



AUTOBIOGRAPHY HISTORY WRITING AND GENDER HISTORY: SOME REFLECTIONS ON NATURE AND METHODOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION:

History is the story we make of the stories we find. Our first duty as historians is to hear those found stories and understand what they meant in their own time

Late Rhys Issac (a member of Melbourne life writing group)¹

In the glossary of literary terms, an autobiography is defined as a biography written by the subject about himself. They are an important source of information from the point of view of history as well. Historians today recognize that autobiographies offer rich and over-awing evidence which can be used in very different ways. At one extreme, personal testimony is criticized as an unreliable and flawed source of information. Critics are of the opinion that since it involves personal outpourings, it is selective, biased and very subjective. However, those who support autobiography as a historical source are of the opinion that personal narratives, "illuminate the lived experience and meanings of historical events and lives of groups of people-so called ordinary men and women who are unlikely to be documented in the archives of the governing classes."² As far as the subjectivity and selectiveness of the autobiographies is concerned, historians like E.H.Carr have established that facts and sources are never unmediated. Both have to pass through the 'processing process' of the historian. They at best serve to the category of the raw material of the historian, rather than of history itself. To say that facts speak for themselves is incorrect. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them. It is he who decides to which facts to give the floor and in what order or context.³

It would be a serious methodological error on the part of the historian to regard autobiographies as self-evident statements of social or historical truths. In fact it would be more relevant to regard these accounts as reflection of culture specific notion of the person or self. These life histories provide insights not just into experience and attitude of the individual concerned, but also of the wider society and societal attitude of which they are a part. Autobiographies are particularly relevant source of historical information about the marginalized sections of the society, including the lower sections or even the women. The lives of the marginalized sections of the society is not accessible by other means. Their individual voices are erased from the more familiar and overtly self-important sources that serve the perspective of the state or those of the dominant caste, class or gender.

¹Gunn Simon and Lucy Faire ed (2017), *Research Methods for History*. In this the chapter titled Life Histories and Historical Analysis by Alistar Thomson (Jaipur: Rawat Publications) pg 104

² Ibid pg104

³Carr, E.H (1961) *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books)pp3-36

Autobiography and Gender History

Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley make a potential argument for the historical relevance of autobiographies particularly for *gender* historians

“Autobiography offers a way in which individual can inter weave their personal stories and remembrances with the public account of those major historical events that have social and political meaning within a given society.”⁴

They further add that autobiographies deal with a certain kind of ‘performance.’ They say,

“ For a genre that is inherently confessional-in so far as it is about self-fashioning-the idea of performance teases out the choices made in terms of forms and narrative strategies employed and the audience addressed.”⁵

Thus in most autobiographies, the narrators find themselves indulging in certain amount of self-censorship. Sylvia Batuk’s work on Zakira Begum-an early twentieth century Urdu novelist-and her memoir would be an interesting case study to understand the above. In her memoir Zakira Begum tried to avoid offending any of the individuals mentioned in her memoir. She treated deceased relatives with particular discretion and respect. There was much about the family situation which she did not mention. But her silences were often motivated by a reluctance to reveal private information or recount embarrassing incidents involving someone close to herself because of age of kinship relationship.⁶ Thus all autobiographical practice is based on memory, inherently selective and interpretive, and therefore performative in what/how it congeals or enacts, conceals and reveals.⁷

Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert are of the opinion that, “If we look at autobiographical practice as a self in performance, we begin to appreciate the historical social and cultural milieu in which the self was imbued and what enabled subjectivity and speech.”⁸ The motivation, lingual and stylistic choices and preference of genres or issues vary in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial context. Further autobiographies of men differ from those of women both in content and structure. Women autobiographies are more personal than political. Rather than focusing on public life and career, they focus on the relationships of the domestic realm. They are more fragmentary than linear, more collective than individual, less about the more carefully crafted public self, and more about self in society.⁹

In her well acclaimed monograph on *Piro*- the denizen of nineteenth century Punjab-Anshu Malhotra endeavored to make sense of whatever fragmentary writings that *Piro* wrote and composed during her life time.¹⁰ These included the versified tales (*Iksausath Kafianor 160 kafis*) and her other writings including her acrostic poems also known as *siharfis*. *Piro*'s life is situated in the middle decades of nineteenth century Punjab which was marked by disintegration of Sikh empire and emergence of colonial era. In her writings *Piro* highlights social and cultural structure of her society. It shows the mentality of a modern denizen who belonged to the early modern period in India. She was particularly a woman-who broke the varied disciplinary codes. She was deeply molded by bhakti imagery and its effects. Anshu refers to *Piro* as *exceptional normal* in the sense that she was not a *woman worthy*, yet also not *every woman*.¹¹ *Piro*'s forceful autobiographical narrative knits a fanciful tale of abduction, and redemption. *Piro* is the extraordinary voice of a low caste Muslim, and a former prostitute, who reinvents her life as an acolyte in a heterodox sect. She crossed several boundaries including religious. The heterodox sect referred to is the *Gulabdasidera* was a small sect, practicing the heterodox bhakti

⁴ Malhotra Anshu and Siobhan Lambert- Hurley (2015), *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance and Autobiography in South Asia* (USA:Dukes University Press) pg 1

⁵ Ibid pg1

⁶ Ibid Chapter-A passion for reading by Sylvia Batuk pp 36-37

⁷ Ibid pg 16

⁸ Ibid pg1

⁹ Ibid pg9

¹⁰ Malhotra Anshu (2017), *Piro and the Gulabdasidasis: Gender Sect and Society in Punjab* (Delhi: OUP)

¹¹ Ibid introduction xviii

religion. *Piros* poetry employ's bhakti imagery in exceptional ways, demonstrating how it enriched the lives of women and low caste. Her agential role is outstanding and creative not because she engineered any revolutionary change in the society, but because she gathered the courage to speak and change her life which is why she is exceptional.¹² Thus as David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn said that accounts of personal lives reflect culture specific notions of the person or self¹³

Methodological Concerns

Historians today recognize that autobiographies offer rich and over-awing evidence which can be used in very different ways. Every historical source- including archival material, newspaper, literary accounts, journals, or even life stories, memoirs and diaries- are all shaped by different narrative convention. It is important for the historian to ask how, " the narrator of an autobiography perceived and worked within, or perhaps against the story telling conventions of a particular genre of life story within a particular time and place."¹⁴ The way a woman or any writer would write in the early twentieth century would be different from the way they would write in mid twentieth century or even end of twentieth century. Every genre of source has its own characteristic features. The generic expectations of the autobiography include the following: it should be chronological; it should be sustained by tension about character or outcome; it should be fashioned for aesthetic effect and to evoke particular meanings and significance.¹⁵

While using autobiographical writing as a historical source, the historians can consider the impact of the genre upon the content of their work and how that would affect their analysis and hence use of their source.¹⁶ Alistar Thomson suggests some significant methodological clues for the historical study of autobiographies. He suggests that the historian should consider the reasons why someone narrates their life and how that autobiographical impulse affects what they do or don't say. He is of the opinion that autobiography allows for a study of individual and society by juxtaposing the two in relation to one another. The narrator draws upon the language and meanings of their culture to articulate experience. So the personal meaning and the public sense get betwixt.

The premise of 'objectivity' while using such a thoroughly subjective genre cannot be missed out. It needs to be reiterated that, the conventional history research skills remain intact for autobiographical genre as well. It too requires a background research to situate the account in its historical context. The historian should undertake a triangulation with other evidence. There is a need to check for internal and external consistency. It is important to keep in mind that life stories have a cultural overlay and a psychological underlay. The cultural overlay gets depicted through the language used and the meaning accorded to the experiences shared. The psychological underlay of the narrators is embedded in their attempt to create a relatively coherent and comfortable sense of their experience. For gender historians, the need to understand the relevance of psychological underlay is even more necessary. According to Barbara Metcalf, the strategies of expression that women employ can be referred to as *Convention of Passivity*. According to this convention nothing that happens including the very act of writing itself is attributable to their own initiative.¹⁷ Many a times their discussions acquire a deferential and apologetic stance. However, as Metcalf says modesty should not be confused with lack of agency or self-effacement. They often take recourse to such strategies to man oeuvre patriarchal existence.

¹²Ibid introduction xx

¹³ Arnold David and Stuart Blackburn (2004) *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life-History*, (Delhi: Permanent Black) pg 64

¹⁴ Gunn Simon and Lucy Faire ed (2017), *Research Methods for History*. In this the chapter titled Life Histories and Historical Analysis by Alistar Thomson (Jaipur: Rawat Publications) pg 114

¹⁵ Ibid pg115

¹⁶ Ibid pg115

¹⁷ Metcalf, Barbara.D (1993), 'What happened in Mecca: Mumtaz Mufti's Labbaik, in RobenFolkenfliked *The Culture of Autobiography: Cultures of Self-Representation*, (Stanford C.A: Stanford University Press) pg 167

In conclusion it can be said that since History is the science of the study of men in time, therefore autobiographies can offer a very interesting and relevant source to fathom the cultural milieu in which the narrator wrote the account. For a gender historian, it can offer a valuable key to unlock the treasure of women's personal reminiscences. Further as David Arnold says, that there is a need to go beyond collective life histories. Indian Autobiographies demonstrate the significance of individual agency and notions of self in a region of the world where people have historically been seen to identify themselves in terms primarily of caste, kinship and religion. Autobiographies reveal the isolated, autonomous individual self in a society that is more complex, yet meaningless without the individual.¹⁸ For the gender historian, the autobiographies reveal that there is a certain kind of power dynamics which has to be negotiated in order to sustain and thrive. Autobiographies provide adequate room to delve into the more unspoken realms of social and historical existence. The significance of this source, to study the history of the marginalized cannot be discounted.

¹⁸ Arnold David and Stuart Blackburn (2004), *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History* (Delhi: Permanent Black), pg 19
