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A Life in Writing: An Analysis of the Gaps and Silences in the Autobiographies of a Marginalized Woman

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Abstract:

*The writing of lives has seen an unceasing charm from time immemorial among a gamut of people ranging from scholars, intelligentsia, scientists, writers as well as the common man. The human species have a tendency to narrate stories. As a matter of fact, it is a dexterous method of transmitting valuable knowledge to mankind making them quite essential for survival. Autobiographical chronicles that determine who one is with reference to time, place and in relation to others have to abound in frameworks that are not only explanatory but also evaluative. Such life-texts interlink occurrences, people and places inspired by intentions, motivations as well as the different psychological states. However, a life-text could be pregnant with gaps of time, memory and perspective and it is up to the readers to fill in the elisions, interpreting them according to his or her viewpoint. It is the skill of the scholar which enables him to excavate the implicitly underlying chasm. In the case of biographies, there could be conflicting perspectives and knowledge gaps. The biographer may incorporate fictional elements into the real story just to fill in these gaps. The fallout of this being that the authenticity of the biography may become questionable. In the case of translated versions of life writings, the role of the translators plays a very vital role in determining whether the end product is one with or without gaps. In some cases, the intrusion of political and commercial aspects into life narratives raises a question as to whether gaps and omissions in the life-text have been deliberately assimilated. The publication of two versions of the autobiography of Nalini Jameela, *Oru Laingikattozhilaliyude Athmakatha (The Autobiography of a Sex Worker)* and *Njan, Oru Laingikattozhilali (I, A Sex Worker)*, is a case in point.*

Keywords: *Autobiography, authenticity, authority, power, Foucault*

The quintessence of writing lives lies in the depiction of the individual self. The genre in itself, a ubiquitous and ancient practice, has assumed a new hermeneutic dimension in the postmodern era. The term life writing achieved a wide currency in the 1980s and is gaining momentum thereafter. The scope of life writing is quite large and may comprise of written forms like autobiography and biography. However, life writing also shelters under its umbrella, entries on life stories which have their origin outside of the written form including but not limited to testimony, reminiscence, personal narrative, visual arts, photography, film, and oral history.

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Autobiography, in its simplest form, is the story of the writer's life. However, it is not merely a simple reportage of events. There are four additional aspects that go into writing it. In the words of Jolly, the first feature is that autobiography has a psychological and philosophical dimension that requires its writer to balance the deeds of an active public self with the thoughts of a contemplative private one. Secondly, it requires its author to have an awareness of the audience. Because the autobiographer does not simply recount life's events, but offers the reader a window into the thoughts about, motives for, and reactions to the events described, the autobiographer's account differs distinctly from the purely private record of experience found in a diary or journal. The third characteristic of an autobiography is that it has a clear formal convention. Most typically, these conventions are the epic ones of hero (its subject-matter) and journey (toward adulthood, self-awareness, spiritual growth, personal wholeness), but many autobiographies also employ several additional formal devices outlined by Albert E. Stone in his study of the genre. In the words of Albert E. Stone, as quoted in the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*,

narration with its characteristics of pace and momentum; metaphors of self through which verbal patterns and bridges are constructed from narrative details; description, reflection, argument, and meditation; and other common literary features, including characterization, dialogue, dramatic scenes, and synecdoche (2001: 75).

Lastly, according to Jolly, autobiography is a literary form defined less by genre than by didactic intent.

In spite of the fact that the term autobiography entered into the English lexicon only in 1797, the genre was in vogue from writers of classical antiquity. It was St. Augustine, with his *Confessions*, who produced the first full length autobiography. Even though he narrates a personal story, he presents himself as a servant of God. Historical evidence corroborates that the first instance of independent selfhood is recorded during the Renaissance period. With the development of secular rationalism, there was a shift in the focus of representation of the individual self in autobiography, a fine example being Montaigne's *Essais*. Depicting the self as exemplum in early autobiographies and as individuals in later ones is rather a very superficial progression in tracing the evolution of autobiography. However, a more appropriate and sagacious method in assessing the evolution will be to assert that the genre has succeeded in incorporating the changing cultural conception of the self. Customarily the multitude believed that narratives are true, reliable, and helpful and that the author's experience could provide them with valuable and authentic insights. But,

In the modern era, however, this implicit contract between autobiographer and reader - as well as the philosophical and formal dimensions of the genre - has been challenged and changed by increasing skepticism about both the possibility of a cohesive self and the ability either to know or to tell the "truth" about such a self (Jolly 2001: 75).

It is at this juncture that this discussion attempts to inquire as to whether autobiography, a sub-genre of life writing, projects the true picture of one's self or whether the gaps and omissions contained therein, deliberate or otherwise, throws up a distorted picture.

In earlier autobiographies, the self appears as doubly present, as narrator and protagonist. This representation of the self is attacked by multiple theoretical challenges of the twentieth century like Post Structuralism and Post Modernism. The post structuralist exponents are of the view that individuals are not self-governing entities but are, in fact, products of cultural codes and semiotic systems. There was a rise of critical interest in autobiography in the 1980s and 1990s which led to an attempt to discuss autobiographical narratives, "as an act of creation rather than mere transcription of the past" (Smith and Watson 2001: 128). Revelation of agency or the desire for agency are quite effectually done through autobiographies because they effectively expose, how implications are created for people, how people create denotations for themselves and how people involve the world around them. However, these kinds of agencies and the metaphysical conceptions of self-presence, authority, authenticity and truth get dissolved and dismantled by Derridean deconstruction, Barthesian semiotics and Foucauldian analysis of the discursive regimes of power. Derrida argues that subjectivity is a cultural construct. Further, according to him, in reality, the notion of a fixed centre is nonexistent and is only a structure of power thrust upon by institutions of society. Barthes opines that language speaks and acts through writers and according to Foucault, it is the outcome of power relations in the society which constitutes the self. In the light of these theories, it becomes exceedingly difficult to perceive autobiography as referential and verifiably authoritative and it cannot be construed as an abstraction of a pre-existent, unified and unique self but as a provisional and contingent one.

In order to determine whether lacunae are present in an autobiography, the catechism of authenticity and authority are to be examined. Authenticity refers to the association between the text and its original source. It is connected with how the writing portrays or negotiates identity. "It is perhaps marginal cases - forged, anonymous, pseudonymous, and collaborative autobiography - that best illuminates the nature of autobiographical authenticity" (Jolly 2001: 72). Collaborative autobiography is the most complicated of all life narratives and it even becomes problematic in situations where oral transmission of the narrative takes place. The most distinctive feature that makes up this genre is that the unique identity of the author cum narrator cum subject is disrupted.

Authenticity must be considered to be the function of the faithfulness of the text to its sources. But the sources are not available for inspection. When they are not, authenticity becomes a function of successful simulation of a convincing voice.

That is, it is at best a rhetorical effect, at worst an illusion (ibid: 73).

There is relatively less fortuity of fabrication and manipulation when the associates belong to the same socio-economic and cultural strata of society and the power relation between them is more or less equal.

A sex worker, activist and film maker, Nalini Jameela shoots into fame with the publication of her first book *Oru Laingikattozhilaliyude Athmakatha (The Autobiography of a Sex Worker)*. It narrates the life of an ordinary Indian woman who happens to choose the vocation of sex work. I. Gopinath, a freelance journalist, is entrusted with the task of converting a voiced narration into a syntactic form. He acquires the relevant information by interviewing her more than twelve times and recording her speech resulting in the book getting published in June 2005. But Nalini Jameela is dissatisfied with the content of this version and decides to write her story again, this time by herself. Hence, the second version titled *Njan, Oru Laingikattozhilali (I, A Sex Worker)* published in December 2005.

A repetitive issue is the degree of independence and control the autobiographers have over their works especially in cases where an oral narration is involved. Lejeune questions whether,

The life "belongs" to the one who lives it or the one who writes it. Profoundly problematizing the notion of authorship,

Lejeune notes how "a person's life can appear through someone else's narrative" in collaborations such as interview situations where questions are erased and the oral stories of those who do not write recorded (Smith and Watson 2001:144).

The first version begins by giving a detailed account of the character of Nalini's father. He is depicted as a very cruel and arrogant man who does not care for the family. Outwardly he follows the ideals of the communists, whereas inside the house he is an autocrat. His wife, Nalini's mother, is very scared of him and is apprehensive to even come to the verandah if her husband and son are sitting there. The second version of the autobiography opens with Jameela's thirst for education. Her father is portrayed as an obedient servant of his brother's wife, Jameela's valiamma, who plays the role of the leader in the family. Jameela says that, her father prefers to discuss all matters with valiamma rather than her mother.

In the first version, the collaborator may purposefully be depicting the cruelty of her father in a detailed manner in order to conform to the codes of feminist writing and to highlight how women suffer under the patriarchal regime. In the second case, the cruelty of the father is not highlighted. This is a gap which needs deliberation.

Remarks on sensitive issues like the Suryanelli rape case and the ice cream parlour sex scandal seen in the chapter “Kampaniveedum Manukkayum” of the first version, are absent in the second version. Can this be interpreted as an attempt by the collaborator to exhibit his knowledge on contemporary issues, at the cost of the authenticity of the first version or is it a case of deliberate omission in the second version.

The collaborator’s voice is explicit in the chapter “Kannukali Brokermar”, where he comes down heavily on the present socio political situation and criticizes by remarking unequivocally that on the one hand, there is an increase in police raids to curb immoral activities, whereas on the other, there is a simultaneous increase in illegal women trafficking, rape of small children and dead bodies, thereby attacking moral policing.

In “Athruptharaya Bharthakanmar”, one of the chapters in the first version, he severely censures the so called progressive thinkers who are actually deceivers. In the chapter “Ammu”, he touches upon another socio-political issue, and mentions that Ammu and Usha, both sex workers, have participated in the march in Delhi supporting the cause of Narmada Bachao Andolan. The incident, wherein Usha, when in Delhi, is accused of stealing the purse of another lady, finds its place only in the first version and not in the second. A scene from the film *Sthithi* shows NGO lady officers and teachers, participating in the strike to voice their protest against globalization and the existent government policies, being arrested and put in the jail. When the husbands come, they see the sex workers along with their wives which are a matter of insult for the gentlemen. During her trip to Thailand, a fellow passenger tries to molest her. In the first version, this episode sees the collaborator giving a detailed account of it whereas in the second one Jameela only mentions it as a passing remark, giving it the least importance. Santha indulges in flesh trade all through her life, with the sole objective of earning some money to give a better life for her daughter, only to be shunned in the end by the same girl whom she loved the most. Santha is murdered for her only possession, a gold chain. This tragic incident finds a place only in the second version of the autobiography. Can these instances be interpreted as cases of the collaborator’s intervention into the narrative?

In autobiographical narratives there could be aspects which are not conveyed or said. The very denotation of narrating experiences presupposes that there is an editing and selecting method to which the narration has been subjected to, thereby making known only some of the perspectives. The corollary being that there are some aspects which are silenced. As Jeanne Braham opines,

We see the past . . . in something of the same way we see a Henry Moore sculpture. The ‘holes’ define the ‘shape.’ What is left repressed, or what cannot be uttered, is often as significant to the whole shape of the life as what is said” (Braham 1995: 45).

Silence, can be intentional or unintentional. It may be meaningful. Silences, which may be caused by deliberate exclusions or lost memories form a part of life narratives. Perspectives which are disputatious invariably are cloaked in silence. Power play is pervasive and is most effective when invisible as Foucault points out. Readers must interpret for themselves the significance of what is left unsaid.

Jameela, in the chapter “Thozhilinte Ganapathikkuri”, of the first version speaks about her first experience as a sex worker. Her first client is an immaculately dressed police officer who is accompanied by Gopalakrishnan, a man who dons a khadi dress and his driver Gopi. After having sex with the police officer, Gopi wants to be with Jameela which she rejects. In the second version of her autobiography, Jameela chooses to be quiescent as far as pronouncing these names are concerned. In the chapter “Kambani veedum Manukkayum”, Jameela explicitly speaks that she had sex with Manukka. But in the second one she opts to remain mum about it. A perusal of both these versions leaves the reader wondering whether these are cases of deliberate silences.

Authority which also signifies honesty/veracity refers to the association of a text with the extra textual world. The concern of truth of an autobiography is posed by the first and second wave generation of critics. The bios of the autobiographer is dealt with by the former category of critics. Questions like that of identity, self-definition, self-deception etc. are beyond the scope of these experts. On the other hand, the era of the second wave generation of critics see an influence of Marxian notion of class consciousness, Freud and Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories of self and identity in explaining the concept of self. Philippe Lejeune who belongs to the third wave generation, in his, *The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write*, critically analyses, “whose life is being narrated, whether the life experienced by the person or who writes it” (Smith and Watson 2001: 144).

Autobiography is not based on fact-finding and does not have any imaginary characters but rather its narrative authority stems from personal experience, memory and subjectivity. Here arises the question of reliability since the failure of even a part of the narrator’s/collaborator’s memory could result in lapses. Such lapses are quite evident in the autobiographies of Nalini Jameela. A close analysis of the two versions brings to light the differences in them. There is a variation in the ordering of events. In the first version the following sequence of events takes place. Jameela goes to Calicut by bus. She gets down and stands in the bus stand. After sometime a boy comes and takes her to Maharani Lodge, where she meets a client Rajan. But in the second version, Rajan is a broker who comes to her while she was sitting in the park, after reaching Calicut, and takes her to the Maharani Lodge. Another instance where differences between the two versions can be seen pertains to her marriage with Subramanian. In the first version, after the marriage of her brother she has to leave her house as a result of the conflict with her father for supporting her brother’s marriage who married a lady elder to him against the wishes of his father. Upon leaving her house, she directly goes to the house of Subramanian and starts living with him. However, in the second version, she goes to meet one Chandran and upon failing to meet him, is standing in a confused state, when Subramanian approaches her and tells her to come to his house and mentions that she can meet Chandran on another day. She goes with Subramanian to his house first and later to his uncle’s house. She stays there for one week and by that time rumours spread that she is the wife of Subramanian. These inconsistencies appearing in the two versions explicitly question the truth and authority of the autobiography and the reliability of the narrative.

The ultimate objective of any autobiography is to communicate a circumstantial account of the life of the protagonist to the reader. However, the life-text could be pregnant with gaps of time, memory and perspective and it is up to the readers to fill in the elisions,

interpreting them according to his or her viewpoint. It is the skill of the scholar which enables him to excavate the implicitly underlying chasm. In the case of autobiographies, there could be conflicting perspectives and knowledge gaps. The autobiographer may incorporate fictional elements into the real story just to fill in these gaps. The fallout of this being that the authenticity of the autobiography may become questionable. In the case of collaborated versions of life writings, the role of the collaborator plays a very vital role in determining whether the end product is one with or without gaps. In some cases, the intrusion of political and commercial aspects into life narratives raises a question as to whether gaps and omissions in the life-text have been deliberately assimilated.

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