

**Negotiating the Genre of Autobiography:  
A Study of Select Indian Literary Texts**

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In this paper I would like to explore the challenge that posed while reading and teaching the three texts. They are Kamala Das' *My Story* (1976), claimed to be an autobiography but readers and critics have questioned it; Bama's *Karukku* (2000) has been taught as text in literature departments and question her claims as she does not use her name as narrator; and P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* (2006) is not claimed as autobiography but an autobiographical text. However, she reveals the characters, intentions and associations as an autobiographer does. One is being from the mainstream literature and other two are being from the marginalized narratives.

If one were to go back to what consists of autobiography, one can think of (limited) life story, memoirs, diary entries, letters, "events", anecdotes, facts but only facts etc. R. Raphael talking about writing an autobiography, she says:

It must be noted that not all can write autobiographies. Before writing his or her 'story', the autobiographer must have lived his or her life *fully*. Every human being leads a twofold existence; the inner or subjective world of meditation, introspection, beliefs, and convictions, and the external or objective life of adventures structured in a chronological or historical order. A genuine autobiography should be much more than a book of deeds of externalized adventures; it must also explore the world of inner

consciousness.... This means that the autobiographer must have lived his life according to certain noble principles and ideals. The struggles and tribulations that such a person encounters in upholding these principles and the joy and satisfaction connected with their achievements alone can make the autobiographer's life worth reading. The autobiographer must, therefore, live not only his or her private life, but also that of his or her age. (p. 129)

To my knowledge autobiography genre had started from African-American slave narratives such as Fredrick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901), W. B. Debois' *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940), Richard Wright's semi-autobiographical work entitled *Black Boy* (1945), Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* (1965), Malcom X' *The Autobiography of Malcom X* (1965), Maya Angelou *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and others. We have many autobiographies from mainstream literature in India such as Mahatma Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth* (1927) Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India* (1946). We do have autobiographies from marginalized literature such as Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003), Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003), Omprakash Valmiki's *Jhootan*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2009) and others.

While teaching the three texts such as Kamala Das' *My Story*, Bama's *Karukku* which have been claimed as autobiographies by the authors themselves and various academic critics, on the one hand, the question that arises is: in what way they fit into the genre of autobiography? On the other hand P. Sivakami, a Dalit Writer who was an IAS officer and left for the writing and for activism, wrote a novel entitled *The Grip of Change* though

Sivakami did not claim it as an autobiography but as fiction; why cannot we consider this as autobiography as the novelist herself writes the Part II as the intentions of the characters?

Let me talk about Kamala Das' *My Story* which is from mainstream literature. It is considered as an autobiography which has many fictional elements. There is a big debate whether the autobiography should consist of facts or fiction. However much one claims that one has used only facts still there will be an element of fiction. The act of memory which is part of fact by translating it into the writing it has an inherent fiction. Critics have looked at this text as novel or autobiography. The controversy goes on even today about this text. One of the critics says: "Apart from her 'sex-story' there is nothing enduring and endearing about Kamala Das's *Story*." (Raphael *Indian*: 131) Raphael further adds that "*My Story* is written as if it were a novel" (p. 133) and "the book as a whole lacks art and proportion" (p.132). The last adverse remark that Raphael makes about Das' autobiography is that "it is my firm belief that Kamal narrates her *Story* with a view to capture the young" (p.135). Whether you read Kamala Das' poetry or her autobiography or her short stories, one gets to know the content is same in the three genres. She has written one novel entitled *Alphabet of Lust* (1977) and one short story collection entitled *Padmavati, the Harlot and other Stories* (1992).

Coming to the next text Bama's *Karukku* which has been one of the best and short autobiographies from Dalit literature apart from her two novels such as *Sangati* (2005) and *Vanmam* (2011); one short story collection entitled *Harum Scarum Saar and Other Stories* (2007). She uses the first person narrative and her focus is not so much on her story rather it is the story of her Dalit community which Sharan Kumar Limbale calls "collective responsibility" and "social responsibility" (Limbale *Towards* 2004). My concern is that whether it is considered as an autobiography. If so, in what way does it qualify as an

autobiography? Critics have looked at this work as a “Testimony” (Nayar 2004). Is it a testimony when she herself has not claimed it as her autobiography? What Bama claims herself in her preface is that “events that occurred during many stages of my life” (p. xiii) but mind you she does not say her life. Can events be a life story? There are elements of memory, facts, experiences, caste oppression and discrimination which qualify to be an autobiography. In the introduction to the book the translator Lakshmi Holmstorm says:

The events of Bama’s life are not arranged according to a simple, linear, or chronological order, as with most autobiographies, but rather, reflected upon in different ways, repeated from different perspectives, grouped under different themes, for example, Work, Games, and Recreation, Education, Belief etc. (Bama *Karukku* VII)

The question one has to ask is: how much of her life is part of her autobiography? Can we have her sequel of *Karukku* in the next book? It is possible to have later life as additional information. Is she willing to write additional information as a living writer? Maya Angelou’s autobiography *I Know* is up to an age of seventeen who has been raped by a white male. She is describing her agony in that book. Can we consider that as a life story/autobiography? Can we have sequel of her *I Know*?

Coming to my last text P. Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change* has challenged literary theory of autobiography by writing the explanation of her characters in Part II of her novel. In the name of character called Gowri who represents the novelist herself, deconstructs the text by revealing her intentions of the characters. In Part II the novelist writes: “The novelist and the character in the novel, Gowri, must be one and the same person” (Sivakami 2006: 134).

As a writer she has every right to do what she wants to do. She need not bother about the literary theory. As a literary critic we have to worry about the text and its placement in the genres. She talks about her father in the novel who has been shrewd politician but in his real life he was very meek, timid, submissive, apprehensive person. He was humiliated by the Tahsildar but never protested against. I would like to substantiate by quoting novelist words for you:

When her father was elected a member of the legislative assembly in the first general elections, the tahsildar had not offered him a seat when he had entered the man's office. The tahsildar had also insulted her father in the manner in which he had addressed him. After her father left, the tahsildar had apparently grumbled about being forced to treat a Parayan as an equal. Her father had come home, locked himself in a room and wept. (Sivakami 2006: 140)

She was one of the twelve children in her real life whereas in novel she has been the second and last. It is interesting to see another passage where Sivakami comments on Mahatma Gandhi and his autobiography. She says:

Could a writer avoid subjective conclusions? A careful reading can easily identify the subjective quality with the just the changing notations. The character Gowri in the novel, the *Grip of Change*, appeared too good to be true; or else, she had not been drawn with sufficient. Gandhi had made an attempt at self-analysis in his book *My Experiments with Truth* after his image as a mahatma had been already consolidated. He had restricted his self-analysis to his private life, not examining his public life and political views, which in turn had concerned many lives. Was it because he feared that his image as a mahatma might be shattered? (Sivakami 2006: 148)

I have just given a few details so as to show how the writer can create disciplinary or genre difficulties for the literary reader.

I would like to conclude my paper to say that autobiography genre was considered to be one of the genres in literature departments with theoretical background starting from African American literature to Indian mainstream Literature and Dalit literature. As a teacher as well as researcher, I have chosen three texts such as Kamala Das' *My Story*, Bama's *Karukku* and P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* to prove how they have posed challenge to the genre called autobiography. In other words I am not saying other autobiographies have not posed challenge to the genre. For this presentation I have chosen only three texts.

Thanks to Prof. Purushottam for giving me this opportunity to think and share this piece of information with you. I am sure there will be several questions on my brief presentation. Thank you.

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The Dictionary of Literary Biography states that Doubrovsky makes use of "alliteration, assonance, homonyms, paronyms, antonyms, and anagrams" (Serge Doubrovsky 74). The difference between traditional autobiography and the genre of autofiction is that autobiographers are attempting to depict their real life while writers of autofiction are only basing their work upon real experiences. Writers of autofiction are not expected to be as historically accurate as possible as autobiographers are. They are at liberty to select what they want to include or omit. They can simplify or amplify an event.

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