Chapter-IV

AUTHENTICATING THE SELF

All art involves self-projection to a certain extent and in the novel or the drama, the writer projects his own personality into the characters that he creates. As a result, self-projection is inevitable in literature. Through the ages, man has always been fascinated with his ‘self’ and in almost every age autobiographical writing is evident.¹ We have the diary, memoir, letters which all fall under autobiographical writing but each is different from the other.

In the diary we have a faithful and minute recording of a person’s daily life but a disadvantage of this kind of writing is that it does not have a long-range perspective which only time can bring. A further disadvantage of the diary is that it does not have the coherence of a journal, which is usually written to a plan. A journal unlike the diary, usually has specific objectives but both are interesting because they provide a wealth of detail about their times.²

A memoir is very closely related to the autobiography and there is a very fine line which separates the two. Though both the memoir and autobiography are based on personal experience yet in the memoir, the memoirist concentrates more on recording public events rather than on the ‘self’. A significant difference between the two is that the memoir is
usually written by a person after he or she has played a distinguished role in life or has contributed to and witnessed history in the making. A memoirist focuses more on external life and not on the inner self and as a result a memoir is more like a chronicle. Autobiography on the other hand illumines the author's inner self using external descriptions and what makes it unique is that it is a retrospective account of the autobiographer's life, written with affirmed fidelity.  

The term autobiography was coined in 1809 when Robert Southey commented on the life of a Portuguese painter Francisco Vierira in the Quarterly review. The word autobiography can be described in terms of the three constituent elements – autos (self), bios (life), and graphe (writing). Autobiography has its birth in the desire to explain and justify the self according to William L. Andrews, and Georges Gusdorf has explained it as a need to do away with misunderstandings and to restore an incomplete or deformed truth. He exhorts the autobiographer to take up the telling of his own story. In America it is only in recent years that autobiographies have received scholarly attention. Earlier, autobiographies were not considered works of imagination and therefore English departments of the 1950's and 60's derided them as an inferior kind of literature. It is only in the 1970's that Frederick Douglass's three autobiographies were accepted as works of literature.
An examination of Black American literary tradition reveals that it began with the oral tradition with its roots in Africa. Some of these stories were very popular with both Blacks and Whites of the time. These stories about the experience of capture and enslavement were passed on from mouth to mouth throughout the antebellum period. Black American autobiography is a continuation of this creative literary tradition and these writings are a reflection of the epic experience of this group. For Black autobiographers, autobiography fulfills their need for a rhetorical mode to do battle against racism. Writing their story allows them to give a first-hand account of the horrors they have had to endure and these stories go right into the hearts of men. Though other types of writing like treatises, pamphlets, addresses and appeals thrived during the late eighteen and early nineteen centuries yet it is only Black autobiography which is capable of having a mass impact on the conscience of ante-bellum Americans. William L. Andrews believes that the history of Black autobiography is one of increasingly free storytelling and that it signals the ways black narratives address their readers and reconstruct personal history. Freedom is a mark of Black autobiography since it is the Black people's desire to demonstrate their freedom through the oral form or through written storytelling that leads them to writing autobiographies.
In the 1840’s and 50’s American autobiographical writing becomes diverse and original. In White autobiography the convention is to write the success story, in Black autobiography however the convention is to focus more on the escape from bondage to freedom. Experienced abolitionists recognise that autobiography or first person narrative is the most effective tool in their fight against slavery in the South. A reason is because these writings offer an in-depth and intimate look into a world which before stood as an enigma. The story of a runaway slave is bound to be more compelling than any oratory or pamphlet by a white abolitionist. When we look at the history of Black autobiography we find its roots in the Slave Narrative. A closer look at the slave narrative reveals that it is the antebellum\textsuperscript{12} slave narratives which assume a position of privilege unlike the postbellum\textsuperscript{13} slave narratives. However slave narratives have a problem with historicity and this has been a topic of heated debate over the years. Early historians of the slave narratives have always believed in the weakness of factual substance of these writings since they were merely an arm of abolitionist propaganda. John W. Blassingame, however, dismisses this earlier belief and contends that most of the accounts written by former slaves not only have a ring of truth but they can also be verified by independent sources.\textsuperscript{14} However it
must be remembered that even when we speak of a verifiable fact, it is
still interpreted by the narrator and the facts do not speak for themselves.

Autobiography without a doubt is one of the most difficult forms of
literary art. Not only must it be a retrospective account of the
autobiographer’s life but it must also be written with the utmost
honesty. In autobiography the nature of truth is very complex because it
is subjective rather than objective, since the autobiographer presents the
truth of life as seen from inside. In American autobiography, slave
narratives have been accepted with great skepticism and resistance
precisely because of this. Another reason is because Black slaves have
always been perceived to be liars, thieves and drunkards in the North,
therefore whatever they have to say or write is always viewed with
suspicion. Frederick Douglass’s act of writing his own autobiography is
the result of accusations that he had never been a slave because he did not
speak in the slave dialect. Douglass’s revelation of his master’s identity
and place of birth in his autobiography is looked at askance by his fellow
Blacks who consider it to be a folly since his master will learn of his
whereabouts. But Douglass is convinced that without these revelations his
book will be worthless as no one will take his word as the truth. For
Douglass it is imperative that he must be believed. Therefore if his act of
disclosing personal details about himself and his owners puts his hard
earned freedom in jeopardy, so be it.

On the other hand, in White autobiography, truth is viewed very
differently. Henry David Thoreau declares at the beginning of his
experience at Walden Pond, “I, on my side, require of every writer, first
or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life.” When we compare
this statement to the extent Douglass goes to establish the authenticity of
his story, we immediately discern the bias of the White readers. For one,
Thoreau did not bother to explain how one might prove one’s sincerity
because for a White autobiographer the establishment of the truth is not
of much importance. This is so because they believe that their readers
will grant them peer status and their sincerity is assumed. So given this
relationship that exists between a White autobiographer and his readers,
the author’s letter to the world always have social, cultural and linguistic
sanction. In White autobiography, literary egoism may be praised as self-
reliance but in Black autobiography the same is termed as impudence.
Perhaps the greatest challenge to Black autobiographers is to find devices
and strategies that will bestow the stamp of authenticity to their writings.
When we look at Douglass’s autobiographies in this light, it is clear that
he is one of the first Black autobiographers whose books have
successfully overcome this challenge.
In his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, Douglass has to conform to the traditions of the slave narrative by having two white men, William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, write the Preface to the book. The two men’s role is to authenticate that the book had really been written by Douglass:

Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ someone else. It is, therefore, entirely his own production; and, considering how long and dark was the career he had to run as a slave... it is in my judgement, highly creditable to his head and heart.17

In the second book, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass breaks away from tradition by having Dr. James McCune Smith, a black physician and abolitionist write the Preface. This is done deliberately because after fifteen years of freedom he is forced to reassess his philosophy and goals as a reformer following a split with Garrison. By this time however, Douglass is convinced that he doesn’t need a white man to authenticate his literary act and his selfhood. His last autobiography too carries a preface by George L. Ruffin, the first Black American to graduate from Harvard Law School in 1869 and the first to serve on the Massachusetts state legislature, as a reiteration of this belief.

In autobiography the writer depends wholly on his memory which at times can be treacherous and misleading. This is so because he has no control over his memory and memory sometimes can be selective and
also creative. In his autobiographies, Douglass often makes no mention about certain people and incidents in his life. His childhood friendship with Daniel Lloyd is given only a brief mention and even more surprising is that he makes no mention at all about his courtship with Anna Murray in Baltimore before announcing his marriage to her in New York a few days after his escape. All that we know about Anna before her marriage to Douglass is that she helped him financially when he made his escape to the North. Douglass deliberately plays down his association with Daniel Lloyd because within its boundaries he was the lowly slave boy, an impression which does not sit well with the image that he now wants to show the world. His wife Anna, an illiterate, dark-complexioned and coarse woman did not fit into Douglass’s world filled with outspoken and militant personalities. By keeping silent about them, Douglass tries to uphold only his heroic qualities.

For Frederick Douglass it is vital that he must be seen as a truth teller because Blacks have always been seen as depraved and vicious by white America. American standards insist that autobiography must be factual which means that in Black autobiography the self must be situated on the periphery while the ‘facts’ must be the centre of attention. Douglass on the other hand believes in giving both the ‘facts’ and the ‘self’ equal importance because one cannot do without the other if a
balanced view is to be achieved. Since autobiography is an assessment of the significance of one’s life, Douglass is determined that the ‘self’ he reveals to the world must be worthy and complete and deserving of the name truth teller because it is only then that he will achieve full manhood.

The inhumanity of man on man and the continuation of slavery and human bondage have given rise to various forms of protest and Black autobiography is one such example. Douglass’s three autobiographies can also be called protest literature because he protests against attempts by the white dominant race to suppress his voice and reduce him to a mere puppet whom they can manipulate. Other autobiographies such as W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Dusk of Dawn*, the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and a few others are also examples of black protest in literature. Black protest comes in different forms, it started on the slave ships with the slave rebellions and it matured into the act of seizing an education in the face of white opposition which is one of the most powerful forms of protest. Other forms of protest range from a deliberate work slowdown to oratory and even religion when Black slaves inscribe Christianity with certain African forms of worship such as the calling out which is very popular in Black churches.

A recurring theme in most Black autobiography is the Black man’s protest against the cruelty and injustice imposed on him by White
America. This theme is seen not only in the autobiographies of the slave narrators of the 18th and 19th centuries, but also in 20th century autobiographies such as *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965). A comparison between Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X reveals that the two men have a lot in common though they belong to different centuries. Both of them are charismatic leaders and also orators of their time. Like Douglass, Malcolm is a man of complete integrity and he is not afraid to tell it as it is. Whereas Douglass believes in social integration, Malcolm is a believer of Black separatism, where the sable race will have economic, political and social independence. That issues of oppression and racism have remained the same in America from the 19th century to the 20th century is indicative of the collective failure of the American nation in providing basic civil and human rights to a race of people whose forefathers were forcibly brought across the ocean against their will.

For Douglass a potent weapon against the debilitating effects of slavery is a deliberate misreading of everything that the slaveholder stands for. A study of his life reveals that Douglass has always done the opposite of what others want him to do. In many slave narratives, the ability to read, the acquisition of literacy is treated as equivalent to the achievement of physical freedom. In the *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass speaks of reading as the way he begins to define himself via defiance of
his master. When Hugh Auld learns of Douglass’s lessons with his wife Sophia he becomes apprehensive lest Douglass becomes uncontrollable. Yet when Douglass realizes this, he goes to great lengths to educate himself, risking punishment along the way. In the Narrative he writes that he owes his ability to read not only to Sophia but also to Hugh Auld’s bitter opposition to his education.

As he puts it, “What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated.” Though Douglass is rare among Black autobiographers in representing himself as a radical misreader of the teachings of his master, yet he is not alone because Walker’s David Walker’s Appeal in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World is also a misreading of the US constitution. However this misreading in Black American autobiography is not an act of social commentary or moral criticism. It is a fundamental part of the act of self-creation.

It is only through autobiography that Douglass feels he can authenticate his own self. William L. Andrews writes that autobiography is “spurred by many motives, perhaps the most important of which is the need of an ‘other’ to declare himself through various linguistic acts…” For Douglass, autobiography is the only genre which can provide him with the platform to reveal to the world the man that he is, a hero.
End Notes


2. Ibid., p. 200.

3. Ibid., p.201.


7. Ibid., p.223.


12. Period in US history before the Civil War.

13. Period in US history after the Civil War.


