

Quest for Self in Kamala Das' *My Story* And Amrita Pritam's *The Revenue Stamp*

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Introduction

Autobiography has acquired a prestigious place among literary genres. There are few leading writers sans the urge to narrate their own life experiences in the form of autobiography. Perhaps, the impulse to talk about oneself is spontaneous and natural to human beings. Besides professional literatures, prominent personalities belonging to different spheres of activity, be it politics, theatre, sports, armed services or business, have used autobiography as the medium of expression of their experiences and impressions of life, people and times.

Being a factual narrative, autobiography bears a close resemblance to history and biography. In classical times, autobiography was taken as an art akin to history. Autobiography relates to history in this that both share a concern for the search for facts and fidelity to truth. In this sense, autobiography can be called more a craft than an art. Manjit Singh believes that "Autobiography is indeed historical in its basic form, yet it is different from history as it involves a personal commitment" (46). It seeks to convey a sense of individuality and worth of the subject through his or her creative insight.

The Problem

Autobiography has been given little critical attention. That is autobiography has received scant claim to consideration from a critical viewpoint. Jeevan Singh feels that "...The cause as well as the effect of this neglect is the non-availability of strict guidelines pertaining to it. It is astonishing to note that until recently, neither America nor England could boast of many books on autobiographies" (29).

Because of the dearth of unanimity regarding the formal and material limits of autobiography, to the present day the term autobiography tends to be designated rather liberally to any writing of personal revelation, irrespective of whether or not it formulates a

continuous or coherent narrative of self-portrayal. With the result that various sub-genres like the diary, letter, memoir, etc. are generally subsumed into autobiography.

The word 'autobiography' was first used by Robert Southey in the *Quarterly Review* article at the end of the 18th century. Todd's dictionary, in 1818 did not enter it, nor did any other dictionary until 1845. Only a few sample autobiographies could find entry under the title 'Biography' in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which is more detailed than the earlier editions. Only rarely has autobiography been critically set apart from biography as is generally perceived and studied as another form of biographical literature. Autobiography is a very close relative or a special form of biographical literature; it is the life of a man that happens to have been written by himself and is, therefore, unfinished.

The Argument

Of recent years notably since the beginning of the nineteenth century - autobiography has come to be regarded as a distinct literary form with characteristics and requirements peculiar to itself. It is indeed closely related to what in general we call biography, yet it is definitely separated from it. Though autobiography and biography are akin to each other, yet autobiography can boast of a separate standing as a literary genre. While biography is written mainly with documentary assistance, autobiography is largely sustained by memory. The three basic elements of personality, history and literary together constitute an autobiography. In a true autobiography, these elements should exist in a harmonious and proportionate relationship. An ill-proportioned relationship among these elements may distort the total effect of an autobiography. A detailed perusal of these elements is a precondition for an insight into the structure of autobiography.

Autobiography may have other stimulus. The general public is always eager to access the personal lives of celebrities. Thus, there is a hot market for autobiographies, particularly confessional in nature. Publishers constantly press famous personalities to write their memoirs because they sense that publishing them is a sound commercial venture. Kamala Das has confessed in the preface to her autobiography that she was motivated to write her autobiography in order to earn money to meet some urgent financial liabilities.

Autobiographies are generally written during the declining years of authors, a period when their fame and glory are on the wane. The urge to remain in the limelight inspires them to narrate their life-experiences. These are some of the motives which impel a writer to

narrate personal experiences. Still, it can be safely professed that autobiographies are generally pervaded by a personal need, i.e. to use the words of Socrates, to know thyself. Amrita Pritam, in her autobiography *Rasidi Ticket* (1976), holds autobiography as a tool in the hands of a writer to achieve "the basic truth which is the writer's own need" and "a continuous process that leads from one reality to another" (127).

The present study places in a critical perspective the tradition of autobiographical writing among women writers in India with special reference to Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam. The aim is to capture the splendour of autobiography among women writers through analysis, comment and illustration. I have focused specifically on Kamala Das's *My Story* (1976) and Amrita Pritam's *Rasidi Ticket* (1976). The latter has been translated into English as *The Revenue Stamp* (1977).

Both these writers are intensely subjective. Their writings are a record of their personal experiences. One needs to be familiar with the events of their lives to fully comprehend their works. The essential trait of their writings is reconstruction of their own selves. Adil Jussawalla, in his book, *New Writing in India*, has included the poems of both, Amrita Pritam and Kamala Das, in the third part of the book about which he says, "The third part consists of writing I shall call 'personal'...The writing in this part is concerned with describing highly subjective states of mind and exploring existential problems" (29).

Besides being subjective, both of them (Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam) are alike in many respects. A sense of neglect tormented their psyche. In their autobiographies, one finds the evidence of awakened and agonized souls in anguished turmoil over their lonesome existence. Both had inherited poetic talents and started writing poetry at an early age. Their repressed inner urges and emotions of rebellion found expression in their poetry. With their creativity, these poets emerged out of the inner darkness into a sunlit valley. Both had unhappy married lives and sought love outside marriage. They chose poetry as a medium of self-expression to relieve themselves of their unhappiness.

Present research work attempts to explore the beauty and the power of autobiography as a literary genre. The charm and power of autobiography testifies to its wide appeal among writers. Autobiography paves the way for self-realization in a world designed to defeat such a quest.

I have attempted to trace the history of the autobiography in India. The religious, spiritual and impersonal orientation of Eastern aesthetics and culture has often led people to

think that autobiography is alien to the traditional Indian literature. There is no denying the fact that ancient Indian aesthetics showed little interest in the personality of the author. Still, India can boast of a rich autobiographical tradition. However, the first authentic and pure specimen of the Indian autobiography is to be encountered only after the advent of Islam in India. The Bhakti movement was a turning point in Indian autobiography. The next few centuries witnessed the slow erosion of old values, and the rising of the new western-oriented outlook to life. English language and literature cemented the autobiographical tradition in India.

Any autobiographical writing constitutes the personality of the writer. However, in the case of women-writers, the subject and self of the author coalesce to form a coherent unity. A woman's writing tends to be a contradiction between fact and fiction. Endowed with subjectivity, poetic autobiography constitutes the crowning glory of a woman writer's genius. I use the term "poetic" to underline the essential features of female autobiography.

Female autobiography is generally imaginative, fictive, metaphorical and digressive. A woman writer's life-story turns out to be a spontaneous and instinctive expression. The focus is more on the emotional aspects of life. Female auto-biographers have almost always talked about their parents, their marriages, their husbands and their in-laws at length. They remain conscious of themselves as women and write from a woman's point of view.

Conclusion

Thus, it is against the background of their personal experiences of life that the literary works of Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam must be viewed. Their literary journey is a continual exercise of self-revelation. At the same time, it is possible to place these two writers in the tradition of women's writing in India.

The autobiographical narratives of prominent personalities Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore and Nirad C. Chaudhuri - bring into limelight the essential characteristics of autobiography-writing in India. For the preponderance of religious and metaphysical values, the Indians in their autobiographies shun writing about their lives in isolation. The life-story is synthesized with a wider and deeper phenomenon-social, political, historical, spiritual and creative in nature.

The autobiographical impulse and act is central to woman's writing in India. The gamut of Indian women's writing generates an unending discourse on personalities, selves,

woman's emotions and ways of life. In a way, it presents the socio-cultural scenario in India from a woman's standpoint. It affords a peep into Indian feminism too. Besides giving a historical perspective, it throws ample light on woman's psychic topography. It takes us to the deepest emotions of a woman's inner being. Love finds a spontaneous response in a woman's heart. She seeks her god in her love. The varied aspects of woman's personality find expression in the female autobiographical literature

Like Walt Whitman, Kamala Das is pre-occupied with her own predicament in her writings. Her own sensibility finds repeated expression in her poetry, fiction, autobiography and prose writings. Like D.H. Lawrence, she has firm conviction in the validity of physical experience. Human beings are captive of their bodily desires. The only way to come out of the prison of the body is thorough satisfaction of one's sensuality. Physical union frees one from ego and earthly temptations, leading to a spiritual experience. There is, in fact, no body-soul dichotomy in Kamala Das.

Amrita Pritam is a self-realized woman whom the prevalent customs and traditions could not deter from achieving her goal. The most attractive traits in her personality are her extraordinary courage and her unshakable conviction in truth. She met the adverse situations of her life with fortitude and emerged with greater phoenix-like strength.

Kamla Das's *My Story* (1976) and Amrita Pritam's *The Revenue Stamp* (1977) opened up new vistas for women writers. These autobiographies are marked by a ruthless dissection of intimate matters. Extra-marital affairs are discussed at length along with the freedom of the individual spirit.

Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam retain their primal impulses. They have a deep abhorrence for all types of ostentation. Both claim to have established an honest and selfless relationship with their readers. They are intensely confessional writers. Their writings capture their individuality, points of view, and establish their distinctive personalities, reaching out to readers across all barriers of time and space.

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