

## CHAPTER - I

### NATURE AND ART OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In much broader perspective, Autobiography is both the simplest and commonest of all literary exercises and anyone who is able to write a sentence, can take venture to write one. Anyone whether he is ordinary or extra-ordinary, when sits down to write the story of his own life, has to confront special problems. Though there are no general canons or formal requirements binding the autobiographer, and the critic does not properly know how to assess an autobiography, yet the tradition of the genre has been in vogue since the 4th century A.D. and is still galloping forward. As man is self - assertive to some extent by nature, the autobiographical impulse is evident in different parts of the world in every age. The autobiographical impulse got momentum in Western Europe as a result of the Renaissance, and thereafter, from the Restoration Period onward the autobiography has been recognised as an independent literary genre.

It is odd enough, however, to note that the word 'Autobiography' has been used to denote the 'self-life-writing' only recently. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the credit goes to Robert Southey to be the first user of the term 'Autobiography' in the year 1809 in a remark upon a Portuguese painter. But we can push it back to the last part of the 18th century by quoting William Taylor who tentatively used the term '*Autobiography*' along with the other term '*Self-Biography*' in the *Monthly Review of December, 1797*.<sup>1</sup>

St. Augustine's *Confessions*, though alone can prove that a great autobiography could be written many centuries before the beginning of the modern self-consciousness, it is still significant that no two critics are in agreement on the theoretical aspects of autobiography as a separate art form of literature.

***"This is one of the paradoxes of the subject : everyone knows what autobiography is, but no two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement."***<sup>2</sup>

Here it seems that autobiography is the most elusive of literary documents and most of the readers and observers confuse autobiography with diary, letter, memoir, reminiscence, journals, travelogue and, even with biography, poetry and fiction.

The word 'autobiography' itself produces a definition that explains the intrinsic difference between biography and autobiography. The word 'autobiography' is a hybrid one consisting of three separate words : 'autos' meaning self or himself, 'bios' meaning the life or course of a life time, and 'graphe' meaning the act of writing. Hence, we find the definition that *the autobiography is the description of an individual life written by the individual himself.*<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary* defines 'Biography' as *"history of the lives of individual men as a branch of literature."* The two definitions have shown the fundamental difference between biography and autobiography as two distinct literary genres.

There is a sharp contrast between biography and autobiography rather than their more obvious similarity in purpose and form. There are two major differences between the two; *one is external and the other is*

*internal.*<sup>4</sup> The first obvious external difference lies in authorship. In a biography, an attempt made at reconstructing an individual human life by another person. But an autobiography is a deliberate expression of an individual human life by the individual himself. It leads us to the revelation that the time factor is utterly different between the two. A biography can be written any time during the life or after the death of the subject, but there is the necessary absence of death and the common absence of old age in the autobiography "*and is therefore unfinished.*"<sup>5</sup>

Autobiography is primarily subjective in nature, whereas, on the other hand, biography is essentially objective. The autobiography reveals the inside view, 'the chain of feelings' of the invisible world of the subject, for which autobiographer is the only unchallenged authority. A biography is expected to reflect faithfully the personality and character of the subject from all available sources of information. The biography provides only an external view of the person, often reviewed and corrected by the general demands of the people and of the age. But the autobiographer attempts to pull out his self from the other side of the mirror. Though biography and autobiography present a wide range of individual human experiences, they are still different genres; both work by some different principles and different satisfaction to the readers.

Apart from autobiography, there are many other cognate forms of personal writing that furnish a response closely analogous to it. It is, therefore, necessary to attempt a discrimination, if possible, between autobiography proper and other forms of autobiographical writing. The writers who practise the forms, use the terms quite indiscriminately as

diary, autobiography, memoir or reminiscence or even letters. Autobiography and diary are the deliberate self expressions of the human life, but they differ from each other regarding the point of view and manners of writing. Diary provides the fresh relation of the events of the human life or time projecting day by day; whereas in autobiography, the events and experiences of the individual life are presented after proper selection and modification to reconstruct a somewhat 'whole' picture of the personality. Roy Pascal precisely describes this :

*"The formal difference between diary and autobiography is obvious. The latter is a review of the life from a particular moment of time, while the diary, however reflective it may be, moves through a series of moments in time."* <sup>6</sup>

Diaries are to some extent more historical than literary. They are the events of day-to-day significance recorded closely. The diarist jots down the humdrum details of daily experience without proper importance and selection.

As a result the work, in totality, lacks the integration in projecting the subject as a unified whole. It is mostly dull and full of repetitions. The fragmentary and disjointed materials occasionally produce a broken personality. On the other hand, the autobiographer gives a coherent shape by viewing his past in a certain point of his life and by selecting the events and experiences judging with his present wisdom. In this manner the autobiographer can form the narrative on unified whole. Though a charge is often levelled against diaries that they suffers from uncertainties, false starts, momentariness etc., yet they have also their importance. These are a few exceptional diaries such as that of Samuel Pepys, John Evelyn in the

17th century and Anne Frank which arouse greater effect both from the historical and literary point of view.

Generally, the compilation of the letters of an individual does not possess any claim of unity and integrity. The letters like diary-entries, could also be inserted in the autobiography, if they help enhancing the freshness, authenticity and the quality of the work. They can supply us a granary of information about the events, individuals and the spirit of the time along with the fragmentary picture of the feelings, traits and behaviour of the writer. Letters are written with the aim to transmit message or information from an individual to another for some immediate personal or public purpose. The letter-writer is merely concerned with the immediate present more than a diarist, and much more than the autobiographer. However, important the letters might be, they cannot produce the events and personality of the individual self as is produced in an autobiography.

Journals and the philosophical reflections are also different from autobiography. They are more than diary and less than autobiography. They record the events and experiences of the different phases of life in their context of time quite independently. Therefore, it is evident that what a journal kept in youth reports and what the autobiographer presents in the history of his personal narrative are likely to be interestingly different. According to Bottrall, the element of reconsideration differentiates an autobiography from a journal. In philosophical reflection on the self, the focus is mainly drawn upon the changing aspects of a character, the religious faiths and beliefs, and the experiences or conversion. Here we can say in the language of Pascal that :

*"the autobiography is on the contrary historical in its method, and at the same time the representation of the self in and through its relations with the outer world."*<sup>7</sup>

It seems to be a hard nut to crack to draw a differentiating line or rather a clear marker between autobiography and memoir-remembrance. In fact, these three forms of personal writing do not carry any distinguishable form or manner of writing. One cannot show us an autobiography that is not at the same time a memoir or remembrance, and a memoir - remembrance without having the autobiographical appeal or impetus. All supply autobiographical information that is based upon personal experiences, follow chronological order and become reflective.

It is the intention of the author that generally differentiates between autobiography and memoir-remembrance. In a proper autobiography, the author's intention is focused centrally on the self or on the personal things and experiences both his private and public life, his achievements and failures and on his total personality. On the other hand, in memoir and remembrance the attention or focus moves away from the central figure and settles on extra-personal things. The relationship of a man to the inner and outer world may be conceived actively and passively. The distinction between autobiography and memoir-remembrance mainly depends on this consideration.

We can perhaps draw a differentiating line between autobiography and memoir-remembrance with the words that autobiography emphasises on who is remembering and memoir-remembrance on what is remembered.

Therefore, it has become evident that autobiography is only form

distinctive enough among many in which the author speaks of himself. One should not think that the reader could identify an autobiography by its mere title. James Olney tells paradoxically that the first autobiography was written by one W.P. Scargill; it was published in 1834 and was called *'The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister.'*<sup>8</sup> So, it is the question of priority. If we insist upon the word and refuse to call a book autobiography unless its author calls it so, then Olney is correct. St. Augustine and J.J. Rousseau called their works *'confession'*, Montaigne called his works *'Essay'*, Gibbon and Rabindranath Tagore entitled their works as memories and reminiscences respectively.

Again one may raise a query - what is an autobiography then? In an autobiography the movements of an individual life or part there of is reconstructed, self being the focal point though both experience from inner and outer world come into the shaping of the personality. The main business of the author is to narrate his own history. As A.M. Clerk said, *" he is not the mere analyst of his life, but its philosophic historian"*,<sup>9</sup> the autobiographer regroups the reassembled scattered elements to a comprehensive picture, and transforms it into a work of art.

Therefore, it can be said that autobiography is the shaping of the past with a certain pattern and with a compact story of the life. The autobiography is not superficial repetition of the bygone days of the writer. What we find here is the present wisdom of the writer, which comes from a particular standpoint of his own. In fact, it is a metaphor of the self. We seek to find in autobiography the way how experience of an individual life is transformed into literature.

Autobiography is also a moment of life that it recounts the meaning dug out of 'life' *not merely as course of years but as the spirit, or the act of consciousness, or transcendent reality, or a personality, character and a certain mode of living.*<sup>10</sup>

The quality of spirit of the author makes an artistic and reliable autobiography. The autobiographer has to discriminate and select from the super abundant store house of material ; the chamber of memory, and has to shuttle backward and forward from past to present in order to give the work a coherent and significant pattern. But in the process of discrimination and selection, we need to distinguish sharply between omission and falsification. An autobiographer perhaps has the right of omission more than a biographer. *"The autobiographer, in sum, knows more but tells less, on the whole, than the biographer - granted that no biographer could attempt, much less achieve... The autobiographer regenerates his materials even as he uses them."*<sup>11</sup>

One important thing regarding omission is that one cannot discard the whole hum-drum of everyday happenings as they are not always necessarily trivial and unimportant. Such mundane events or experiences can draw attention towards the unfolding of the inner life or of the personality of the subject. The example of the autobiographies of M.K. Gandhi and Bertrand Russell are sufficient to prove this view. Therefore, the writers are to be precise in omitting events.

To consider the problem of life in autobiography, it is very difficult and elusive. This difficult feat or unique aspect of autobiography demands extra-ordinary insight and an objective approach which no ordinary writer



can possess. We can only expect genuine autobiography from such artists who possess exceptional self-knowledge and integrity and who is actually aware of his own experience as an individual capable of reflecting the nature of his actions within the framework of his total experience. Nicolson and Kendall, therefore, quote Cowley in their respective works thus :

***"It is a hard and nice subject for a man to write of himself, it grates his own heart to say anything of disparagement, and the reader's ears to hear anything of praise for him."***

Endless objections flow out from the critics regarding the dependence of the autobiography upon memory. It is the memory and imagination that shapes the creative art. So, if autobiography is a 'work of art' then what is the objection in memory in playing the role of a great artist? Moreover, the great store house of memories, whether it plays hide and seek, or not, does not make an autobiography itself ; but they constitute the autobiographical consciousness.

The purpose of reading an autobiography is to satisfy our need for verifying, a human being's experience of reality. Readers get satisfied when they strongly feel that the book is true to the experience of the author. ***"In autobiography, unlike fiction, we expect the work to embody even in its illusion, the truth of the life of the writer."***<sup>12</sup>

One should not demand a scientific truth in an autobiography. Autobiography can provide us historical, or factual, and above all, also psychological and poetic truth. In the process of omissions and commissions or distortions, the autobiographers unintentionally damage

the historical and psychological truth of autobiography; but it may not damage the true value of the work. Truth of fact and truth of feeling coincide in the subconscious mind of the author and both types of truth get admissions in the body of the book. The autobiographer is expected to present the verifiable facts of the author's life.

But the main concern of the autobiographer is his private inner life which does not necessarily carry any factual evidence. It is true that recollection or memory is inadequate and at the same time creative. Augustine also remembered that the act of remembering is a process of the conscious mind and will, and it is disassociated from the feeling of the original experience.

But the notable point here is that it is fascinating to watch what the man, at least, can remember of his past and how he can reconstruct the spirit of his life or personality convincingly in his personal narrative.

Autobiography is not primarily written for private reasons. The readers read autobiography mainly to satisfy their curiosity to know other people intimately. We feel an inclination to be inspired and instructed by the experiences of those heroes who have created history; and autobiography offers us the ventilation to fulfil it. In such a case, if the autobiographer attempts at a calculated intention to appear admirable or important, damage may be done to the autobiographical truth. Too much reticence or vain gloriousness is bound to affect the quality of autobiography. Thus the autobiographer may be 'the witness and judge' of his personal narrative.

There is still another aspect to touch in respect of style and language. Autobiography is not simply a portrait of a life but also a narrative covering

a temporal sequence which seems to offer the contour of life. This can be achieved through the style of the autobiographer. When Rousseau proclaims in his *Confessions* :

*" I am not made like any the those I have seen : I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. "* <sup>13</sup>

We find this style of language unfolding its qualities.

Moreover, it is an art of writing (graphie) - the third element of autobiographer that determines the past of the narrative as a work of art. It is the act or art of writing that gives the complexity intertwined and entangled self and life a certain form or a particular shape and image. This style of writing, in the end, relegates a seemingly completed entity of the self or life in the form of an art. Thus the style plays a pivotal role in autobiography.

After all these considerations, one major aspect still escapes our attention. It is the impact of time and society upon the autobiography and vice-versa. It is a well-known fact that behind every book, there is an author and behind every author there is an age and a society.

Every autobiographer, as a social being, has an impact, deeper or lighter on his society and time spirit. Time and society exercise their influence on every individual this way or that way. There is no doubt then, however great or small an autobiographer may be, he is not an isolated being from any society or time. An autobiographer has to become serious in mirroring the actions and reactions of time and society on the self or life of the person; and at the same time, the impact and influence of the self or

personality, on time and society. At the end, it may be said that autobiographies differ from one another as the experiences of every man differ from those of another, and the expressions of such experiences also differs according to the receptive quality of mind of the autobiographer and his ability to unburden in the medium of language. And above all, whether it becomes an 'artistic' reproduction of life or not, the autobiography has to present the man of flesh and blood, his personality and character or the background of his time and society truthfully in order to achieve literariness. In fact, it must be a confessional and real presentation of the particular golden past.