CHAPTER: II
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Woman is the largess on the earth. She is a creator and mentor of the whole universe. One can’t expect human existence without woman. Our Vedas and Upanishads have rightly termed woman as ‘Nari tu Narayani’ and she has been hailed as ‘Yatra Naryastu Pujayate Tatra Ramati Devata’, ¹ That is to say Gods are pleased, where females are worshipped. Thus, woman has been always placed amongst the divine. However, in reality her picture is altogether different. Woman has never demanded any exclusive place in the hierarchy. She has just expected the society to treat her in a human way. She has just demanded ‘a room of her own’.

In writing a woman’s life Carolyn G. Heilburn says that a woman’s life can be described in four ways:

“… the women herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write a biography, or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously and without realising or naming the process”. ²

Domma Stanton in her article entitled “Autogynography: Is the subject Different?” considers women’s autobiography as ‘autogynography’. Critics like Germaine Bree or Shirley Neumann or Carolyn G. Heilburn have debated over the formation of women’s autobiographies and checked the intensity of gender discrimination in it. There are several issues which have troubled the critics for a long time. Caroly G. Heilburn has put forth several issues while discussing the essentials of a woman’s autobiography:
“Where should it begin? With her birth and the disappointment or reason for no disappointment that she was not a boy? Do we then slide her into the Freudian family romance, the oedipal configuration; if not, how should we view her childhood? What in short, is the subject’s relation-inevitably complex with her mother? The relation with the father will be less, complex, clearer in its emotions and desires, partaking less of either terrible pity or binding love. How does she cope with the fact that value is determined by how attractive men find her? If she marries, why does the marriage fail, or succeed? 3

Though Carolyn G. Heilburn’s questions have been raised with reference to western woman, they can be applied in the Indian context also. The basic difference between western women and the eastern counterpart is that of diversity in their socio-economic and cultural background. Generally, autobiography is a literary genre which unravels the inner most feelings of a writer. It provides self-exploration. But, can a woman, who is taught to be submissive and docile, achieve such a goal. Susan Stanford Friedman has very remarkably put forth this problem of gender-discrimination even in creative writing:

“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.” 4

Prof. Meena Sodhi appreciates natural creative genius of a woman auto biographer and opines that she can defend her self hood and narrate the story of her life very boldly. There is nothing unnatural in her creativity, which can not be a rival to her biological creativity. She advocates the ideas of radical feminists who consider woman’s literary creativity as a superior endowment:

“… the literary professions were first to be opened to women, the status of the women writer has long served as an index of a society’s
views on female abilities and rights. Although writing has never been regarded as an unfeminine accomplishment, women writers have always encountered more critical resistance than men”.5

Thus, Prof. Meena Sodhi has advocated women’s capacity of critical resistance in her critical work “Indian writing in English-The autobiographical mode”. However, we find a whole lot of women autobiographers who consider women’s culture, as a ‘sub-culture’: men’s culture being the main culture, with the women confirming mainly to it. A woman is taught to be selfless, submissive and is only a daughter, a wife or a mother. On the other hand, following Milton’s view: “He for God only, She for Goding him”, man is always made a God by a mother, a wife and a daughter. Man is a man only because he is pampered and wooed by a woman.

Sometimes, all the three – a wife, a mother and a daughter are rolled into one, as in the character of ‘Candida’. She confesses remarkably her role in her household and focuses on the real character of her husband James Morell when she says; “Ask me what it costs to be James’s mother and three sisters and wife and mother to his children all in one… I build a castle of comfort and indulgence and love for him and stand sentinel always to keep little vulgar cares out. I make him master here, though he does not know it and could not tell you a moment ago how it came to be so.”6

According to Andre Maurois, “Autobiography is a prolonged speech for the defence” and is of two types: one is where the writing is “as interesting as novels and as true as the finest ‘life’. It has truth of tone and a “fidelity and impartiality in portraiture of a very high quality indeed”. The best autobiographies are those which expose the inner journey of the self and depict the inner struggles of the person. It establishes a coherent and individual identity of the person.
Indian women writers have established a permanent place in the arena of literature, because they have written with a woman’s point of view. They have not initiated male manner of writing. Majority of Indian women autobiographies belong to the first category of autobiography described by Andre Maurois. They have expressed a genuine female experience.

All the autobiographies from Sunity Devee’s *The autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921) to Mrinal Pandey’s *Daughter’s Daughter* (1993) and Taslima Nasreen’s *My Girlhood Days*’ express the inner search of women with women’s point of view. Until the end of nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, women autobiographies lack an authoritative voice to speak. They could speak only of family or religion.

“Although each author has significant, sometimes dazzling accomplishments to her credit, the theme of accomplishment rarely dominates the narrative.… Indeed to a striking degree they fail directly to emphasize their own importance, though writing in a genre which implies self-assertion and self-display.”

In the later part of twentieth century, we find autobiographers like Amrita Pritam, Kamla Das, Shobha De, Dilip Tiwana, Sharanjeet Shan, Mrinal Pande and Bangladeshi writer Tasleema Nasreen who are very blunt in the expression of their innermost feelings. They have boldly expressed the social inhibitions and cultural taboos laid down by the society. Their autobiographies have tone of truth and fidelity.

Women writers like Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Krishna Hutheesing and Nayantara Sahgal have written their autobiographies basically about the Indian struggle for freedom. Hence, their autobiographies have political leanings too. We have to judge whether these writers have consciously or unconsciously secured their ‘sense of self’. The autobiography depicts the
‘hidden form of inwardness’ and the writer has to establish the portrait of the self in the public eye. One has to consider whether a woman reveals her unique self and indulges in self-exploration.

There have been many women in India who have felt the urge to express their inner selves to the reading public. These women have been lawyers, political activists, women from royal families and so on. There is a remarkable distinction between the writings of a woman and a man. This is evident not only in India but round the world.

A woman’s autobiography generally deals with the various relationships like those with her parents, siblings and also with her spouse, children and other women of her family set up. Her identity is established only on the basis of these relationships in her life. A man’s autobiography is mainly concerned with his success story, achievements and the world of work. He rarely focuses on his familial relationships. George Henry Lewes says that a woman’s literature ‘promises a woman’s view of life, woman’s experience: in other words a new element’. But he further adds,

“Masculine mind is characterized by the predominance of intellect and the feminine by the predominance of emotions… Woman, by her greater affectionateness, her greater range and depth of emotional experience, is well fitted to give expression to the emotional facts of life…” 8

Thus, women’s autobiographies deal mainly with the emotional turbulence of women and their relationships in the social set up. Nevertheless twentieth century came up with a set of women writers exposing extraordinarily intellectual and dashing women writers like Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Shobha De, Mrinal Pande and Dilip Tiwana. They are no longer passive, submissive ‘Sita’ or ‘Savitri’ but dashing, bold and innovative in their techniques of writing also.
India achieved freedom in 1947. Hence forth ‘began a new era of challenges and changes in Indian life’. The new social scenario inspired creativity of the Indian writers in English as well as in other regional languages. Once the country became free and the society gained stability, people became candid and self-assertive. The social upheaval got expression not only in poetry and fiction but also in the autobiographies. The autobiographical genre got a new meaning and opened up new vistas of knowledge for all.

*The Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921) is one of the earliest writings by an Indian woman. Sunetee Devi, a daughter of Brahmo follower Keshav Chandra Sen, who became the Maharani of Cooch Behar, lost her husband early in life. The book is a stepping stone in the realm of Indian women autobiographies as it depicts the inner feelings of most of the Indian women of 19th and 20th century.

Sunity Devee’s parents demanded that their daughter should be married as per the Brahmo rites and rituals. At first her in-laws protested but the prince showered his choice on Sunity Devee only. Sunity Devee was well-educated yet felt proud in following her hubby’s commands. She never wore pearl ornaments, as her husband did not like them. Furthermore, Maharaj did not permit her to mix up with other people, partying, dancing or horse-riding. She readily accepted restrictions of Maharaja and followed his footsteps like a true ‘Pativrata’.

Two memorable moments of her life were the birth of his first son ‘Raje’ and her voyage to England with Maharaja. She felt that people of Cooch Bihar might have never given her so much recognition if she did not bear a male child as her first born.

After the death of Maharaja in 1911, Sunity Devee passed a ‘sati’ life and never complained anybody or crossed the limits of her honour. Then after she was guided and protected by her son, who married the
princess of Vadodara, Indira Gaekwad, without informing any one in the family. Sunity never uttered harsh words to anyone and accepted the modern life-style of her daughter in law.

It is obvious that the woman who always led traditional submissive life disliked the stylish life-style of her daughter in law. She tries not to mention much about her daughter in law in her autobiography, except that she was clever and beautiful’. Her autobiography concludes with the remark that, India shall be proud of her daughters.

One has to give a second thought. Did Sunity Devee achieve her identity in her society? One is not assured if her life turned out to be a role-model for other women of India? Looking to her emotional and intelligence quotient, we feel that the life which she might have led rarely contented her. Her discontented inner wishes might have led her to write autobiography wherein she has portrayed herself as an ideal Indian woman.

Another remarkable woman autobiography is *India Calling* (1934) by Cornelia Sorabji. It is the autobiography of India’s first woman lawyer, who raged a struggle against the suppression of women. Sorabji belonged to Parsi-Christian family. She was inspired to choose her job by observing the plight of women who visited her mother. Her book depicts the gender discrimination encountered by her not only in India but also in England where she went to study on a government of India scholarship. She emerged victorious from her ordeals and succeeded in becoming a lawyer. Her autobiography deals mainly with her concern for improving the sad condition of the women in the Indian society.

*With No Regrets: an Autobiography* (1943) says the writer Krishna Hutheesing, is ‘a book of memories and reminiscences’. Amiya Chakraborty has appreciated the treatment of the subject matter depicted by Krishna Hutheesing in her autobiography. Her autobiography has been
termed as a simple picture incarnated in a simple frame. Sarojini Naidu also considers this autobiography as a simple and intimate depiction of the events.

Krishna Hutheesing born in 1907 was the youngest child of the father Motilal Nehru and mother Sarup Rani. Her childhood passed in a very happy, healthy and gay manner, full of materialistic facilities.

In her childhood Krishna condemned those who got honour and love of all other family members. She notes two remarkable incidents related to this kind of nature. Firstly, she accepts that when her elder brother ‘bhai’ as she terms Jawaharlal, was about to return from England, she disliked the way in which all other family members were preparing to welcome him. She sometimes wondered why her mother took so much trouble just to please one son. She was not at all pleased to receive Jawahar. Nevertheless, in a very short span, Jawahar won his sister’s heart. Secondly, she confesses that she condemned the father of our Nation- Gandhiji on her first meeting as he was honoured by all other people around her.

Just like Nayan Tara Sahgal, Krishna Hutheesing glorified the idea of being imprisoned for national cause and she was much pleased when in 1932 she was imprisoned for a whole year for the freedom-struggle of India. Moreover, she takes pride in being the family member of that historical family from which most of the people were imprisoned for the freedom movement of India.

She has remarkably noted that though she belonged to an advanced educated family of India, her parents never wished that she should join a paid job. They preferred some dignified job. She is proud that because of her worthy brother Jawaharlal only she joined a job as a teacher and later on joined politics.
Her autobiography is a record of the great Nehru family and the historical incidents of the country. However, it fails to bring out the individuality of the writer, who is more concerned with her father – Motilal Nehru. Nevertheless, the book does reflect her loneliness during the freedom struggle.

After independence, more and more Indian women were feeling confident in expressing themselves through life narratives. A Khoja girl, Ishwani Pseud, wrote an autobiography entitled *Girl in Bombay* (1947). The book reveals the writer’s determination to pursue her own religion that is Shiya Khoja creed rather than pursuing the religion of her husband that is Agakhani Khoja. She becomes so much determined that she divorces her husband Rashid. After the death of his mother, Ishwani’s father remarried. The step-mother laid down strict inhibitions on Ishwani and her sister. Marrying an educated Agakhani Khoja youth meant freedom for Ishwani. However, after the marriage, she encountered the same conservative environment at her in-laws. She disliked the hypocritical manner in which all the other daughter in-laws pretended at the dining table and tried to satisfy their appetite by hiding the food in their handkerchiefs and eating it later in their bedrooms. At last Ishwani abandoned her thraldom.

*The City of Two Gateways: The autobiography of An Indian Girl* (1950) is a noteworthy autobiography written by Savitri Devi Nanda.

She was born at her maternal home and for first three years she did not meet her father. When at the age of three her father came to take little Savitri and her mother with him, she was overwhelmed with joy. She considered her father as the most handsome man on the earth. Her father always encouraged her to be a tomboy and wanted to give her good education. On the other hand, her mother did not appreciate her boyish behaviour and sent her back to her grandparents’ house for a disciplined
upbringing. Her life story reveals the training she received in domestic chores. By her maternal grandmother, she was not allowed to enjoy a carefree childhood, but was taught to be a docile, cute girl like all her cousins. Her father understood her truly and couldn’t see the child being crushed under the social taboos. Hence, one night he took her way from the grandparents’ home and got her admitted in a convent school. Later, she pursued medical profession and wrote her life-story on the banks of Thames.

The subtitle of her autobiography needs consideration. It does remind us of what Germaine Bree argued in her chapter entitled ‘Autobiography’ that, why should there be a separate section for ‘women’s’ autobiography?

“I was somewhat puzzled by the implications of the title. We were not in any other section, invited to discuss men’s’ autobiography”.

Thus, autobiographical writing both by men and women is determined by the socio-historical background of the era.

_Maharani, the Story of an Indian Princess_ (1953) is story of a woman ‘trying to defy convention’. In the royal family of the early twentieth century, male supremacy was predominant which is evident in this work. Here the father in law of Brinda abused and insulted her for not bearing a son. The autobiography is a tragic story of a helpless girl in a male dominated society.

Engaged at the tender age of ten, Brinda was taken under the guardianship of her future father in-law. She was sent to Paris to learn the western ways of life and etiquette along with a French governess appointed by her father-in-law. There she fell in love with a French man whom she called gay. The author Dr. Ranjana Harish ironically remarks that Brinda possessed royal elegance, woman like beauty and extreme individuality of disposition. Her autobiography is a story of a conflict
between the opposite poles of two-value systems: the East and the West. Her autobiography is a story of dilemma in the mind of western-educated Indian lady. She never wanted to return to the Indian way of life and adapt herself to the old customs and traditions once again.

It was a paradox that the father-in-law, who had sent her Paris to become sophisticated modern woman, expected her to follow the ideal of a docile, timid, obedient wife. She started defying her in-laws and husband. The drift between them widened when she gave birth to three daughters subsequently. She established a girls’ school in her area to empower girls of the area and decided to do some social work. Her father in law disgusted her social work. He insisted that she undergo a painful surgery for producing a son. The operation failed and her husband was forced to marry a second wife. In order to get the Queenly-Crown, Brinda had to continue her conflict-habituated life in the same home with her three daughters Indira, Urmila and Sushila.

The concluding chapter of the autobiography depicts Brinda’s relationship with her three daughters among whom Indira, the eldest one was very independent like her. The other two were docile and modest and passed happy marriage life. Brinda also passed her remaining life among friends and relatives in foreign land. The last chapter concludes with Brinda’s discussion with her daughter Indira. Brinda concludes the life story by expressing that each one has to build up his/her destiny. In order to break the age old conventions one has to rebel.

After Krishna Hutheesing, Nayantara Sahgal is another woman from the Nehru family who used the autobiographical form of writing. She is a novelist and columnist of great repute. She has written two autobiographies 1) Prison and Chocolate Cake (1954), 2) From Fear set Free (1962). Sahgal considers writing as an invaluable aid which has
great therapeutic value. Considering cathartic function of literature, she remarks:

“Wring of any sort helps to put your own world in order, all the shapeless, bewildering fragments of it. It helps you to figure out what is happening in and around you…..These are things that will never be understood until they are written, and sometimes not even then. But writing helps the process”. 10

Prison and Chocolate Cake is full of reminiscences from the family record, with emphasis on the political life of the family at Anand Bhawan in Allahabad. William Walsh thinks that it is a significant trend started by a woman that of bringing politics in her works. Nayantara Sahgal’s writings have qualities of “dashing journalistic prose”, which exhibits her interest in the minute details of the political life.

Sahgal’s another autobiography From Fear Set Free is a sequel to the first one. It unravels Gandhian influence on the writer. Here, Sahgal’s personal experience is emphasized more than the political activities. The core of both the books is personal experience through which the writer reaches for the liberation of her spirit. The first autobiography was not written with a view to publish and the writer had not maintained records. Hence the chronological order has not been maintained.

Just like Sunity Devee, Shoilbala Das was another girl who loved to dress up like a boy. Nevertheless her life story A look before and after (1956) does not express any feeling of inferiority for being born a girl. She is a ‘born fighter’ and ‘a blunt woman’. She is bold and assertive. She received high education, often in boy’s college. She transformed a boys’ college of Cuttack in a co-education college. She never liked to mix up with docile and modest girls. Her friend circle consisted mainly of boys.
She was an adopted child of Madhusudan Das, who was an important political leader of Orissa. He sent her to Cambridge to take teachers’ training course. On her return, she helped her father in the affairs of the Orissa state. Because of her bold attitude, she got an honorary post of Magistrate in Orissa. She later became a member of the state’s Public Service Commission and held many public posts later in life.

Another significant autobiography of the period is *On the wings of fire* by Kamala Dongerkery, written in 1968. The book deals with some prevalent customs and traditions in the country. Kamala Dongerkery received good education but was married at the age of eleven. She had been trained to respect patriarchy and to believe that the male-child was the primary supporter of the family. She had a remarkable capability of adjusting herself in a large family, which helped her a lot in her in-laws’ home. Kamala Dongerkery discusses the dictatorial behaviour of her mother in law, on whom she depended financially also, as her husband handed over all his salary to his mother. The mother in law tortured Kamala, as she was childless. Even in unfavourable circumstances Kamala established her individual identity by becoming a social worker in Maharashtra. She also achieved success as a handicraft critic and published many books on Indian Handicraft.

Another heart wrenching but unique autobiography is *Beyond the Jungle* (1968) written by a tribal girl Sita Rathnamala. She lived in the jungles of the Nilgiri Hills. She had a happy and protected childhood with a caring father. Her autobiography depicts her childhood escapades into the jungle with her friends. As a child, she always wished to go beyond the jungle and explore the new world unknown to her. Later on she received a scholarship by the Department of Education, Government of
India to study in the Dodo Boarding school. Here, she acquired sophistication of the civilized society.

In her childhood when she was injured and taken to the hospital, she was nurtured by Dr Krishna Ranjan. Later on she joined nursing and went for training in Dr. Krishna Ranjan’s hospital. Her adoration for Dr. Ranjan turned into love and Dr. Ranjan also confessed his inner feelings for her. However, being a son of an orthodox Brahmin parents, Dr. Krishna Ranjan was unable to accept a non-Brahmin girl’s hand in marriage. Disillusioned Sita returned to her small town in the lap of nature. She always strived to go beyond the jungle, but the reality which she found there was not digestible for her. Beyond the jungle, she found the world of Pomp, Snobbery and class consciousness. There, she found another heartless jungle of cement-concrete, full of wild animals-human beings.

A woman is expected to be modest, shy, demure, passive, soft-spoken and attractive. She is not encouraged to be active, assertive, competitive and unattractive.” Most women writers do not write about the condition of being born homely”. Catherine Drinker Bowen remarks: “Every girl who lacks beauty knows instinctively that she belongs to an unprivileged 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”.

The above statement is most suitable to Urmila Haksar. In her life-story *The Future That Was* (1972). Urmila Haksar recounts that her grandmother never forgave her for being born a girl and that too not very beautiful. This made her rebel against the established norms of gender prejudice. Urmila was not only conscious of her unattractive looks but also of the winsome looks of her sister. Hence, she concentrated more on her studies and being intelligent, excelled in her student life.
She never accepted the conservative, suffocating world of female sex and always developed friendship with male cousins of her family. Her father always appreciated and fostered her carefree, outward personality. While her elder sister learned fragile homely chores from the other female members of her family, she passed her time in discussing sports, politics and other current problems with boys. She candidly confesses her anxiety related to her menstrual cycle. Her mother imposed so many restrictions on her during periods, without giving any solution to her inner most worries. She disgusted her menstrual cycles and never followed the rules imposed by her family. Her mother never discussed anything about the adolescence with her. During her periods Haksar cried and cried for a long time without getting any response from the elderly people. Due to her physical changes she started condemning her sex more intensely.

Nancy Friday has depicted a marvellous Jewish tradition and importance of mother-daughter relationship during menstrual period. In Jewish culture, when a girl has her menstrual period for the first time, she is slapped by her mother. Thus, the girl feels a self-pity, anguish and negative feelings for the society throughout the life. Nevertheless Urmila turned out to be a rebel against society.

She taught political science in Kamala Raja Girls College Gwalior after achieving high qualifications in her subject. In 1952, she married the popular History scholar Shri N. Haksar. Leading a happy married life for 38 years, she died on 29th of November 1989. She left behind a husband and two daughters, Nandita and Anamika. In his letter to Dr. Ranjana Harish, Shri N. Haksar has mentioned that Urmila condemned her premarital life so much that she never liked to mention her parental surname ‘Sapru’ along with her name. She has always written under the name ‘Urmila Haksar’.
Thus, Urmila Haksar’s life-story is a role model for all those girls whose personalities are crushed by their rigid, conservative parents and the hypocritical social norms.

George Gusdorf opines that each person thinks himself to be a special being, “worthy of special interest”¹³ this makes him write about himself and his life in an autobiography. Each individual considers himself to be a ‘unique self’, with a special identity. Hence, the process of writing becomes a “quest for identity”. We can say, “The autobiographical work develops as the author develops”.¹⁴ Related to this process of development is a question which a true autobiographer, according to A.O.J. Cockshut has to answer, “How did I become what I am?”¹⁵ It is this process of conversion which was first seen in Augustine’s ‘confessions’.

Prof. Meena Sodhi, inquiring the structure of Women’s autobiographies asks: “How many of these women autobiographers have been able to establish their identity through their writings? How any of these women autobiographers can answer the crucial question put forth by Cockshut?”¹⁶ There are not many, but undoubtedly some women autobiographers have revealed their true self successfully through their life-stories.

Kamala Das is one of the most distinctive female writers of her time. Her autobiography *My Story* (1976) is one of the bold, uninhibited self-revelations seen in recent times. My Story is an attempt at redefining male-female relationship. It is a challenging account of the writer’s mental as well as physical urges. Through her life-story Das has redefined her personality. It is an account of a woman who tries to live traditionally but is forced to break the social rules in order to satisfy her instincts.

Das’s childhood was spent like a common Indian girl. Her mother was from the royal Nalapat family. Her father was a peasant Nair, who
later became a Managing Director with a British concern. In the very beginning of her life narrative Kamla Das confesses that there was no bridge of communication between the parents and the kids. Kamala and her brother were always treated indifferently. She remarks: “They took us for granted and considered us mere puppets moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently, like sturdy shoots of the banyan growing out of crevices, in the walls of ancient fortresses”.17

“Every dark cloud has a silver lining”. Though Kamala was not closer to her parents, she had a loving and indulgent grand mother. She has given detailed accounts of the customs and traditions in the Nair family; the performances of Ottanthullal dancers, the theatre group which she and her friends established.

Das’s romantic ideas of life shattered soon as she was betrothed to a man double her age. He only wanted to maul her body. After marriage his behaviour became insensitive and the tender Kamala had to encounter a kind of rape regularly. However, she enjoys her role as a mother and looked after her son very indulgently. Her husband disliked the baby around the house. Because of his callous behaviour Kamala Das decided to be ‘unfaithful to him, at least physically’.

After the birth of her third son, Kamala turned out to be religious and went to live in Malabar house along with her sons. Her relatives were not happy to see her without her husband and thought her twenty four years old marriage was on rocks. But she paid heed to none. She lived there happily fully stuffed with gold jewellery and cultivated her lands like a true peasant.

India, in early nineteenth and twentieth century was a country of kings and queens. We find many autobiographies written by princesses
and Maharani, which at the time of publication provided the much needed revelation of the royal women. Most of them had lived behind the ‘Purdah’. However, most of them were well-educated. Some of them had got their education in European countries too. Writing in English did not create a problem for them. They were quite familiar with the western way of life. Hence writing an autobiography - a document of self-recapitulation and revelation came naturally to them. Most of these autobiographies focus on the lives of these queens in the kingly shadow of their husbands. They participated actively in social and political activities of their times but they never appeared ambitious enough to hold independent positions. Right from their childhood, they were trained to be submissive and to perform their duty.

Gayatri Devi’s autobiography ‘The Princess Remembers’ (1975) is a landmark in the autobiographical writings by Indian ‘Maharani’. It is the story of queen of Jaipur who gave up ‘Purdah’ to join politics and won every election. She played a vital role in the welfare of her state of Jaipur. However her life-story concentrates more on the personal events of her life than on politics.

Another important life-story of the time is ‘An Inheritance’ (1977) by Dhanwantri Rama Rau. Her autobiography exposes the making of a woman. Right from their childhood, Indian women are given the inheritance of their culture to imbibe the womanly virtues of ‘Savitri’ and ‘Sita’. They were supposed to conform to the conservative male-dominated rules.

Dhanwanti’s mother was much concerned about the education and well-being of her daughters. Despite the familial opposition, Dhanwanti was admitted to the presidency college of Madras in 1909. It was a ‘brave decision’ in those days. Her mother gave her an approval to take up a teaching job for economic independence. Dhanwantri Rama Rau was
married to an I.C.S. officer in a registered marriage. She was given the new name of ‘Sita’ after marriage. However, her Cambridge educated husband did not call his wife by any name and showed no intimacy towards her in public. He did not like her interaction with people. Nevertheless Dhanwanti developed into an individual in her own right.

Another woman of substance is Shudha Mazumdar. Her autobiography ‘A Pattern of Life’ (1977), describes how the women of the house lived in the inner rooms of the house while the father occupied the outer rooms. He followed a western style of life and gave Shudha a good education in a Christian school. Shudha’s autobiography expresses her awareness of being a female as she narrates that as a child she was taught that the female was inferior to the male. However her father considered her birth to be an important moment in 1899. Her childhood was spent in observing ‘Vratas’ to get a good husband and little Shudha was taught that it was “a sin to displease one’s father”. The same applied to the husband. Shudha naturally considered women as a second sex and followed the path led by all common women of her times. Her mother did not allow her to eat meat even though her brothers ate it. Her father always supported Shudha in all the matters. Shudha’s mother never objected her husband; but advised him to make Shudha an heiress of a little part of his estate; for her safe future. When Shudha’s father did not follow her mother’s advice, she was withdrawn from the Christian school by her mother.

Shudha was married at the age of thirteen to a man who was in Bengal civil service. He persuaded Shudha to give up ‘Purdah’ and learn to read and write to become a perfect wife. She also became a social worker, adapted new ways of life, but never abandoned her traditional values learnt at her parents’ home. After husband’s death, she defied the social norms and wore coloured saris and attended meetings abroad.
Indira Gandhi seems to be the only woman from the Nehru family, apart from her mother, who did not want to write her life-story. Her aunt Vijayalakshmi Pandit’s ‘The scope of happiness’ (1979) in an important work revealing the affluent life style of the Nehrus and their contribution in the freedom struggle. Here is the powerful woman who fought for the inheritance rights of the women of India. She served as India’s ambassador in many countries.

Vijayalaxmi Pandit had an arranged marriage at the age of twenty and she willingly changed her maiden name ‘Sarup Kumari’, which she had never liked, to ‘Vijayalaxmi’ the conquering goddess laxmi’. Later both the husband and the wife became actively involved in the freedom struggle. She felt guilty for neglecting her domestic duties, but she did not sacrifice her career. She had a successful political career. She was elected the president of the eighth session of the General Assembly of the United Nations. Later she was made the Governor of Maharashtra. Her political achievements did not hinder her womanly qualities.

Another outstanding woman autobiographer is Durgabai Deshmukh. There is a marvellous presentation of her childhood days in her autobiography Chintaman and I (1980). Her father taught her to be selfless and have a humanitarian approach towards life. She was quite unaware about her womanliness. Her autobiography also depicts her deeds in public life. She joined the work of social service at the tender age of twelve. Her parents always encouraged her for her outspoken behaviour. With the help of women’s organizations Durgabai protested ‘Purdah’ system and Devdasi culture. She also fought for women’s rights.

She belonged to a traditional Hindu family and was married to the son of a ‘Zamindar’ at the age of eight. Later, she divorced him so that he could marry again. At the age of 12, she organized a meeting for the women of her town to be addressed by Gandhiji, so that they could
abandon ‘Purdah’. Her autobiography reveals her keenness for the women to be educated.

In 1940 she established the ‘Andhra Mahila Sabha’. She did her matriculation from the Banaras Hindu University and her B.A. from Andhra University in 1939. She also studied law and became a criminal lawyer.

Despite all her education, Durgabai considered herself ‘almost a rustic’ and was hesitant to accept the marriage proposal of C. D. Deshmukh, the then finance Minister in the Nehru Ministry. However, the marriage proved to be happy and successful as the two individuals adored and respected each other. Durgabai states in her autobiography “When I look back over the twenty six years of our married life, I cannot find even a single instance where we differed significantly. Thus, there was no question of adjustment because adjustment and compromise arise only when one differs basically from the other on a significant matter. We are assimilated in one another and were integrated as a soul like Parvati and Parameshwar”. 17

Another significant life story is ‘My Reminiscences’ (1982) by Renuka Ray. We can discuss it as a related form to life-narrative. Here is a woman born to the most advanced family of Bengal. In the conservative Indian society, where generally a male child is welcomed with pomp and ceremony, Renuka’s birth was a rare one indeed to be celebrated with a great pomp. She was lucky to be born in highly educated Brahma family of I.C.S. officer Satishchandra Mukherjee and Charulata Mukherjee. Her mother was one of the pioneers of feminism. Her Maternal grandfather Dr. P. K. Ray was the first principal of the Presidency College and fortunate to be a teacher of great figures like Dr. Radhakrishnan and Dr. Rajendraprasad. Her home in Calcutta was a meeting place for great
figures like Gandhiji, Dadasaheb Naoroji, Gopalkrishna Gokhale and other freedom fighters.

Renuka went for further studies to U.K. where she met a youth named Satyajeet Ray. He had completed his studies in natural sciences and achieved the degree of I.C.S. The acquaintance turned into friendship and love, which resulted in marriage. After her engagement Renuka and her fiancé returned to India in 1925. Gandhiji invited both of them for a meeting. Gandhiji warned Renuka’s fiancé that Renuka’s first objective in life would to serve her Nation. He advised Mr. Satyajeet to give a second thought as he was a servant of the British and Renuka was devoted to the freedom struggle. Satyajeet promised ‘Bapu’ not to hinder Renuka’s mission in present as well as in future. Thus, with proper understanding and decided mission Renuka and Satyajeet got married and passed a successful life together.

Renuka fought for women’s rights and laws related to divorce. She enjoyed various dignified posts in the then government in 1952-57; she served as a minister for relief and rehabilitation. From 1957-67 she remained an elected member of parliament. From 1958 to 60 she remained an active member and Head in the Planning Commission of social welfare and Welfare of Backward Class. In 1967, she did not get the ticket in congress and it was the end of her political career.

The last chapter of her autobiography In Retrospect summarizes her political career. She has mentioned her private life in few paragraphs only. She has briefly discussed her family, kids, kinsman and the agony related to her husband’s death. It is notable that she has referred to her two bright kids – Ranjana and Rati in her life story once or twice only. Her autobiography does not conclude with the memories of self content. It is more a piece of social-documentation. She gives more importance to
creativity as its own end rather than materialistic facilities, she opines that chivalry and sacrifice has its own charm.

Another significant contribution in women’s autobiographies is *Princess: The Autobiography of the Dowager Maharani of Gwalior* (1985). Vijaya Raje Scindia, who was ‘Lekha’ prior to her marriage, but agreed to the change of her name. She says that her husband was her God. In order to please him she became a non-vegetarian. After her husband’s death she had been torn to pieces. Due to differences in political ideology, she had to suffer alienation from her only son. Her autobiography is an account of the plight of a woman, her pain, her sorrows and her sacrifice. She also served as a chancellor in Sagar University.

Another significant autobiography published in 1991 is Sharanjeet Shan’s *In My Own Name*, which we shall, discuss later on.

Another significant autobiography of the period is Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya’s *Inner Recesses outer spaces* (1986). It is distinct in the sense that it unravels the story of a woman’s heart, who is a bit reserved and shy. She is the woman who is greatly influenced by her maternal grandmother and mother under the influence of her mother she had imbibed the feministic ideas of Pandit Ramabai Saraswati and Annie Beasant. Her marriage to her friend Sarojini Naidu’s brother was a failure. In the concluding chapter of her life-story, she accepts that she did not like to exhibit her innermost feelings publicly. Moreover, she did not tolerate those who exposed themselves publicly. Life had been very hard for her and she did not achieve anything easily in life. She was a devoted freedom fighter and enjoyed the position of a chairman of ‘Indian Handicraft Cell’, vice chairman of Sangeet-Natak Academy and general Secretary of ‘All India Women’s Council’. The concluding chapters of her autobiography reveal that she passed her last few years of life in the fear of death and uncertainty of life.
*Portraits of an Era* (1988) is another significant life-story by Tara Ali Baig. As the title suggests this autobiography is a beautiful portrayal of great figures of twentieth century. Here Tara has portrayed her personal and intimate experiences with great figures like Gandhiji, Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Jinnah and his Parsi wife Petit, Homi Bhabha, Somerset Maugham, Sarojini Naidu, Actress Devika Rani, Anna Pavlov, Uday Shankar, Dalai Lama and Mr. and Mrs. Deshmukh. She has associated her individual experiences with all these great figures in such a manner that they appear live on the page. Tara Ali Baig was a well known writer of Multi Media and also the president of ‘Indian Council of Child-welfare’.

Another remarkable life-story of the period is ‘In Love with Life’ by Dr. Prema Naidu. She was a practicing doctor and professor of medical science in Osmania Medical College, Hyderabad. Prema Naidu passed a very hectic busy life as a doctor. Both, the husband and the wife worked in different hospitals in different cities and met only on weekends. During internship they chose the same sessions and Doctor Naidu proposed Prema through a hastily written chit. Prema loved to play a role of a typical housewife for her husband during week-ends. Week-ends remained the most exciting moments for the couple. In the concluding chapters of her life-story, she requests the great God to announce her summons and to conclude her hectic, long and exhaustive life so that she can sleep peacefully forever. Nevertheless she is fully contented with life and has no regrets. The autobiography has been written in a very realistic manner. Her life-story is a marvellous evidence of how an autobiography can be a piece of consolation and self content. Her autobiography echoes the thought process of John Peeling’s ‘Autobiography, as a crisis’.19
In many of these women autobiographies we find that a sense of failure continues despite having achieved success in their life. They felt discrimination in their childhood, Carolyn Heilburn opines; “Nostalgia, particularly for childhood, is likely to be a mask for unrecognized anger”.

Thus, all these women have attempted to glorify their childhood memories. In the later part of their life they were acknowledged with the fact that their births were not very happy events for their families. Until then, they 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”. The depiction of childhood has been a favourite theme for the autobiographers. As a matter of fact, the childhood memories are often second-hand. Generally, parents and grandparents narrate incidents from early life. Thus depiction of childhood is an indirect experience. What is offered as recollections of childhood is generally no more than what the writers have heard about themselves from others.

The birth of a female child is still not a very joyous event in many of Indian families, where the girl child is announced as “It has arrived”. Many of the women autobiographers have not elaborated it but some have discussed the attitude of the other family members at the time of their birth. It is interesting to note that Vijaylaxmi Pandit’s *The Scope of Happiness* (1979) gives a detailed account of the birth of a girl in the Nehru family. Kamla Nehru was expecting a child and all the family members waited anxiously outside the room. After some time Swarup Rani announced “Hua…”, at which Motilal Nehru laughingly asked “Bachcha Hua?” When his wife did not reply, he understood that a girl child had been born and announced it to the whole family:
“Mother had not said a son is born but ‘it’ has been born. In the traditional way she could not bring herself to announce the birth of a daughter!”

The same girl child who was not welcomed by her family members at the time of her birth, became India’s first woman Prime Minister! If the elite class of India possessed such a state of mind, then what would one expect from the lay man?

Dr. Shubha Tiwari has illustrated the childhood of various women autobiographers in her book *Children and Literature*. She remarks that childhood is usually associated with happy memories. However, autobiographies of Kamala Das, Sharanjeet Shan, Dilip Tiwana and even Shobha De reveal the social stigmas attached with the birth of a girl child.

Dr. Shubha Tiwari remarks that as a child Kamala was very ordinary in her looks. At the tender age of nine she was made conscious of her dark complexion. Her grandmother rubbed raw turmeric all over her body before the oil bath. Her father found her to be too rustic for his likings. So Kamala was admitted to a boarding school run by the German Catholic nuns. Kamala was given proper education but her father was quite orthodox. At the age of fifteen, Kamala was forced to marry a person quite double her age. She comments: “I was a burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessing of all, our marriage was fixed”.

Dr. Shubha Tiwari points out that the girl’s childhood was scaled with an unhappy marriage. There was no one to share her misery and pain. In such circumstances she took to writing. Soon her poems were accepted by the journal P.E.N.

*Selective Memory* (1998) is an engaging candid memoir of Shobha De. Here she writes poignantly of her earlier years and of her relationship with her parents and siblings. She writes, “Unfortunately for my mother I
was not a second son she prayed for. My birth could not possibly have been a day of celebration for the family especially since my maternal grandmother was around to remind everybody that third daughter had arrived as an additional liability….”  

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It was only Rao Saheb, Shobha’s father who rejoiced on seeing the perfectly formed infant. He consoled his wife by telling her that God had been kind to them by giving such a healthy and good looking daughter. Fortunately for the family many changes for the good happened after the birth of Shobha. She was considered lucky for the family. Thus, the initial feeling of being let down by the daughter’s birth was transformed to warmth and love soon after. Shobha De shares memories related to her first pregnancy. She confesses that during her first pregnancy women told that if a woman glows and looks pretty then it predicts the birth of a girl child. On hearing this, Shobha stopped blooming. Unconsciously the pressure of producing a son took hold of her. She was worried that if her first born would be a girl, then it would disappoint the eager family.

The social conditioning is so deeply rooted in our psyche that even modern women like Shobha De succumb to social pressures of having a baby boy as their first born.

Another significant portrayal of gender-discrimination has been found in Dilip Tiwana’s *A Journey on Bare Feet*, (1990). Tiwana was born into a traditional family of rich and prosperous Zamindars. She remembers her mother as a neglected woman in the family because she had not given birth to any son. Tiwana’s grandmother never spoke gently to her daughter in law. She rebuked her daughter in law in the worst manner:

“What good are you if you can not give us a son.” (Tiwana:17)

“Oh! God it’s our bed luck that you have fallen to our lot. That bride of the Peepal tree house took no time in giving birth to two sons in quick
succession. A lucky family indeed! And you?”

After many years of prayers a son was born in the family. Tiwana at last had a brother. Grandmother lavishly distributed wheat among the poor and many other gifts were also offered. Tiwana could perceive the difference in the treatment given to the son and the three elder daughters. Tiwana records another problem which is usually faced by girls in our society. She recalls the time when her marriage was settled. When only few months were left for the wedding, parents of the boy broke off the engagement. The social stigma that a daughter in the family had been rejected was uppermost in the minds of all at home. The rejection of a daughter for marriage would also affect the prospects to Tiwana’s two younger sisters as well. Years later Tiwana’s aunt brought another proposal. This time she said sarcastically:

“What belongs to the garbage dump must ultimately find a place there. Girls can’t live in their parents’ homes all their lives. They must go where they belong. Here’s a good opportunity coming your way. Of course, you can try in other place. Nobody can stop you from doing that. But they would all insinuate that she is a once-rejected girl, you may find yourself at a dead end.”

Thus, Tiwana's autobiography unravels typically Indian social scenario and the social issues. Her account is essentially personal, yet her struggle is the struggle of every woman. She has focused on several concerns of women such as dowry, women’s education, the general preference for sons and the status of woman. Her autobiography, *A Journey on Bare Feet* received the Gurumukh Singh Musafir Award in 1982.

Another significant autobiography concerned with the struggle of woman right from her childhood is *In My own Name* (1991) by Sharanjeet Shan. Shan’s life story expresses extraordinary courage, faith
and determination. She had a very independent mind and extraordinary individuality. She defended all the restrictions imposed on her right from her childhood. In the preface to her life story, she writes “My book is merely a narration of the tragic events of a bright young girl’s life; a life that was transformed, indeed cut short because of the orthodox marriage system…. It is a statement of agony on behalf of the many hundreds of girls who go through the same trauma even today.”

Recounting the time of her birth, she remarks; that was my beginning to Sardar Ajeet Singh and Bibi Pritam Kaur, a daughter, born to be ‘Parai’ (some one else’s property.) Shan’s brother was born one and a half year later. Sharanjeet was told to be a good sister and share everything with her brother Paramjeet. She was taught all the household chores right from her childhood. Her brother was encouraged to play and participate in all extra-curricular activities. Sharanjeet was confined to the four walls of her home. Her interest in current fashions was severely criticized by her father. Her brother was always nurtured with vital delicacies like apples, milk and ovaltine. He was not allowed to share all these delicacies with his sister as she was ‘a parai’ and so she must learn to suppress such temptations.

Shan took special pleasure while listening to her mother singing: “My son will grow up to be a king one day”. She thought that if all the sons in India would take up the throne one day, there was bound to be a glorious mess. According to her father, it was bad deeds of past lives, which caused one to be born woman or to a schedule caste. She is often confused about her role as a daughter. She ‘tongue in cheek’ remarks that, on the one hand a daughter is referred to as Devi (Goddess)., while on the other hand she is always looked upon as a burden, a temporary guest, a duty to be discharged. She feels that the reference to ‘Devi’ has been
made in order to cover up a kind of guilt the parent might feel for having given birth to daughters.

Another such life-story narrating a conflict habituated childhood is *Daughter’s Daughter* (1993) by Mrinal Pande. It is a book about growing up as a girl. Gender discrimination was felt by Mrinal Pande in the early years of her life. In the preface to the book Pande writes, “I know, even as I write this, girls are being destroyed in wombs by new techniques, being tortured and burnt for dowry... No, survival is not easier for our young girls today than it was for us”\(^{27}\)

Most of the events are narrated in the background of her grandmother’s home, where her being the daughter’s daughter was always a disadvantage. All the attention was paid to her cousin, Anu, the grandson of the family. Their grand father would often treat Anu to a slice of mango but the daughter’s daughters, i.e. Dinu and Tinu were deprived of such favours.

Mrinal Pande has expressed the sorrow of her mother, Shivani, who had three daughters and pined for a male child. When her mother was expecting the fourth child, the relatives called Prakash, a cousin to predict the sex of the unborn child. He made a sign of a money box with his hands which clearly meant a boy. Girls were bad cheques, they were like auctioneer decrees. Boys brought in money, land, gold everything. Girls just took away things.”\(^{28}\) Mrinal Pande recollects the day when her brother was born. Her mother looked so relieved and relaxed. Her grandmother hugged the youngest grand daughter who had brought a brother on her back. All the relatives remarked that now the brother will protect the sisters and carry on the family’s name.

Thus, the childhood experiences of notable women writers expose the deep rooted disbeliefs of our society. The gender discrimination is very evident and obvious. The preference for a male child, the pity for a
mother of daughters, the different set of morals for boys and girls has always existed in Indian social structure. Biographies of some eminent women are also marked by such events. Kiran Bedi suggests some strong convictions which can change the future of young girls in the new millennium. Bedi firmly believes that as long as women continue to be in a position of receiving rather than giving, they shall continue to bear injustice.

The next point of discussion, so far as women are concerned is that of marriage. It is the most persistent of myths which imprisons a woman. It focuses on her relationship with the husband, mother in law and women and other family members. Today a woman may decline marriage or opt for dual career marriages. They may even choose a live in relationship. But the times in which most of these women auto biographers lived, marriage was both mandatory and conventional. Most of these women hoped for a perfect marriage. Meena Sodhi opines: “The media encouraged it (marriage) by showing a happy ending in the movies, with the marriage of a hero and a heroine, flashing the sign, and they lived happily ever after”, little realizing that the trouble would start only after marriage.”

Women willingly accept to be called Mrs. so and so, unaware of the servitude represented in that nomenclature:

“Women have long been nameless. They have not been persons. Handed by a father to another man, the husband, they have been objects of circulation, exchanging one name for another”

Prof. Meena Sodhi opines that a common and absurd practice, which is highlighted in some of these autobiographies, is the change of the first name after the marriage. Women willingly accepted new culture, new environment and completely new name after their marriage. Along with her name a woman’s original identity is shattered after her marriage.
One more notable point about women’s autobiography is the age at which these autobiographies are written. Virginia Wolf had recorded in her diary that she was forty years old when she found that she could talk freely about herself and her life. It is remarkable that women generally like to indulge in the act of self creation when they reach their middle ages. To confront the society, one needs either the energetic youthful attitude or the shrewd, calm and calculating mind of the middle age. Erik Eriksson has observed that autobiographies “are written at certain late stages of life for the purpose of recreating oneself in the image of one’s own method and they are written to make that image convincing.”

In her early life woman is involved in her responsibilities, duties and preoccupation. Hence, she forgets her ‘self’. ‘She forgets her individual existence and becomes one with the surroundings. But once, when she is comfortable with her circumstances,” she may well for the first time be woman herself”. Women are well beyond youth when they begin often unconsciously to create another story”.

If we take a look at some of the women autobiographies, we find that most of them were written during their middle ages. For instance, Sunity Devee wrote ‘The Autobiography of an Indian Princess’ at the age of fifty. Dhanwanti Rama Rau wrote her life story An Inheritance when she was eighty. Shoilbala Das wrote A look Before and After at the age of 82. The Scope of Happiness was written by Vijayalxmi Pandit when she was seventy five years old.

A deeper study of the women’s autobiographies unravels the hidden recesses of feminine psyche and the sick psyche of Indian society. Whatever the position of woman may be, behind every social stigma, there is a woman- either in the role of mother in law, sister in law or wife. Most of the autobiographies reveal that fathers always encouraged the bold and broader outlook of their daughters. Especially in the case of
Sunity Devee and Shobha De, fathers rejoiced the births of their daughters. Most of the time father in laws turn out be father figures for daughter in laws. Woman herself has to come out from the age old customs and disbeliefs and treat the newly entered woman in the home as her own sister.

When a sister or a mother in law becomes too much possessive about the son or the brother then only the problem arises. Furthermore, woman herself should be rejoiced at the birth of a girl child. Women have to develop the determination to review their situation constantly. Only then the men will share resources with them. With more women coming in the situation will change. In order to give a happy child hood and blissful life to woman, an unbiased social perspective and a change in social attitude is required.
References:

3. Ibid, P. 27.


18. *Chintaman & I*, P. 76.


27. Ibid, Ch-6.


31. Ibid, Ch-86.

32. Ibid, Ch-86.

33. Ibid, Ch-86.