Introduction

A student of Autobiographical Studies fronts serious problems relating to this relatively new mode of writing, ‘autobiography’. “We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person speaking”, says Thoreau, and adds in a tone of subtle irony: “I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I know as well. I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience” (Thoreau 02). In other words, all writing is for Thoreau autobiographical. ‘Self-consciousness’ and ‘absence of frame’—these would then be the prominent features of autobiography. In a strictly factual sense autobiographies remain unfinished; not in the sense ‘yet to be concluded’ that Sucheta Kripalani and Indira Goswami employ it as title for their autobiographies. To consider all writing as autobiographical is to allow the validity of any approach—historical, sociological, psychoanalytic, literary critical and even the ‘common-sense’ reading—arbitrarily. But the academic need is for considering autobiography as a distinct genre. As Linda Anderson puts it,
On the one hand, autobiography, through its relation to individualism and humanistic values, is seen to be available to non-technical, common-sense readings. ... On the other hand, autobiography produces an unease that it could spread endlessly and get everywhere, undermining even the objective stance of the critic if it is not held at bay or constrained by classification. (Anderson 5-6)

Partaking the characteristics of both History and Fiction, autobiography appears to frustrate conventional literary critical approaches to it. Autobiography turns into a grey arena to allow many sets of contraries. One pair of contraries that taunts the reader has to do with the private and the public selves of the autobiographer. How much of the private self can a reader expect from the narrator of the self? Khushwant Singh was so upset with Amrita Pritam for the meagre information that she let out regarding her relationship with Sahir Ludhianvi that he unfairly suggested that a revenue stamp would suffice for writing her life-story. Is there any legitimacy in the readers’ expectations relating to self-revelations of the private and the public life of the subject?
Consider two autobiographers: Lakshmi Sahgal and her younger sister Mrinalini Sarabhai. Both come from a family radiant with the spirit of nationalism. Lakshmi Sahgal commanded the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army of Subhash Chandra Bose. Mrinalini is the great exponent of Bharatanatyam. Both autobiographers narrate the story of the Kadambur case in which their father Swaminadhan won a case for his young client wrongly accused of murdering an important British officer. This victory earned Swaminadhan enormous admiration and prestige in Madras. Lakshmi Sahgal’s A Revolutionary Life: Memoirs of a Political Activist (1997) devotes about a page for this episode and Mrinalini’s The Voice of the Heart (2004) about three pages. The event mentioned combines both the personal and the public selves of the autobiographers. The narration of the event is equally interesting to read in both The Voice of the Heart and A Revolutionary Life. But whereas in Mrinalini’s autobiography the personality of the father receives greater attention and the details of the legal case elaborated, in Lakshmi Sahgal’s autobiography the episode is made concise in order to allow space for describing the ‘repercussions’:

Many of my mother’s English friends refused to greet her, and in school I was accused by the
English teachers of being the daughter of a man who by unfair means had saved a native who had brutally murdered an innocent English gentleman. (Sahgal 05)

The really appealing portion of the narration comes at the end of the episode when Lakshmi Sahgal goes to the high school seeking admission. The Principal is none other than the sister of the English officer who had been killed. Says Lakshmi Sahgal: “She could easily have refused to admit me but did not do so, and in no way did she show any resentment towards me” (Sahgal 05). The most significant part of the narration is the information that that was the point in time from where the Swaminadhan family took firm steps towards decolonization:

The Kadambur case marked a turning point in our lives. Gone was our admiration for the honesty, justice and fair play of the British. From that day on we were determined to be genuine Indians and not imitation Britishers. We were taken out of the convent and put in to the government high school. We stopped wearing English frocks and got into our more comfortable and attractive pavada and blouse. We also spoke more in Malayalam and Tamil rather than the now disliked English. The period also coincided with the appearance of Mahatma Gandhi on the national scene. We stopped wearing all foreign
clothes. ... At this stage my mother became an active member of the all India Women’s Conference and the Women’s Association of Madras. (Sahgal 05)

The personal is inseparable from the public here. The transition of one is in terms of the other.

Yet at another place in Lakshmi Sahgal’s autobiography the personal and the public selves meet to make a fine balance. This happens when she is in Rangoon:

... soon after, we heard of the death of Kasturba Gandhi in the Aga Khan Palace in Poona where she and Gandhiji had been incarcerated. That evening, first Netaji and then I broadcast to India. Netaji’s speech was very emotional as he was personally fond of Katurba. He said that her attitude towards him had always been one of warmth and affection with no change even when Netaji differed from Gandhiji and left the Congress to form the Forward Bloc. (Sahgal 76)

The division between the public and the private selves will perhaps manifest in such cases where human concerns are not genuinely reflected. It is with this alertness that the question of the private-public contraries is to be examined. Lakshmi Sahgal’s autobiography is notable for toning down the ego; hence even when speaking of her association with a personality
like Netaji’s her autobiography does not lessen the scope of ordinary human emotions. Lakshmi’s style is unadorned, though one gets a feeling occasionally that she must have had artistic sensibilities and abilities. The following passage about the way evenings were spent in Rangoon when she was training the women soldiers in the military camps strengthens this impression:

In the evenings, after dinner, we would gather together and explore what talent we had. I soon discovered that I had several good musicians, dancers and actors in the regiment. We pooled all our talent and, on December 27, we put on a variety show. The hall was packed to capacity. It was a colourful and enjoyable show, the highlight of which was a short play written and produced by me called Azadi ya Maut (Freedom or Death). Through this show we were able to collect 5000 straits dollars for Netaji’s fund. (Italics added, Sahgal 67)

One must also note the fine balance in this passage between ‘I’ and ‘we’. Such is a leader’s sophistication that sounds superior to a ‘polished’ language. The commander’s self becomes the soldier’s, as it were.

It is only when the ‘human’ is recognized that a work’s historical value is asserted. A Revolutionary Life in that sense is a great contribution to Indian History.
The Rani of Jhansi Regiment was the first ever complete woman's regiment and Lakshmi had this task of recruiting the conservative, socially shy young women into soldiers who would fight independently of men, and yet retain their roles as mothers and nurses. Where essential human concerns exist in autobiographies, the private and the public selves appear to blend harmoniously.

What is the right blend, the right relation between the private self and the public self? Perhaps the right combination is when the personal self attempts to make society recover from amnesia. That rendering of the public self that cannot become history, is not adequately rendered by the private self. This is why it is inevitable in an autobiography—especially a woman's autobiography—for the personal self to relate, in definite ways, to the public self. From this angle, even family histories when written especially by a woman, acquires some value. The example of Rajeswari Chatterjee's *A Thousand Streams* is worth mentioning. Hailing from Pandavapura, a village-town near Mysore, Rajeswari (192) became an electronics expert at the Michigan University in USA, and married a Bengalee physicist, Sisir Chatterjee. Her personal history offers valuable bits of information relating to the social work rendered by some women of the old Mysore state.
Dr. Rajeswari’s paternal uncle B.M. Srikantaiah was a giant literary personality of Karnataka. Her maternal grandmother Kamalamma Dasappa who suddenly found herself a widow when still young, was instrumental in building the Mahila Seva Samaj at Bangalore. Her paternal aunt and the famed B.M. Sri’s sister Nanjamma, whose fate also was to become a widow, was responsible in founding the Mahila Seva Samaj in Hassan. Dr. Rajeswari’s autobiographical work offers many family portraits which certainly prompt a regional society to come out of amnesia. It is in such attempts that one feels the need for art to come to History’s aid. Preservation of memory is History’s concern; but for that, an ability in art perhaps becomes necessary. The relationship of the personal self and the public self perhaps hinges around the crucial role of literary merit.

However, attempts in this direction to grant the status of an art work to autobiography would raise serious theoretical questions. New Criticism which is still relevant (especially in India) would inquire into the relation between the text and the author. Eliot’s assertion that poetry/art is “not an expression of personality but an escape from personality” brings embarrassment to attempts at seeing an autobiography as a work of art. How to read an autobiographical work as an
autonomous world without reference to external circumstances? The question of intention in an autobiographical work becomes sharper with Barthes’ proclamation of the death of the author.

A student of Autobiographical Studies is in a dire dilemma when reading Barthes’ “The Death of the Author.” What is the logical status of Barthes’ own autobiography in relation to his statement about the death of the author? In order to avoid self-contradiction, Barthes’ *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* makes the recollection of life available in several fragments. But Barthes’ guideline to his autobiography is this line: “It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in the novel” (Barthes xiv). Is Barthes allowing here a back door entry to intentionality? Herein lies the dilemma of the student of Autobiographical Studies: he/she stands on the shadow line between life and work.

The dilemma is compounded by a related debate. Right from the time R.C.P. Sinha’s book on Indian Autobiographies in English appeared a debate about the Indianness of this mode has also grown. Is autobiography a Western gift? Or is it a part of the Indian literary tradition? A very illuminating discussion on this topic is to be found in Bikhu Parekh’s “Indianization of Autobiography.” He suggests that autobiography
presupposes not only a unique self narrating itself but also a constituency interested in reading such narratives. Bikhu Parekh’s impressive argument is that Gandhi successfully Indianised the autobiographical form. This has important implications in the reading of Indian women autobiographies. From the time of Raja Ram Mohun Roy, who worked against Sati, the Nationalist awakening was concerned with the revision of the image of woman in India. On the one hand, writing autobiography for a woman becomes an act of self assertion; at the same time gender biases become pale in the Indian colonial context. The colonizer had assumed his characteristically masculine role and Gandhi, in his resistant attitude had included within himself the feminine.

According to the perception of the present thesis, dilemmas with reference to intentionality, public self-private self, History-Fiction, alien-indigenous characteristics increase the importance of Indian women autobiographies while thinning the difference between the men’s and the women’s voices.

This leads to the question of voice in autobiographies. It is only Richard Hoggart, who in his long essay, “A Question of Tone: Problems in Autobiographical Writing” demands that a serious autobiographer get the “matter of tone straight first”
The most important task of an autobiographer, according to Hoggart is to find a “voice” which can “carry a wide range of attitudes and emotions without being socially self-conscious or derivatively literary” (Hoggart 164). Since the “right tone” for any writer “will always be difficult to find”, he suggests adopting a “neutral tone.” And by “neutral tone”, he says he certainly does not mean an “informed, intelligent, decent voice which is so useful a medium for certain kinds of writing.” Till one locates the right tone of voice, according to him, the best thing to do is “to paddle in the shallows of neutral reporting” (Hoggart 176). This is all rather vague. A major activity of the present thesis is the identification of the tone of voice in women autobiographies. While ‘tone of voice’ may manifest concretely in a few lines of a poem, the general tone of a whole autobiographical work demands unusual attention and scrutiny. Attention to certain common features of autobiographies may to some extent help in recognizing the tone of voice. These features may not offer a formula to locate the tone-of-voice, but they offer vague hints at least, in understanding the general character of the self rendered.
It is quite common to find self narratives opening with as early a childhood as memory permits. Though it may appear as a choiceless act, it is not so in the case of sensitive autobiographers. Self-narratives of crude ‘popular’ subjects begin with childhood for convenience, but one who takes to self-narration out of an inner compulsion (for the motives and purposes for writing autobiographies are not always clear) would search for the meaning of his/her existence at the farthest point in the individual past. Childhood is the sourcebook for almost all autobiographers. The tone of voice is rarely false when recollecting childhood.

Every autobiography hints at a double conflict: conflict with oneself and a conflict with society. Every autobiography is about growth to a mature position, which is why the dual conflict of self with itself and society often provides maximum scope for depicting growth.

A sense of loneliness appears to be common to all autobiographical subjects. Mrinalini says,

... After my father’s death I have never trusted life, even in its happy moments. It took me years to understand and appreciate that living in constant apprehension was wrong that it was wiser by far to think in terms of ‘the now’.
The fear, that if I loved someone he would disappear and leave me all alone, was deep rooted in me. I had to learn to rely on myself. Years later I found myself dealing with the same scars when Vikram died and I felt my world come apart. (Sarabhai 31)

References to loneliness are numerous in Mira Behn’s and Indira Goswami’s autobiographies. This is also true of Revenue Stamp, Karukku and Autobiography of a Princess. The sense of loneliness may suggest spiritual inclinations in a deeper, non religious sense.

Often do we read appreciations for an autobiography that reads like fiction. Shiv K. Kumar says this of Mamoni Raisom’s autobiography:

An Unfinished Autobiography reads like a fictional narrative with its dramas and suspense, its twist and turns, its portraiture of real men and women who seem to be characters risen from the pages of a novel or a short story. (Kumar 92)

The women autobiographers discussed in the thesis are “open” to suggestions of what could be beyond the rational—mystical/magical/supernatural. In Mira Behn there is a great sophistication in the way she makes ‘reverential’ references to Nature and animals. In Mrinalini there is the narration of the miraculous recovery of her daughter from mysterious sickness; and to
her subsequent trip to Shirdi. Indira Goswami has premonitions of her husband’s death; omens in the form of owls accompany her; a fakir who refuses to reassure by his speech that everything would be well with Madhavan; and a Sanyasin who mysteriously appears before her to tell her that her husband is in danger; Amrita Pritam has enigmatic mysterious dreams; Sunity Devi narrates almost supernatural events in connection with her father Keshub Sen.

These features together contribute to the general tone of an autobiographical work. In Hoggart’s essay there is one suggestion which will perhaps help us in a more specific recognition of the tone. This is about the class-connections of the autobiographer: A “serious autobiographer should try to acquire a better idea than most have at present of the interrelations between class and tone of voice” (Hoggart 171).

The class-connections of the autobiographers are to be sought within the self-narrative. The class-connections, the present thesis maintains, emerges from the sort of people the autobiographer is mostly relating herself to. The readership is implicit in the autobiographical work. Mira Behn’s readership is Gandhi and Rolland. Throughout The Spirit’s Pilgrimage she keeps exchanging letters with Gandhi. Whatever Mira does—
reading, drafting letters, talking to British officials or Indian political leaders, she is always conscious of Gandhi as her listener. It is on record that the maximum numbers of personal letters Gandhi wrote were to Mira Behn. Mrinalini Sarabhai’s class-connections are with the truly elite of the world: Tagore, Nandalal Bose, her own dance teachers, P.D. Tandon, Nikhil Chakravarty and many such others. One finds in Indira Goswami’s autobiography, the reputed writers of Assam and other states, and her teachers like Lekharu dominating her consciousness. It is these people who form her readership. Amrita Pritam’s autobiography shows her readership as constituted by (a) Punjabi writers the majority of whom are hostile to her; though there are admirers; (b) poets and writers from Russia, Uzbekistan, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and other European countries; (c) leaders such as Ho Chih Minh and Indira Gandhi; (d) people very close to her such as Imroz, Sahir and Dhuswn Swamy. Bama’s readers are the common dalits (literate). The only autobiography (analysed here) which shows confusions regarding its readers is Sunity Devi’s. Whereas in all other works studied in this thesis class-connections are evident; in Autobiography of an Indian Princess there is uncertainty regarding readership and the class to which the autobiographer would like to relate to.
In the following six chapters, the attempt is at interpreting the self-narratives of six women. All of these women are known for their literary achievements and attainments in other fields. Mira Behn’s literary abilities are well known; Mrinalini Sarabhai is a great dancer and has penned a novel and other books on dance; Indira Goswami the writer was an activist as well; Princess Sunity Devi authored many books, both in Bengalee and in English. Amrita Pritam had some association with the film world; and Bama is a novelist, but very conscious of her role as an individual in fighting the caste-system.

The analyses of these autobiographies have as their basic premise, Bikhu Parekh’s observations that autobiography presupposes a unique self narrating itself, and also a ‘constituency in reading’ that narrative. The aim of each analysis here is to locate the central idea of the personality—not merely an intellectual idea, but the very life (of that personality) as idea. It means the expression of that idea as that very life.

Chronology is deliberately ignored in the arrangement of the autobiographies analysed here. The term ‘Indian’ too is used in a liberal sense. Mira Behn is for more Indian in spirit than many born in India.
Since this study does not want to become biography oriented, a sketch of the bare facts relating to the life and work of each subject is separately provided at the beginning of each analysis. It must be pointed out that none of the autobiographies (except Karukku) have been subjected to the detailed examination it deserves.
Works Cited


Slade, Madaleine. (Mira Behn) *The Spirit’s Pilgrimage.*

