



EVOLUTION OF IDENTITY IN THE WESTERN WOMEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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ABSTRACT

The term autobiography is commonly thought to have been coined by the nineteenth century poet Robert Southey in 1909. In the beginning, autobiographers wrote more about their family bride and family traditions. In the seventeenth century, due to the extraordinary political and social disturbances more and more people started expressing themselves in the form of autobiographies, to show their contribution in important historical events. Every human being has a desire to express the inner self and wish to share it with others. Autobiography happens to be a powerful medium to express his inner feelings, cravings, desires and aspirations. The autobiographer describes his secrets, beliefs, convictions, intentions, interests which engross the readers, specially the common man, who feels privileged to be allowed to be admitted into the autobiographer's private life. Hence, autobiography as a literary genre is becoming popular day by day. An autobiography is the record of time, the era, the social, political and religious state.

The autobiographies of women writers which have been taken for the detailed study are from various Western countries. The Western women autobiographers selected for the study are Hillary Clinton, Doris Lessing, Betty Mahmoody, Goldie Hawn and Shirley MacLaine.

Life and literature share an inseparable relationship in which literature is not only a reading material, but a part of a life which the author would like to share with other people. Important people like presidents, prime ministers, authors, Nobel Prize winners, celebrities who have taken unusual experiences in their lives, leave permanent impressions of their experiences in this world, through their autobiographies. People read these autobiographies with keen interest because they like to know the real person hidden behind the important personalities. Autobiography reveals the inner-self. There is a distinction to be noted in the writings of a man and a woman. A man's autobiography is mainly concerned with his success story, his achievements in life and very rarely does he give a vivid account of his wife and children.



A woman's autobiography generally focuses on the various relationships like those with her parents, her siblings and later with her spouse and her children. A 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. With utmost sincerity women highlight on their inner feelings, their self- introspection, their self –esteem, their own dignity, their self-evolution. Autobiography 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.

From the Hebrew Bible and Greek Philosophic writings to the present, the female is defined negatively. Women have been suppressed, subjugated and subordinated by men. In the western countries during the Edwardian period women worked hard to obtain their rights. The suffragette movement was the first galvanizing force in the lives of a wide spectrum of women in the west. The War in 1914 put an end to suffrage agitation, but it had brought a change in women's lives. They began to oppose the patriarchal system which is controlled, organized and conducted in such a ways as to subordinate women to men in all aspects-cultural, familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. Through hard work women have succeeded in acquiring their present status. Today it is necessary to look at women's writing as a challenge to master narratives. Through their autobiographies women express their self- identity. They raise their voice against women's subordination and violence by empowering them.

The western autobiographer and the then first lady of America Hillary Rodham Clinton (*Living History*, 2004) has strived for women's empowerment. She made the famous statement . . . “human rights are women's rights.... And women's rights are human rights”. She is an international icon who has chaired many important posts. She has remained First Lady of the United States from 1993 to 2001. She was United States Senator for New York from 2001 to 2009. It was for the first time in America the First Lady run for public office. She is the 67th United States Secretary of State, serving in the administration of President Barack Obama. She was a leading candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. Twice she was listed as one of the 100 most influential lawyers in America. In spite of her high political career she has never failed her responsibility as a mother of her daughter Chelsea and she has always supporter Bill Clinton as a senator, president and her husband.

Just like Hillary Clinton, Doris May Lessing (*Under My Skin, VOLUME ONE OF MY ATOBIOGRAPHY*, 1949) is another great women writer who received the Nobel Prize in Literature for her Nobel – *The Golden Notebook*. She was described by the Swedish Academy as “that epicist of the female experience who with scepticism fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny” (Nobel Prize Org). Lessing was the eleventh woman and the oldest person ever to win the Literature Prize. She is passionate



about social and political issues. Her novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950) depicts the brutalities of colonialism. As a member of the Communist Party in the U.K. she was banned indefinitely from Sothern Rhodesia where she was raised, and from South Africa. In her novels Lessing writes about women who are cut off from the civilization in which they grew up, yet this woman have to cope with post- state or post-apocalyptic realities. Her significance as a political writer is that she doesn't just throw stones; instead she muses over the incidents and then asserts her own views on the incidents.

Other important figures in the society are celebrities who gain attention from the common man. People are interested in film actors and they like to have a peep in their lives. Everybody is interested in the life of real person behind the glamorous face. Media and magazines give importance to their personal lives. There are many actresses who have gained fame. Goldie Hawn (*a lotus grows in the mud*, 2006) is a Hollywood comedy actress who has won the Oscar for Best Actress. She is not only an actress, but film director and producer and also an occasional singer. She makes people laugh. Like Charlie Chaplin, Goldie has mastered the art of physical comedy, of slapstick, pulling sad face, pulling happy face and creating jokes through her action. She became famous in her first T.V. series *Rowan and Martin's Laugh – In*. She became better known in *Shampoo* and *Private Benjamin*. Unlike her moving persona her autobiography is a record of everything the actress has learned about life. It's a very optimistic book. In her autobiography she describes spiritual and mystical practices. She has taken experience of a guided meditation which she calls a rebirthing experience.

Shirley MacLaine (*Don't Fall Off The Mountain*, 1991) is another famous Academy Award winning actress who learned dance from a very young age of three years. She became the understudy to actress Carol Haney in *The Pajama Game*. Haney broke her ankle and MacLaine replaced her. Hall B. Wallis who was in the audience signed her for the *Hollywood film – Paramount Pictures*. MacLaine took the opportunity and made the best of it. She was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role for five times. She has written many autobiographical books. In *Don't Fall Off The Mountain* MacLaine does not like to stand on the peak of the mountain and look below, instead she prefers to stand at the bottom of the mountain and look above at the peak which reveal her personality and her ambitions to achieve more in life and reach the highest peak.

Betty Mahmoody (*Not Without My Daughter*, 1989) is not a politician or Nobel Prize winner or a Academy Award winner. But she is a lady with remarkable courage and faith. The horrific situation in which Betty found herself would give nightmares to any loving mother. The title of the autobiography itself suggests her courage and devotion to her daughter. Betty Mahmoody and her husband Dr. Sayyed Bozorg Mahmoody and their four year old daughter Mahtob came to Iran from USA to meet his family. She was appalled by the squalor of their living conditions. She was horrified when she saw the women were merely chattels in Iran.



The Khomeini savage regime Westerners were despised. Mother and daughter became prisoners of an alien culture and hostages of a tyrannical and violent man. She began to make plans of running away from Iran. Along with her daughter she took the most difficult route to reach America, through the mountains of Turkey, a journey that few women had ever made. There were more chances of death. But she got through it to win freedom for herself and her daughter.

There has been a development of identity of women in the Western society to the South Asian society. There has been an abrupt change in psyche due to war and industrialization in the minds of the western women. According to Feminist writers like Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millet, the conflict between men and women is the primary contradiction in society. This approach holds that all structures in society are based on male power and therefore men as a class are the main opponents of women. There is a basic difference in the cultures of western and south Asian countries.

The western women strongly protested against the patriarchal social structure. This indicates that there is a marked difference in the development of psyche of the South Asian Women. They endure long enough before rebelling against injustice imposed on them. It would be interesting to study minutely the gradual change in the personality development of the South Asian women in the perspective of the women autobiographies mentioned earlier, as they seem to represent the general outlook and to certain extent, attitude of the majority.

Though countries in the West and the East are geographically separated the plight of women is similar. The political, historical, social and religious scenario has tremendous bearing on cultural environment which in turn is inculcated in the psyche of people living there. Women had been the victim of social injustice. The awakening of self came after many movements but strongly after women's liberation movement in 1975. The seeds of it were sown in the 17th century with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The suffragettes had succeeded in acquiring the right to vote for American women in 1920. Women in the West strongly reacted against the atrocities inflicted in them which took momentum towards their freedom and their rights. This process was slow but sure in the South Asian Countries. This can be traced through the Autobiographies written by them. Their attitude, their struggle, their efforts for finding individual freedom and insistence to be treated as humans reveal the inner recesses of their psyche and remain exemplary of womanhood in general.



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