



## **QUEST FOR 'SELF' IN THE SOUTH-ASIAN WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Women are always the suppressed class. The study of women autobiographies is the study of the experiences and emotions of the suppressed class. The status of women is always secondary in every society. What the oppressed suffers, she suffers the same and yet without any status. Thus she is doubly oppressed. It is interesting to understand the realities women have to face in their lives. She undergoes the tortures, perseverance toils, pains, sometimes unnecessarily. The best realization of the facts of her life can only be understood through autobiographies. It is the first, second hand experience a reader gets. It also gives the picture of her struggle to gain a status, to have the identity, to have individual freedom, to participate in decision making etc. This aim is achieved at different times for different women. It is seen that women in South Asian countries have taken a long time for this type of awakening. The picture is different in the Western countries. The present study intends to undertake the task of highlighting the evolution of identity in the writings of the women's autobiographies. Women's autobiography has now achieved a significant place in literary writing and criticism. The publication of anthologies on the subject has increased over the past few decades.*

Autobiography makes possible for women the reclamation of voice and thus empowers them. By writing autobiographies, women challenge the established history written by men. Autobiography also has a healing power enabling both the writer and the reader to cope with the wounds of the past. Hence, women find a chance to speak the unspeakable by writing their life stories and they hold mirrors to the lives of other women. Therefore, women's autobiographies are the representation, reflection of their minds, their self-respect, their self-dignity and their self-identity. The autobiographies of women writers which have been taken for the detailed study are from various South Asian countries. The South Asian women autobiographers selected for the study are Benazir Bhutto, Kamala Das, Shobha De, Mrinalini Sarabhai and Nayantara Sahgal.

Asian countries are much a product of a common heritage of the legacy of colonialism and the struggle of earlier generations to create a just and equal society in the region. In the post independence period however, women have continued to be subject to common structure of oppression and exploitation imposed by dominant class, caste and patriarchal rule. It is



observed that women in the South Asian countries did not have to struggle much for their right to vote or for education. But there were many obstacles like old traditions, the way of upbringing of girls, exposure to the world outside, limited experience and gateway to higher education. All of it contributed in establishing the self of women in Asian countries.

Thinking about women began specially in the late seventies and eighties and was characterized by the emergence and proliferation of autonomous women's groups. These groups having grown out of a tradition of social feminism, sought to involve another politics. Initially they focused on issues of personal violence like dowry, murders, rape wife beating and sexual harassment. The anger was marked by wide spread demonstrations, protest and extended campaigns. The movement was challenged at a higher level on gender bias, not only in social institutions like the family, community and media but also in political parties. In the eighties the group gathered momentum, which transformed into a movement.

In spite of women's subjugation there have been women prime ministers and presidents in various countries of South Asia. Benazir Bhutto, (*Daughter Of The East An Autobiography*, 2008), is Pakistan's first and to date only female prime minister. She was a Pakistani politician who chaired the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), a centre-left political party in Pakistan, at the age of 29. Bhutto was the first woman elected to lead a Muslim state. She was the eldest child of former Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Nusrat Bhutto, and was the wife of current Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari.

Beautiful and charismatic Benazir Bhutto is not only the first woman to lead a post-colonial Muslim state, she achieved a status approaching that of a royal princess, only to be stripped of her native Pakistan and around the world. But after two terms (1988 – 1990; 1993 – 1996) in office she was snatched off her power which is an example of the bitter political in-fighting that has corrupted her country. Bhutto's life has been full of drama. Her riveting autobiography, first published twenty years ago and now updated to cover her own activities since then and how her country has changed since being thrust into the international limelight after 9/11 is an inspiring tale of strength, dedication and courage in the face of adversity.

Like the Bhutto family, the Gandhi-Nehru family has strived for India's independence and thus gained an important position not only in the congress party but in the minds of the people also. Nayantara Sahgal (*Prison And Chocolate Cake*, 2007) is the niece of late Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, the second of the three daughters born to his sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit who has remained foreign ambassador of India. Nayantara Sahgal is an Indian journalist and novelist whose fiction presents the personal crises of India's elite amidst settings of political upheaval. Her fiction deals with India's elite responding to the crises engendered by political change; she was one of the first female Indo-Anglian writers to receive wide recognition. She is author of several fine novels and a coruscating book on



Indira Gandhi has given a fascinating volume, *Jawaharlal Nehru: Civilizing a Savage World*. Her other novels are *Shadow*, *Storm in Chandigarh* and *Rich Like Us*.

Well acquainted with Indian aristocracy - her uncle was Jawaharlal Nehru, her cousin Indira Gandhi, and her mother an ambassador to the United States, Sahgal first wrote *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), an autobiographical memoir about her youth amid the Nehru family. She then turned to fiction, often setting her stories of personal conflict amid Indian political crises. Sahgal's unique upbringing enriches her culture and the effect is very much in both her novels and her political writing. Her novels are often set against the backdrop of pivotal events in Indian history.

The Muslim countries have prejudiced view about women. Even then Benazir Bhutto (*Daughter Of The East An Autobiography*, 2008) excelled at asserting her right to rule. In a male – dominate, Islamic society, she rose to become her slain father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, political successor, twice getting elected as Prime Minister of Pakistan in two non-consecutive terms from 1988 to 1990 and 1993 to 1996. As a Muslim woman leader, Bhutto was almost an iconic figure in the world. The establishment of identity by women autobiographers is based on the relationship with some chosen one's, without any affiliation, they feel constricted to write candidly and unreservedly about themselves. Shobhaa De' and Kamala Das are literary figures who write without hesitation.

Shobhaa De (*Selective Memory: Stories from My Life*, 1998) emerged on the literary sine in 1988 with her best selling *Socialite Evenings* followed by followed by books like - *Starry Nights* in 1990, *Sisters* and *Strange Obsession* in 1992, *Sultry Days* in 1994, and *Snapshots* in 1995. She tries to dismantle the patriarchal hegemony. She has been condemned and denounced for her outspokenness and liberal views on sex and marriage. Shobhaa De cannot stay away from being influenced by the major ethos and culture of our society. She, however, strongly disapproves the practice of double standards of the society. The double standard of the society has amounted to kill the originality and ingenuity of women.

Shobhaa De has opened new vistas into feminism with her intimate understanding of psyche and woman's problems. That is why she is labeled as a feminist writer. She has been many things to many people: super model, celebrity journalist and best-selling author; friend, rival, colleague and confidante. Her high voltage career happened in unexpected ways: right from her unplanned entry as a teenager into the glamorous world of modeling to her high – profile years as a magazine editor, columnist, T.V. script writer and author. Her autobiography is remarkable for the honesty with which it captures the essence of a fascinating woman who has become a legend in her own time. It is written in a voice that is consistently confident and candid. In this candidly memoir, a woman who has been a familiar face and name to millions finally reveals the true self behind the public persona.



Kamala Das (*My Story*, 2009) is a distinguished figure in Indian Literature. Kamala was the daughter of V. M. Nair, a former Managing Editor of the widely-circulated Malayalam daily *Mathrubhumi* and mother Nalappatt Balamani Amma, a renowned Malayali female poet. One of the leading poets of India, with several poetry collections to her credit, Kamala Das used to write in Malayalam and English. In 1999, Kamala Das converts to Islam and renames herself Kamala Surayya. This research work aims to look at Das's autobiographical work, *My Story*, as a text written by a third world woman and her struggle in a doubly colonized world. Kamala Das wrote her autobiography, *My Story*, in 1976. Kamala Das reveals that she wrote her autobiography as a commercial publication, a series of articles for a popular magazine, because she needed money to pay off her medical bills.

In *My Story*, Kamala Das tells her personal experiences including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside marriage, and her living in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home. Chapters in *My Story* are very short. Each of them is about three or four pages. It is fragmented and not in chronological order like most women's autobiographies. It is typically all about Kamala Das's domestic life, her relations with her parents and her close relatives, her husband and her lovers. Kamala Das talks about the domestic details of food, familial relations, marriage, childbirth, sexual liaisons, and the internal and external struggles of one woman in a repressive world. She also talks about her struggle in public life as a poet. She tries to remain at the center of her story.

Mrinalini Sarabhai (*The Voice Of The Heart*, 2004) is the founder director of the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, an institute for imparting training in dance, drama, music and puppetry, in the city of Ahmadabad. She has received many distinguished awards from the Indian government like the Padma Bhushan and the Padma Shri, honored with the Degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa (LittD) by the university of East Anglia, Norwich, U.K. she has trained more than eighteen thousand students in Bharatnatyam and Kathakali. She is a dancer, choreographer, poet, writer, environmentalist, humanist and teacher. She is born into the highly cultured and well-placed Swaminathan family in Chennai, where the intelligentsia and elite of the time often came visiting. She enjoyed theatre and dance even as a young girl.

But it was only in Shantiniketan under the guidance and encouragement of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and amongst her equally gifted friends that she realized her true calling. It was in the dance dramas of Tagore that her innate and immense capacity for innovation and experiment was recognized and allowed to flower. She is a renowned dancer and choreographer. She is single-handedly responsible for taking classical Indian dance beyond the shores of India and making Bharatanatyam a dance form that is revered and respected throughout the world. When she came to India from America, she discovered, along with Bharatanatyam, the pristine energy of Kathakali and used it in her compositions.

Mrinalini Sarabhai's autobiography is titled *Mrinalini Sarabhai: The Voice of the Heart*. This autobiography is written with disarming honesty and simple eloquence. It is a warm and vivid memoir of a life optimally lived. She writes of her childhood, her parents, her years at school and Shantiniketan, her gurus, her concerts, her meetings with a host of interesting and completely diverse people from the worlds of Art and Science. She also talks about the wealth of friendships she gleaned from these. She also writes in her autobiography about her role as a daughter-in-law of the famed Sarabhais, her marriage to Vikram Sarabhai, her children, Kartikeya and Mallika.

Mrinalini Sarabhai's autobiography is a tribute both to the wonderful people who shaped her life and her career and the strength of her own spirit that, recognizing its passion, never disregarded the voice within. It is this commitment to the voice of her heart that has helped her more than redeem the wealth of good fortune and talent she was both born with and married to. This autobiography is dedicated to "Vikram who sought perfection in the imperfection of existence" and "to Kartikeya and Rajshree Mallika, Bipin and their children who have sustained their Vision." Her autobiography is scheduled by HarperCollins for an October release, 2004. Sarabhai's close friend Vijaya Mehta, reputed film and theatre director and director of the National Centre of Performing Arts, Mumbai, says that in most people, there is a clear divide between their creative life and what they are as a person. But Mrinalini is a total human being.

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