



Research Paper

The Ignored Self: Women's Life-Stories

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ABSTRACT:

Autobiographies delight their readers by taking them behind the scenes of the public personality and tell us about the author's private affairs and thoughts, their home and hobbies, etc. this charms the reader as it gives the reader information of a different kind. Indian women's autobiographies are different from that of men's. Their concerns and dilemmas are different; their expression is bound to mirror their differences. Women are under-privileged than men. Under the patriarchal social order, women are expected to place their traditional roles as daughters, wives and mothers above an individual identity. (Kumar 5)

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Rasidi Ticket and Shadows of Words, two autobiographies by Amrita Pritam, are unique for the narrator's foray into both the lovely and the harsh visionary world. These books are the confessional outpouring of a sensitive soul and also a reflection of the patriarchal social constraints. These books are remarkable for their frankness of feelings and boldness of approach in respect of topics hitherto considered taboo. Shades of the same frankness are discernible in Kamala Das's *My Story* and Indira Goswami's *Adha Lekha Dastabej*. In Preface to *Shadows of Words* Amrita Pritam writes:

In the name of home, society, religion and politics those shadows were wrapped around the doors and wall. Somewhat deliberating, this book reaches that desired destination- where the shadows of inner consciousness get translated into words. The symphony of this consciousness may not be captured in words- yet conserving about them are these few pages- which can be anointed as an inner journey.

The most conspicuous trait evident in her autobiography is a woman's battle against authoritarian and male hegemonic discourse and her determination 'to dare to live the life she imagines.' Her writing is celebrated for its sensuous imagery and evocative rhythm and is widely read and appreciated. She writes:

Society attacks anyone who dares to say its coins counterfeit, but when it is a woman who says this, society begins to foam at the mouth. It puts aside all its theories and arguments and picks up the weapon of filth to fling at her (Pritam Preface).

Women writers have to resurrect and heal a self in order to acknowledge their desires and their love for independence even at the cost of love. The above words highlight the nature and atmosphere of confessional strain in the *Shadows of Words*. B. N. Singh aptly observes:

One thing is obvious that words are adequate to give vent to her feelings: the shadows of inner consciousness have been translated into words. This autobiography is about the inner journey of the narrator. The inner journey ranges from 'a demonic shadow which baptized me with thick smog' when she was 'virtually standing alone in this strange world (*Shadows of Words* p. 1) to the spiritual enlightenment 'fervour of the fragrance within (*Shadows of Words* p. 140). In between is the travail she has undergone because of her unrequited love for Sahir Ludhianvi, the noted Urdu poet (17).

In *Rasidi Ticket* we get a bold picture of a love-lorn teenager, a sensitive soul - love smitten and emotionally starved, who detests as repressive all the social values which act as detrimental to her interest. She writes:

In this, my sixteenth year, a question mark seemed to have erected itself against everything... There were so many refusals, so many restrictions, so many denials in the air I breathed that a fire seemed to be smouldering in every breath I drew... That sixteenth year is still present somewhere in every year of my life (Pritam 11).

It had often been assumed that to articulate oneself or to assert one's self was outside the fold of Indian womanhood. The arrival of Amrita Pritam with her *Rasidi Ticket* asserted the arrival of the New Woman, unorthodox and bold in expressing herself. Kamala Das's autobiography *My Story* further highlighted the pathos and anguish of a woman who craved to be loved and understood. Women writers now fearlessly began to lay bare the needs and desires of women for readers to understand the anguish therein (Chakravarty Foreword).

My Story earned Kamala Das national recognition and notoriety among the English-speaking elite in India for breaking all conventions of women writing in literature and proved to be one of a kind. In *My Story*, Kamala Das, a poet famous for her honesty, tells of intensely 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. She feels lost and unhappy as she looks for a soul mate in her lover, the one who loves her body as well as her soul. She enters conjugal life with legitimate expectations and innocent dreams only to be let down. The following lines clearly express Kamala Das's state of mind, when she began writing the most controversial autobiography ever written by a woman:

'My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen in love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband...This book has cost many things that I held dear but I do not for a moment regret having written it' (Preface).

My Story is a life narrative of Das's inner journey. As with other women's autobiographies, it is motivated by a search for an identity, an identity of the split-self craving for true love. Introspection and self-analysis form an important element in their life stories. R. Tamil Selvi's comments sound pertinent:

'Several women writers revolted against the pre-established patterns. But above all a woman's autobiography remained a definition of her subjectivity as against the backdrop of something more powerful. With Kamala Das, we come across a new kind of woman's writings which is bold, daring, tantalising and self-assertive. Here is a woman conscious of her femininity but determined to vindicate it against male supremacy. For Kamala Das it was important to be a woman and a lover with a body and a soul. The autobiography becomes a vehicle for voicing an inner privacy'¹.

Das talks about the domestic details of food, familial relations, marriage, childbirth, sexual liaisons, and the internal and external struggles of a woman in a repressive world. She also talks about her struggle in public life as a poet. Her autobiography argues that a woman is naturally creative and if given room enough she can defend her selfhood and narrate the story of her life boldly. Woman's literary creativity is not unnatural though it cannot rival her biological creativity. *My Story* is an autobiographical journey which helped Das come to terms with herself with her cathartic journey. She writes,

'I have written several books in my lifetime, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me. I have nothing more to say'. (qtd. in Sodhi 101-102)

Selective Memory: Stories from My Life, autobiography of Shobha De, is another book of intensely personal details, remarkable for her endearing candour and intellectual integrity. Her readers marvel at the discrepancy between the gorgeousness on the cover page and the life described within- a life governed by middle class work ethics, a sharp eye for humour and wit and guilt over her failing personal life. Her saving grace, she says, was that she was taught early in life that nothing comes easy, that nothing is delivered on a platter. As a writer she seeks to portray the life of an ordinary girl pitched into strange and often unpleasant stardom. The most notable passage in *Selective Memory* is De's description of the death of her mother: a painful chapter filled with the guilt of a daughter, the dignity of her newly widowed father and the kind of poignant details found in the very best of fiction.

Women writers from disadvantaged communities took to writing autobiographies to highlight the social hypocrisy prevalent in the social fabric of India. Their stories are invariable accounts of determination and revolutionary zeal to gain identity and acceptance as self-respecting individuals. In *Karukku*, Bama employs a narrative strategy to highlight the sufferings of her community as she talks about her plight. Bama hails from a Tamil Dalit community called the parayas. In their pursuit of higher caste and class consciousness, Bama's family and relations adopt Christianity. But religious conversion hardly brought about any improvement in their

lives. She painfully realises that Dalit Christians are looked down upon by the clergy who mostly belong to the upper castes. She is shocked to find that all the sweepers, attendants and the lower rung officials in the church were Dalit Christians and the higher officials who controlled them were from the upper castes. Conversion cannot guarantee them escape the clutches of birth. In her autobiography Bama displays the indomitable spirit of Dalit women to withstand social prejudices and police atrocities. She also brings to the fore the woes of Dalit women. She longs for an egalitarian society and proposes a long drawn plan for the emancipation of all Dalits from the casteist forces of the country.

In her autobiography *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar writes frankly about the private and public aspects of her life. Thus she speaks of falling in love, going against family to marry the person of her choice and moving to Mumbai. She also talks about familial and marital conflicts and recounts how she began to write and to participate in Dalit literary conferences. In her engaging style she also narrates how she founded a women's literary conference. Sharmila Rege writes, 'Thus as a self-consciously Dalit feminist testimonio positioned against the Brahminical and neo-liberal practices of the state, *The Weave of My Life* violates both bourgeois individualism and communitarian notions of the singular Dalit community, thus becoming a milestone in the archive of resources for practising Dalit studies as critical and inclusive social science.' These autobiographies illustrate that Dalit women need not be perpetual victims; that they can fight back like any other woman in the world to uphold their dignity.

Thus we see that women's autobiographies enrich our understanding about their real fears and failures, hopes and aspirations. Their life-stories help us gain insight into their life experiences in a way that men's writing about women can never approach. What is common among them is the urgency to break free from stereotypes and a repressive external world. Life writings or autobiographies of women are incredible stories of determination of women who rose above their birth position to become strong members of the community. Their outpourings display their efforts to break the culture of silence so that voices of protest can be heard. Their success is palpable in the steady rise of women's voices throughout the country.

ⁱ Language in India www.languageinindia.com 11 : 7 July 2011 Issue pages for this Book 771-826 Pauline Das,

Ph.D., K. R. Vijaya, Ph.D., and Amutha Charu Sheela, *Aspects of Autobiography and Biography in Indian Writing in English* R. Tamil Selvi in A Kaleidoscopic View of Kamala Das's *My Story*

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