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Development of Women-Centric Autobiographical Criticism: An Overview

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Abstract

The paper explores why autobiography has existed for ages but was not recognised as a unique literary genre until the late 18thcentury.After World War II, the genre of autobiography was finally recognised as a legitimate literary form worthy of in-depth academic study due to the growth of autobiographical criticism. This paper will critically study the genre's development over time with respect to gender, specifically women. It has developed into a crucial arena for trialing critical ideas, such as authorship, Identity, representation, and the variance between reality and fiction. The autobiography is a literary subgenre with its specific location, components, norms, and limits. Since most readers believe that all autobiographies are based on actual life-history facts, this reference element makes the genre more difficult to understand. It will be analysed in the paper through a timeline of how this male-dominated genre shifts its focus equally toward women-oriented work and criticism.

Keywords: Autobiographical Studies, Self, Gender Studies, Literary Criticism, Feminism.

The term "autobiography" originates from the Greek terms "autos," "bios," and "graphe," which, taken individually, mean "self," "life," and "writing," respectively. Autobiography has existed for centuries, although it was not recognised as a separate literary form until the late eighteenth century. Robert Southey, a Romantic poet of the nineteenth century, used the word autobiography in 1809while describing the work of Francisco Vieura, a Portuguese poet. The genre of autobiography has only recently been recognised due to the proliferation of autobiographical criticism as a valid literary form deserving of serious academic investigation after World War II. It has become a significant arena for philosophical debates and critical discussions regarding various concepts, including authorship, individuality, anddepiction encompassing the line between reality and fiction,

Some critics believe this term does not justice to the long-standing history and wide range of life writing genres and practices worldwide. They also say that it has been contrasted

with several different forms of life writing that already exists. So many new words like "auto ethnography," "testimony," and "psychobiography" have been made up in recent years to describe new kinds of writings about the author. At this point, it is essential to tell the difference between an autobiography and other forms of writing about a person's life.

Formerly, the autobiography was considered a sub-genre of biography. There are many ways of presenting one's life story. In the biography, the author writes about other people's lives from an external point of view. In the autobiography, the subject writes about their own life from an externalised and interior point of view. They may use either the second or third person or even pretend to be a member of the community. A biography may be written at any time before or after the subject of the biography has passed away.Death is not mentioned at all in an autobiography. Various biographies of the same person may arise throughout several generations, each with a different interpretation. Nonetheless, autobiographies must be written within the writer's lifetime, even if they are written over a lengthy period.

As a literary genre, autobiography has its place, components, rules, and constraints. This reference feature complicates the genre since most readers assume that all autobiographies are based on real-life and historical facts. The autobiography is a self-portrait in which the author looks into his history's mirror to represent his Identity and existence. It might be considered an affirmation of faith as a conceptual act of one's intended recall for self-discovery or as a process of inquiry leading to the author's self-knowledge and self-disclosure. The narrative mode of the genre poses problems concerning the supposed links between memory and reality, past and present, and experience and representation.

The genesis and evolution of autobiography as an autonomous literary genre are founded in the lengthy, slow process of the gradual shift in literary norms via a variety of labels and assertions, language and thematic expansion, and the evolution of both writers and readers. According to most critical experts, Augustine's *Confessions*, written in 397–400 A.D., is the oldest autobiography. In his book *The Confessions of Augustine*, Lyotardclassifies it as "spiritual" or "religious" since it addresses the struggle of a thinking mind through conversion. Augustine's confessions are religious because he discusses his soul's change. Augustine, according to Roy Pascal, was the first to build "the cohesive history of his soul," as well as "a sense of time...and a perception of an interior flow of energies"(1).

By defining autobiography, critics have sought to draw a line between different genres. In his book Inside Out, E. Stuart Bates defines autobiography as "a narrative of the past of a person by the person concerned" (2). Philippe Lejuene, a foremost autobiography scholar, released his renowned definition of autobiography in 1982 in his book *On Autobiographical Contract*, "A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his existence, focusing on his individual life, particularly on the development of his personality"(193).Autobiography, according to Roy Pascal, is dependent on "the author's seriousness, the seriousness of his personality, and his intention in writing" (60).The concept of author is more challenging to define for Philippe Lejuene, who proposes a legal terminology autobiographical contract is based on "an intention to honour the signature" that "supposes that there is the identity of name between the author (such as he figures, by his

name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about" (12).He argues that both the reader and the author are bound by a contract of identification established by using a proper name, which is one of the defining features of autobiography. Subsequently, In his essay "The Autobiographical Pact,"Lejuene revised his contract concept to accommodate for the fictitious nature of the legitimate name, arguing that the true reader can read in ways other than those offered to him. He also agreed that many published materials do not have a clear contract. Critics have added other requirements, such as that the auto biographer must be responsible for the storyline and structure of the book and that the knowledge and facts must have been, be, or have the potential to be genuine.

So, it is evident that defining autobiography within the boundaries of the genre is complex. In Metaphors of Self, Olney questioned even the feasibility ofthis literary genre. There is no clear, general definition of autobiography among scholars. Linda Anderson, in her book *Autobiography*, states that the necessity to restrict and govern autobiography inside disciplinary bounds has become important due to its pervasive and transitory nature.Several literary critics have used the autobiography definition to establish their academic standing in a rogue and, at times, questionable area.

Since earlier times, writing an autobiography was a privilege for 'great men' who led 'extraordinary life.' In 1907, with the publication of the *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, George Misch was believed to have initiated the first wave of contemporary autobiographical critique. He thinks that the lives of prominent persons who contributed to the creation of this civilization may be used to analyse Western history. He asserts," Among the special relationships in life, the self-assertion of the political will and the author's relationship to his work and the public stand out as common in the history of autobiography(14). According to him, autobiographies are always required to be representative of the era in which they were written within a spectrum that fluctuates depending on how involved the author was in contemporary culture and the context in which they operated. So, this notion of "representative" dominated the earlier autobiography criticism.It was evident that autobiographies by non-public figures such as women, enslaved people, and colonised individuals, whose assertion of human dignity and exercise of civil liberties as social beings were limited and suppressed, were not recognized as the rightful focus of study and were either hushed, repressed, or disregarded.

Similarly, Western critics seldom looked to autobiographical tradition outside of the West. This idea of "representation" has been deconstructed in modern autobiographical critique. Several problems were raised, such as who decides whose life is "representative"? However, For a considerable amount of time, the idea that an autobiography should be an account of the noteworthy life of a prominent person, as proposed by Misch, was considered to be the standard. The publishing of several autobiographies in 1930 rekindled interest in autobiographical critique. However, these reviewers addressed the topic of autobiography solely. They saw autobiography as a subgenre of biography, thinking both to be the life narrative of an individual. Edgar Johnson's description of autobiography as a biography reflects this 1930s perspective. 'It encompasses formal biography and all kinds of

autobiography, such as letters, journals, and reminiscences, because all biographies are ultimately based on some form of autobiography'(27).

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, critics of autobiography focused on the genre's legitimacy: whether autobiography is a legitimate literary form or just a subdivision of history. They also attempted to differentiate autobiography from genres such as letters, diaries, memoirs, biographies, etc. Pascal Roy, in his book *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, separates autobiography from memoir and reminiscences. Memoirs and reminiscences, he claims, are writings about others, but the autobiography is a retroactive, cohesive, and holistic structuring, the imposition of a pattern onto a life. According to James Cox, in contrast to poetry, fiction, and drama, autobiography is not a genre; it is a phrase used to describe a subclass of the utterly perplexing genre of literature we refer to as non-fiction prose.

According to James Olney, the second phase of autobiographical criticism began in 1956 withthe publication of George Gusdorf's influential article "Conditions and Limitations of Autobiography," which established the theoretical discussion concerning autobiography. On the other hand, William Spengeman believes that the second wave started in 1970 when Francis R. Hart's article "Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography" was published. In his opinion, the English-speaking world was mainly unaware of the work done before 1970.In their book titled *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observed that the First-wave critics were fascinated with the bios of the auto biographer; they saw autobiography as a subset of the biography of famous people and took on the role of moral judges by assessing the quality of the life led and the narrator's presentation of the truth. Yet, critics of the second wave introduced fresh perspectives on the crucial notions of self and truth, resulting in new perspectives on the autobiographical topic.

According to the humanist conception of selfhood, the'self' is a consistent and whole identity, and 'I'is a universal transcending sign of "man."In addition to the advent of Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxism, Postmodernism, and, Post-Structuralism, new linguistic findings have also been observed and questioned the concept of unified selfhood, eroding confidence in a coherent self and the truth of self-narrating. 'Self' began to be seen as a symbolic construct formed through words.The notion of the universal self, which achieves self-discovery, self-knowledge, and self-creation, became obsolete, and a new idea of the "subject" and the problematic interaction between the subject and language emerged. Self-representation and truthfulness were also scrutinised. The initial stage of this transition from a universal "self" to a created "self" focused on a creative component of autobiographical representation. Gusdorf stressed the creative side of autobiographical writing in his paper "Conditions and Limitations of Autobiography." For Gusdorf, autobiography is a late phenomenon of Western culture, and "it has not always existed nor does it exist everywhere" Therefore, he observed that autobiographical works had no place in classical traditions. He asserts that the capacity for self-reflection was brought about due to the gradual secularisation of the Christian tradition of self-examination, otherwise known as the development of individualism. Another aspect of this shift emphasized the forms of self-representation. This

is elaborated in Hart's article titled "Notes for an Anatomy of Contemporary Autobiography."Hartre conceives the lives narrative as a play in which intentions interact and fluctuate (491). He admits that "unreliability" is unavoidable and that narrators cannot speak the truth without being influenced by their interests.

As a result, we can say that the autobiographical subject was connected with brilliance even in this second wave of criticism. According to Gusdorf, it is a "Western" genre that can only exist in a civilization that understands time historically and has a sense of the isolated person. Similarly, Hart's article was constrained by the critical standards of prioritising individuality and distinctiveness above relationality.There was still some uncertainty concerning gendered identities and alternate racial origin themes, and only male and Western standards were seen as global. Seldom were the autobiographies written by women scrutinised — and when they were, it was often as marginal lives - in a remark, a paragraph, or an afterword. The emphasis on "representative lives" also devalued the life histories of formerly enslaved people, workers as apprentices, prisoners, saints, explorers, refugees, mystics, and other distinct groups of people.

Autobiographical literature by women was hardly studied as a field of inquiry before the 1960s. It has been determined that scholarly dissertations should not use this format. Critics such as George Gusdorf, Georg Misch, and William Spengeman limited themselves to the narratives of prominent historical personalities such as Rousseau, Carlyle,and Franklin, whose eventful pasts and prolific literary output ensured their status as important contributors to cultural capital. During the '70s and '80s, autobiographical criticism took a new turn due to the advent of new theoretical inventions like Post-structuralism, postmodernism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derrida's concept of "difference," Althusser's ideas, Foucault and Bakhtin, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Ethnic studies and Anthropological Research, Cultural studies, Queer studies and Interdisciplinary studies of memory, etc. The subject's understandings were reframed due to these newly introduced interventions. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, disputed versions of selfhood were offered in various life narratives that included collaborative, provisional, and movable subjects. Several narratives took place during this period. The authenticity of the Western world's "master narratives" and the tradition of historical autobiography is brought into doubt by Lyotard. Women's lives were deemed too insignificant for centuries to be included in literature or history. The lives of women were omitted and forgotten by both genres. The traditional autobiography genre assumes and sets the pattern that the masculine life ought to be represented. It accepts solely men's works as the conventional formula for autobiographical writing.

Consequently, women's autobiographies have gone unnoticed for generations. "Invisibility" does not imply that the topic does not exist; instead, it emphasises that the subject must be stated and recognised. Women's works have been neglected and glossed over in male-dominated canonical literature. Women did compose texts, but they were seen as irrelevant and unable to meet up to the required text of "great writing."

French feminist writer Helen Cixous wrote an essay titled "Stories: Out and Out" in 1986, which she wrote about the invisible domain of women's writing:

And it is time to change. To invent the “other” history. There is “destiny” no more than there is “nature” or “essence” as such. Rather, living structures are caught and sometimes rigidly set within histriocultural limits so mixed up with the scene of history that for a long time, it has been impossible to think or even imagines “elsewhere”. We are presently living in a transitional period, one in which it seems possible that the classic structure might be split. (83)

The "elsewhere" that Helen Cixous refers to is something female autobiography authors and critics have tried to uncover and chronicle. This is not anything mentioned in either the historical or the literary heritage. This "elsewhere" is a place where women share their perspectives on the events that transpired, sometimes known as "her-story."The introduction of this genre was heralded by Estelle Jelinek's work *women’s Autobiography* and Mary Mason's article "The Other Voice."Both texts are primarily concerned with canonical authors of English-language autobiographies and the variations among men's and women's life narratives in terms of both style and substance. They discover that women have been writing differently and unconventionally than their male colleagues over the globe. Theorists like Domna C. Stanton and Nancy K. Miller started to apply the theories of French feminism. They wondered why women's personal narratives were not included in the Western canon of autobiography. To highlight the differences in women's life writing practices and subjectivities, Stanton suggests the term "autogynography."The long history of women's autobiography has been elaborated upon, and its differences have been theorised by other feminist theorists like Felicity Nussbaum, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Barbara Green.

In female autobiographies compared to male autobiographies, gender dynamics are more evident. There is no doubt that men are impacted by gender stereotypes in society. Yet, males fall outside of the gender group. He can afford to forget about his sex. However, when a woman's story is told, the dynamics of gender are typically mentioned, and they constantly serve as a reminder of their sex. Estelle Jelinek,in his work" Women's Autobiographies: Essay in Criticism," Contrasts men's autobiographies with women's and concludes that autobiographies by men often offer a restricted masculine vision ofhistory, which elucidates the subject's interconnectedness with the larger society. Women's autobiographies, on the other hand, concentrate on home life and interpersonal relationships.They is more private and personal than masculine memoirs. They are preoccupied with their home life, family problems, friends, and individuals who are essential in their lives. They almost completely disregard their job and worldly affairs. They hold self-deprecating thoughts about themselves and claim to utilise autobiography as a self-denial.

Women's autobiographies are distinguished by understatement and veiled assertions of power and seldom highlight personal achievements. In"*Self-Inventions in Autobiography: The Moment of Language*," Paul John Eakin examines autobiographical writings by numerous writers and concludes that the self at the core of all autobiographies is inherently fictive.In the very limited moral world of village patriarchy, he contends, there is no space for the individual, particularly a woman, aside from the group. Friedman contends that the processes

by which male and female gender identities are formed via socialisation are distinct. The contemporary emphasis on individualism in autobiography does not consider the significance of group identity for women, even though women have their own distinct collective Identity. Several theorists, including Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodrow, believe a sense of "community, interdependence, and identification" is one of the most critical variables in forming a woman's Identity. Gusdorf, however, discounts these aspects as being present in autobiographical selves.

Nancy Chodrow, a psychologist in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978),examines that "feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does. In psychoanalytic terms, women are less individuated thanmen and have more flexible ego boundaries" (44).The concept of "relationality" proposed by Chodrow has long-term ramifications for the study of female subjectivity in autobiography. Yet, contrary to popular belief, women's sense of collective Identity is not always portrayed negatively in women's autobiographies. Also, it can potentially be a source of power and change. Women feel a sense of "collective solidarity" with other women and see themselves as part of a larger group of other women in the neighbourhood. When a woman pens her autobiography, she does not establish a "person" that is an "isolated entity" entirely distinct from everyone else. When it comes to interpreting women's life writings, it is important to remember the "collective consciousness" of women and their "relational gendered identity," as described by Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodrow. To broaden the canons of women's writing, Hoffmann and Cully published *Women's Personal Narratives* in 1985, which featured women's letters, diaries, notebooks, and oral histories. Sidonie Smith claimed in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* that autobiographic authorisation was inaccessible to most women under an andocentric culture. They are motivated to narrate their tales differently and have done so since the time of medieval auto biographer Margery Kempe, despite being historically missing from both public spaces and means of written storytelling.

Francoise Lionnet identifies how marginalised people describe their lives in *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. She contends that, as historically marginalised subjects, women and colonised people produce "braided" texts with many voices. In 1988, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck released *Life Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* and Shari Benstock curated a collection of articles titled *The Private Self* that investigates various women's narrative formats, including poetry, cinema, and painted portraits.

Carolyn Heilbrun's 1988 book *Writing a Woman's Life* was a watershed moment in women's autobiographical criticism because it captured the attention of a wider audience. She has raised various points when analysing the fundamentals of an autobiography:

Where should it begin? With her birth and the disappointment, or no reason for Freudian family romance, the Oedipal configuration, if not, how do we view her childhood? What, in short, is the subject's relation – inevitably complex –with her mother? The relation with the father will be less complex, clearer in its emotions and

desires, partaking less of either becoming, or failing to become, a cope with the fact that her value is marries, why does the marriage fail or terrible pity or binding love. How does the process of sex object operates in the woman's life; how does she determined by how attractive men find her? If she succeed? (23)

In the 18th century, women such as Laetitia Pilkington, Teresia Constantia Phillips, and Frances Vane penned autobiographies to express their dissatisfaction with their marriages. Still, tales of their lives were considered scandalous at the time. They concentrate on their personal lives and highlight the harsh realities women without husbands or means experienced at the period. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, women did write autobiographies, but their work did not get the recognition it deserved. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, several women's memoirs achieved bestseller status. Around that period, the most popular books were *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden, The Diary of Ann Frank,* and *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* by Mary Mcarthy.

Throughout the 20th century, middle-class women's responsibilities were reinterpreted to include opportunities for employment outside the house; thus, their autobiographies underwent substantial change. In their memoirs, Annie Besant, Beatrice Webb, and Frances Power Cobb represent women's early 20th-century experiences. They wrote about women's unequal treatment and mistreatment in various spheres of society. Virginia Woolf, a prominent twentieth-century woman author, chronicled her life in several memoirs, letters, and diaries. *Moments of Being* is a compilation of her memoir essays. She made the first deliberate attempt to deviate from established autobiographical conventions when writing about a woman's life. She had a lifelong interest in both personal and theoretical aspects of life writing. Her research focuses on how women negotiate their place in autobiography, a genre that ideologically excludes them.

The transition in autobiographical literary criticism did not occur overnight; it took some time. The autobiographical writings have been analysed by critics, academicians, feminists, sociologists, and researchers using critical lenses, which sheds fresh insight into this genre. Formerly, the autobiography was considered a sub-genre of biography. But times have changed. The emergence of autobiography as a new form of writing and its subsequent development are both rooted in the prolonged and gradual process of literary traditions being transformed through the application of a variety of labels and claims, the expansion of linguistic and thematic scope, and the maturation of both the authors and the readers. Thus it can be concluded that the gradual transition from andocentric to gynocentriccritique is something that has only occurred with the introduction of feminist critics into the literary canon.

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