

Baby Haldar's *A Life Less Ordinary: A Saga of Marginalization*

Dr. Shivani Vashist

Professor, Department of English, MRIIRS

Received: 14 April 2020 Revised and Accepted: 8 August 2020

At the beginning of the nineteenth century autobiography was considered a subtype of biography and even in good libraries was placed in the secluded regiments of history. Autobiography in the twentieth century is not just a separate literary genre, but has already established its value as a form of writing close to life and real experience. Autobiography establishes a pioneering transmission for feminist writings and an ultimate tool for expressing the problems and experiences of women. Women choose autobiography to express respect, appreciation and war of words. Women open up in autobiographies about their personal lives.

Autobiographies, almost by definition, have the authority of individual personal experiences asserting the unique knowledge of that single subject – the self – that of a private public that is displayed in the print. Woman well thought of as a pillar of culture is paradoxically locked in partnership fortifications and limited to custom. The fundamental perspectives of social contact were unlocked for women by means of autobiographical genres, therefore selected writers looked at the forefront from a transformed point of view and used autobiographies to be rightly heard through the sensibilities and awareness of women's work.

As countries split into religion and faith, women became more victims of every disaster, which in India is more so as there are several religions accompanied by religious prejudices and the people of the provinces are concerned with wiping one another or demolishing themselves on the altar of suffering. Rosalind Miles has aptly commented that, "The task of interpretation of women's experience cannot be left to male writers alone, however sympathetic they may be. The female perspective expressed through women's writing of all kinds, is more than a valuable corrective to an all-male view of all universe" (Preface x)

A modern style of writing, well provided for, compelling and gallant, a re-evaluation of the perceptions of women in the patriarchy and a violation of the patriarchal values, the characters of Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Mrinal Pande, Shobhaa De and Taslima Nasrin came to the literary stage in the 20th century. Each writer symbolizes her/his collective personality and individual self in society. Women are perpetrators of the values of patriarchal culture, but they battle for their lives within it through the transcendence of gender roles as respectable people and move beyond the feminine search for legitimacy and self-affirmation of oppressive powers. Helen Cixous says: Woman must write herself, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history by her own movement (245).

Looking at literary history, we realize that autobiography studies are comparatively a new tendency, although life history is as old as other literary genres. The first autobiography of an Indian woman is believed to be an autobiography of a woman from a village named Ramdia in rural Bengal, written in 1865. In a society controlled by fierce men, a belief was widely held that women can not read and write. The biography of Rassundari Devi was the first proof that women can learn how to read and write. But autobiographies of women lack a strong voice until the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. They could only talk about family or religion. However, autobiographies of women became a regular feature in the literary scenario of the nation in the twentieth century. Autobiographies from Sunity Deves's *The Autobiography of a Queen* (1921) to Padma Desai's *Breaking Out* (2012) depict woman's inner life from a male's perspective. Autobiographers such as Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Shobhaa De, Dilip Tiwana, Sharanjeet Shan and Mrinal Pande have been present in the later twentieth century and express their innermost emotions very honestly.

One of the main offerings in feminist literary research was to subvert canonical versions, to reconstruct legends through code, to alert society of the requests of women as well as to provide a way of expressing personality. Previous women were thought to be a symbol of self-sacrifice and suffering. Women auto-biographers may only be able to write about relations or religious belief, given the lack of a commanding voice to articulate until the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. But in the later 20th century, a sweeping revolution took shape with autobiographies of Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Mrinal Pande and Shobhaa De and Taslima Nasrin in Bangladesh, which gallantly expressed the social inhibitions and civilizing taboos laid down by social order.

Women are the injured party of the dormant culture dominated by men. Women's issues remain unaddressed. In opposition to the society, the women autobiographers find themselves independent. They were rational, courageous, debonair in their writing techniques. Such people were casualties of the values of patriarchal culture, and they aspire to become dignified individuals. Many women's literary works have expressed their literary genius. Various researchers studied their autobiographies.

Baby Halder is a Delhi based domestic servant turned author whose initial life was full of trials and tribulations since the very beginning. She had a traumatic childhood, as she was abandoned by her mother at the age of four, ill-treated by her father and step-mother, was married off unlawfully at the age of twelve and became a mother at thirteen. Her husband exploited her physically and mentally, beat her up mercilessly, suspected her throughout and did not support her either financially or emotionally. He also shunned responsibility towards his children and made life horrible for Baby. Unable to bear her husband's atrocities any more, she decided to raise her children on her own and showed tremendous courage in leaving her oppressive husband and heading off to Delhi. Alone in a metropolitan city, and three children dependent on her, with little education to her credit, she took to working as domestic help in different households where too she faced an oppressive environment. Her life was a long tale of exploitation and suffering until she met Prof. Prabodh Kumar in Gurgaon (now Gurugram), the grandson of the famous Hindi writer, Munshi Premchand, in whose house she got full time employment. Prabodh Kumar was a source of inspiration for her. He gave her a congenial environment to work. As he had a literary bent of mind, he explored her interest in reading and was surprised to hear from her names like Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nasrul Islam, Sharatchandra, Satyendra Nath Dutt and Sukumar Rai. As he discovered her interest in books, he correlated her keenness to talk about her "self" with her ability to write and encouraged her to speak about her "self". He gave her a notebook and pen and asserted, "Write something in this notebook. If you want, you can write your life story in this. Whatever has happened in your life ever since you can remember and you became aware of yourself" (Halder 153). Initially, Baby was reluctant and wondered if she "will be able to write or not" (Halder 153). She started writing in bits and parts progressing a little every night, simultaneously reading Taslima Nasreen's *Amar Maybela*. She wrote in fragments in Bengali, gaining confidence in the process of writing and shared her writing with Prabodh Kumar, who read it, edited it and even translated it into Hindi with the help of his Bengali acquaintances. His Hindi translation of Baby's memoir was first published in Bengal in 2002 under the title *Aalo Andhari*. The original writing, *Aalo Andhari*, written in Bengali was published in 2004. Soon the English version, *A Life Less Ordinary*, translated by Urvashi Butalia, was published in 2006. This book has been variedly compared by critics to Anne Frank's *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947), Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996) and Taslima Nasreen's *My Girlhood* (1998). Baby Halder's second book, *Eshast Rupantar*, which is a sequel to her first book, *A Life Less Ordinary* was published in Bengali in 2010. The book illustrates her journey of battleships, her sufferings and her survival to ultimately attaining peace of mind. Her third book, *Ghare Fera Path*, which reflects on how through her writing she has been successful in changing society's perception about her, was also published in Bengali in 2014.

Self-narration, in most situations, is closer to the facts as it is a tale of the circumstances which colored and affected the subject's existence. Retrospection is the standard approach employed to compose a life narrative, with Baby Halder employing a particular strategy because she was directly related to her trauma and could quickly refer to her experience. Her choice to write about her "self" did not unexpectedly transform her into a novelist. It was possible only with Prabodh Kumar's relentless assistance, who said to her, "Baby, only focus on reading and writing ... for now, only leaving things as they are" (Halder 161). She gained more faith when once she heard that people from the literary community who read her manuscripts likened her to Ashapura Devi and Anne Frank (Halder 166). She sensed the fire within her and kept composing.

Finally, after knowing between her dormant forces and the perceptions of her suppressed self she seeks a solution to all her dilemmas. Brubaker et al. also pointed out quite aptly, "We are constructing autobiographies to make sense of our own creation as we create connections between who we are and what we encounter (Brubaker 106). Baby Halder explains her upbringing and her life's peak in her autobiography. She wrote it when she was just thirty, a period that could be used as a creation of her 'person' personality. This presents her creation from a subordinate identity to a girl who crosses all boundaries and makes space for herself to deal with the circumstances.

The culture in which an autobiographical writing is created is strongly informed by it. Halder did not publish in void either. She has illustrated inequality of women in general by her pain. She talks about the abuse of her mother by her father and then abandoning her children. In the very second paragraph of her autobiography, she challenges her mother's helplessness, as she can't survive. She reads, "My dreaming of getting a career, but that meant leaving the house she never had ... Another one of her worries was what might people say? But thinking about what people will say doesn't help to fill an empty stomach, does it". (Halder 2)

Most of the book details her miserable marriage and her husband's physical and emotional violence. She did not at that point realize the importance of marriage and was slaughtered everyday. She says, "Baby wonders how she spent that day of sorrow in such merriment. Little did Baby know that this was the beginning of her days of grief and pain" (Halder 36).

Pramod K. Nayar correctly states that "the first acknowledgment of their own oppressed subjectivity stems from the actual discomfort felt by their bodies" (Nayar 30). At the age of thirteen, baby suffered from domestic violence, beatings and mental harassment by her parents. She suffered much of this peacefully, while there was a hidden storm of revolt inside her. She was shocked when she learnt about her sister's murder by her brother-in-law and the event greatly convinced her that if her sister had repressed her lover, she would not have faced the fate. This increased her ability to be alone. They challenge the norms of the culture, which often oppressed women, whether it is her mother, not helped by her husband, her son, who was abused violently and then strangled to death by her husband, her neighbor, Shashti and her sisters who were seen for quitting their husbands on account of abuse. While she was physically poor, she always questioned her husband why she was always being, "What have I done to be beaten like this?" (Halder 88).

Her brave decision to quit a miserable marriage with three babies, with whom she relocated to Delhi and started to function as a householder, shows her resistance to the atrocities meted out to her. In fact, some of her male colleagues also tried to molest her, which she again opposed. After years of oppression by her bosses, Baby eventually decided to oppose this social system where people from lower castes and strata can only be treated as artifacts over which patriarchal dominance can be wielded in all its facets. Only when she got a job at Professor Prabodh Kumar's home, who encouraged her to start searching for her identification on paper, did she begin to explore her roots.

In her autobiography, Baby presents the rigid confines of the society which succumb people especially women. At the tender age of 12, Baby is married off to a man who is just 14 years old. She explains quite specifically the threats she suffered in her husband's possession, from being pulled by her hair to being hit with a hammer. She often describes occasions in which her spouse would not grant her the right to walk around because of envy. Baby is cautioned not to visit a neighbor, particularly because she is estranged from her husband. Over the years in Indian societies, the women are marginalized by the patriarchal domination. The social framework is so oppressive that most of the time, women give in to their fate for the sake of family or other social reasons. Baby Halder, a victim of the socio-cultural circumstances also tried to adjust and reconcile to her fate. She waited for years hanging between her parental home and her husband's to gain her individual identity and some space. She struggled for independence, respect and love.

Baby Halder ultimately existed in the society as an individual with her own identity. The identity that was shaped by the various incidents that left a deep impression on her mind and personality. She led an ordinary life, being marginalized at multiple levels, until she took cognizance of her potential to write about her 'self', critically investigating the incidents of her life, taking responsibility of her life changing decisions and existing to be independent. She showed indomitable courage, took responsibility of her children, and suggested ways to other women to questions exploitative home and work environment. Her life journey gives a strong message to all women to fight for their independence and recognize their self-worth.

REFERENCES

1. Baby Haldar. *A Life Less Ordinary*. Trans. Urvashi Butalia, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2006.
2. Brubaker, J.R., Mansour, E., and Pasupathi M. *Developing a Life Story: Constructing Relations between Self and Experience in Autobiographical Narratives*, U.S.A: University of Utah, 2007
3. Nayar, Pramod K. *Trauma, Testimony and Human Rights: Women's Atrocity Narratives from Postcolonial India*. *South Asian Review*. 29(1). 2008.
4. Cixous, Helen. "The Laugh of Medusa." *New French Feminisms*. Eds. Elaine Marks and Isabella de Coutrivon, Brighton: Harvester, 1975. Print.
5. Miles, Rosalind. *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of Novel*, 1987; London: Routledge, 1990. Print.