dealt with comprehensively, the
members of the Nehru family especially. The book vividly projects the
father-daughter relationship or the brother-sister relationship, which have not
found a place of importance in the earlier autobiographies.

The members of the Nehru family have their own individuality and
yet they are representatives of many other families of the age, which had to
suffer a lot for the nation. As Pandit Nehru points out in his letter to the
writer,

It is true that large numbers of people do us
the honor of taking interest in us and so they
will be interested in your narrative. Also to
some extent that narrative becomes symbolic
of others. 9

Some of these characters are parallel and contrasting to each other.
The characters of Bibi Amma and the writer’s mother are contrasting to each
other in certain matters. While the mother often voices her objections to
modern things like bobbed hair or sleeveless blouses, Bibi Amma wisely
refrains from passing judgements about them. While the mother can not give
any kind of definite advice to the young, Bibi Amma can. In spite of being
thus contradictory to each other, these characters become parallel in the end-
Bibi Amma dies exactly twenty-four hours after the death of the mother.

Most of these characters have been drawn objectively. Regarding
Kamala Nehru, the writer tells us-

She had many virtues but many faults too.
She was childlike to a fault and never seemed to
have grown out of her girlhood days. At times she was terribly neglectful of her health and no amount of good advice given would make her take more care of herself.

The book *We Nehrus* courageously deals with these characters in a more realistic way, probably because the passage of time had given the writer a clearer perspective upon them.

When it comes to deal with her differences with her mother-in-law, which lead her to get her husband separated from his family, she is reluctant to criticize the mother-in-law. While she has boldly and forthrightly revealed these differences in *We Nehrus*, she has given just vague indications about them in *With No Regrets*. While dealing with the matter, she firstly lavishes praise on the mother-in-law and the other members of Raja's family. Then she criticises the business community in Ahmedabad-

The business community of Ahmedabad is narrow, conservative and self-centred and demands conformity to its values which are often an irritating and unnecessary interference with the private life of an individual, more so when the individual is a member of the joint family. Hence the process of adjustment for us was difficult and long.

The indication here is that it is not Raja's family but the business community in Ahmedabad that is to be blamed for Krishna Hutheesing's differences with Raja's family. Then Krishna Hutheesing gets a little bolder
and devotes two paragraphs to the shortcomings of the joint family system
and tells us,

Such views of mine naturally come into conflict
with those of Raja’s family and sometimes
of Raja himself. We discovered that there
were many matters on which we could not
see eye to eye and our views sometimes
clashed.

Here Krishna Hutheesing is at least bold enough to admit her differences
with Raja’s family but she is still reluctant to blame the mother-in-law on
this score. Then she casually mentions a fact-

For some months after our marriage, we lived
with Raja’s family. Later we had a flat of our own... 11

as though it had nothing to do with her differences with the mother-in-law.

All this shows the patriarchal hold on the mind of the woman autobiographer- the patriarchal idea that a woman should not speak against
the in-laws or bring a bad name to them prevents her from openly criticizing
the in-laws.

The character of Bachuli, a convict girl whom the writer met with in
the Lucknow Central Prison, has been drawn with sympathetic
understanding. It is remarkable that a writer coming from a highly civilized
background has dealt with a murderer child like Bachuli with sympathetic
consideration. It is significant to note that the writer wrote a special book
called Shadows on the Wall on such convicts. Her sympathy for such criminals did not remain confined to writing about them but after Independence, she worked as an honorary magistrate of the Juvenile Court of Mumbai. This shows the extent to which the Independence movement matured the women’s attitude towards criminals. The story of Bachuli has been comprehensively narrated and put into her own mouth, which makes the portrait very poignant. In the book We Nehrus, the story has been briefly dealt with, that too using the third-person narrative technique and so the portrait loses some of its poignancy.

All the incidents in the book are well-chosen and some of them are parallel and contrasting to each other. The incidents of the death of the writer’s mother and that of Bibi Amma exactly twenty-four hours after it are parallel to each other. The incidents of Indira’s happy wedding at ‘Anand Bhavan’ and the writer’s gloomy visit to it to meet her sister Swarup, who has been released on parole for some few weeks, after a year are contrasting to each other. Being thus parallel or contrasting to each other, these incidents light up each other.

The writer is selective in giving details. In Nehru’s autobiography, at times the emotional aspect of an incident gets lost in political discussions. A chapter entitled as ‘A civil marriage and a question of script’ begins with an
account of Krishna Hutheesing’s marriage but after giving some few details about the wedding in it, Nehru tells us that

The little invitation we issued for the wedding was written in Hindustani in the Latin script.¹²

Then he goes on to discuss scripts and languages in the rest of the chapter—
the chapter never makes a single reference to the marriage again. This kind of thing does not happen in Krishna Hutheesing’s autobiography—probably because of being a woman, she is more concerned with the emotional side of a matter than the philosophical or political aspect of it. Naturally enough, she has brought out the emotional aspect of every incident very well.

Similarly, We Nehrus seems to have been written with the Western audience in mind and so it gives some unnecessary information about Indian traditions and customs. While talking about Nehrus being Brahmins from Kashmir, the book unnecessarily explains what the term ‘Brahmin’ means. The book also unnecessarily relates Indian historical incidents like the Jallianwala Bag massacre for the benefit of the Western reader. The book With No Regrets does not give such unnecessary information— it takes for granted that the reader knows Indian culture and history very well.

All the incidents have been evocatively projected. As Pandit Nehru points out,

Your book is so vivid occasionally that it
evoked many images in my mind and the past stood before me, and a vague nostalgia seized me. 

Most of the chapters have been preceded by some apt lines of an English poem. The chapter regarding the death of an infamous member of the family like Bibi Amma aptly begins with the lines of a poem by William Morris-

Some had name and fame and honour,  
Learned they were and wise and strong;  
Some were nameless, poor unlettered,  
Weak in all but grief and wrong. 

Such lines set the mood for those chapters and also reveal the writer’s wide knowledge. One of the chapters is prefaced by a French sentence by Romain Rolland and one by an Urdu couplet by Ghalib, which shows the expanding world of the woman.

The only limitation of the narrative-technique is that no experiment has been made with it-all the incidents have been narrated in a chronological order. However, nothing is surprising about it because experimentation with the narrative technique was a rarity in the Indian English autobiography of the pre-Independence era.

The style of the book is simple and unartificial-it is very rarely that we come across a simile or a metaphor. The range of these similes and metaphors is small.
The only limitation of the style is that there is no innovativeness in it. This is something rather surprising because in the Nineteen thirties, Indian English writers like N.Raja Rao or Mulk Raj Anand had brought in a lot of linguistic innovations in their writings.

In conclusion, it can be said that the book is certainly remarkable for its interesting self-portrait and other pen-portraits, reflection of a wide and varied world of experiences, absorbing narrative-technique, unartificial style. One of the limitations of the book is that it does not boldly deal with the husband and the in-laws. The next chapter will deal with a book which overcomes this limitation of the Indian woman’s autobiography and which is very bold in character.
References

1 Krishna Hutheesing. *With No Regrets*. Mumbai: Padma Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1944. (All subsequent references will be taken from this edition)


5 Ibid.56.

6 Ibid.56.


8 Ibid. 145.

9 Ibid.145.


11 Ibid. 261.
