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Disability Autobiography in India

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Abstract :

Autobiography or life writing has become a powerful tool of resistance for the hitherto marginalized groups, such as women, working class people, the dalits, black people, people of sexual minority and disabled people. In this paper I present a critical view of disability autobiography in India. In this context, I will first outline the contours of autobiography, and then I will go on to look at conception of disability in

India and go on to the analysis on disability autobiography in India. Coming to the conclusion that disability autobiography in the Indian context should be adopted as the means of disability activism.

Keywords:

Some-body memoir, internalized ableism, life writing, impairment, disability culture, the new disability memoir, overcoming narrative, RPWD ACT, PWD ACT, the UNCRPD



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Research Paper

The genre of autobiography has emerged as a popular literary genre resulting in the recent memoir boom (Couser, 2005: p. 604). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson trace the etymology of the term autobiography assigning its origin to Ancient Greek and Latin words - i.e., self, bios i.e., life and graphy pertains to writing, thus, literally the word autobiography means self-life writing. The term autobiography has come under attack in the Post-modern times due to the unitary self-representation of the conventional autobiography, for instance Rousseau's Confessions (1782) is regarded as the first autobiography ever written which is critiqued for its bombastic language and self-glorification. Smith and Watson prefer the term life writing to the term autobiography, at length explicating the terms life writing, memoir and life narrative. They hold that life writing is manifested through a variety of forms such as historical, poetic, novelistic, blogs, social media posts, videos, films, documentaries and in a form of reportage (Smith and Watson, 2010: pp. 1-5). For the purpose of his paper, I use life writing, life narrative and memoir synonymously and interchangeably. Even G. Thomas Couser likewise notes that the advent of digital era has helped proliferate different modes of self-representation (Couser, 2009: np Introduction, the Somebody Memoir).

The critical study of autobiography is a recent phenomenon, especially the 20th century, yet, it enjoys a rich and diverse scholarship (Dibattista and Wittman, 2014: p. 1). A variety of critical theories imported from literary studies are mostly adopted to the analysis of autobiography. The theories such as Marxism, Feminism, Post-structuralism, Gender theory, the theory of sexuality and body situate the autobiography in a particular perspective (Jay, 1987: p. 41). The autobiography is also of interest to social theorists, anthropologists, and the scholars of cultural studies. However, we seldom come across the study of autobiography from the perspective of disability theory. In this paper I will look at disability autobiography, especially in the Indian context and will also argue that the disability autobiography should be placed in the specific local context rather than applying Western conceptualization of autobiography in general, and disability autobiography in particular. In this context, we will first understand the



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genre of autobiography in the Indian context, then, link it to the understanding of disability autobiography in India.

Autobiography in India

Autobiography is often regarded as purely the product of the Western education in India. The famous autobiographies of Jawaharlal Nehru, M K Gandhi among others are influenced by the western conceptualization of the self. At the same time their autobiographies are characterized by highly public and social dimensions of the self rather than exploration of their private selves. However, the Indian women's autobiographies of Durgabai Deshmukh, Vajaya Laxmi Pandit and Madeline Slade exhibit more of their private selves (Gohil, 2008: Sodhganga).

Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, on the contrary have pointed out the existence of self-representation practices in the Moghal period and even before that. The texts like Baburnama are cited as the instances of life writing. Indian men and women have represented themselves through their stories, legends, songs, poetry and fiction. Further, they observe that a majority of women would represent their gendered selves through fiction (Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, 2015: p. np introduction). Thus, the Indian autobiography is distinct in that it refrains from the direct expose of the private self. The self represented in Indian life writing appears to be in a relational form. Many marginalized groups such as women, black men and women, sexual minority groups, working class people, and Dalits present their selves in the context of others. Likewise, the disabled people's autobiographies are replete with the life writings of other persons and the assistive devices, thereby, stressing on their dependence in order to emphasize upon the fact that dependency is a common factor between nondisabled and disabled people alike (Wendell, 1996: np Disability and Feminist Ethics). They also expose disabled people's objectification, isolation, discrimination and dehumanization. Thus, the nature of disability autobiographies is interconnected and interrelated. In order to understand the disability autobiography, we must first grasp the concept of disability and its nature in India, then, understand the disability autobiography in the West. Thereafter, make sense of disability autobiography in India.



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What is Disability?

Disability may be defined primarily in three ways: 1. from the medical perspective, 2. from the Legal perspective, and 3. from the Socio-cultural perspective

As per the biomedical view of disability, disability refers to lack of a limb or a body part affecting the regular function of the person. The Legal view likewise, by and large, adopts the biomedical definition for the purpose of drafting legislations and policies. For instance, the 1995 legislation, Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, understands disability as Blindness, Low vision, Leprosy-cured, Hearing Impairment, Locomotor disability, mental retardation, Mental Illness and cerebral palsy (The Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995: Chap. I, article II). Here, the medical conditions themselves are termed as disabilities which stand in stark contrast with the tenets of disability studies in which initially the disability and impairment are treated as separate from each other. It considers disability being the hostile socio-cultural environment for the people with impairments, therefore, impairments were thought as bodily conditions. However, later this theory is contested with the focus on impairment being the product of cultural prejudice and hostility (Tremain, 2006: p.45). Thus, the legislations drafted after the adoption of the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disability, the Legal definition of disability is transformed reflecting the principles of UNCRPD. In 2016, as per the revised legislation i.e., Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, a person with disability is understood as the one who encounters difficulties with their anomalous bodies in the interaction to the outside world (The Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2016, 2016: chap. I, article II). These difficulties range from interpersonal interactions to the hostile socio-cultural and attitudinal environment which discriminate, isolate, objectify and cause harassment, hindering the wellbeing of the person.

Thus, the definition in RPWD Act 2016 embraces the socio-cultural view of disability. The socio-cultural view of disability has arisen out of disability rights movement and the subsequent emergence of the field of disability studies. The disabled people give voice to their oppression by defining disability. Carol Thomas (Thomas, 1999: p. 40) defines disability in terms of unequal social relations whereas Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (Garland-Thompson,



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2005: 1558) views disability as the cultural interpretation of bodily variation. Thus, both Thomas and Garland-Thompson bring the idea of disability in the domain of society and culture, thereby, suggesting an alternative to comprehend disability different from the traditional view of the biomedicine, rehabilitation and the theories of social deviation. In this paper I uphold this socio-cultural view of disability rather than the earlier ones.

In India the socio-cultural definition of disability started gaining currency only in the nineties (Chander, 2013: p. 72). In spite of that, Anita Ghai rightly comments that the ideas of disability directly imported from the West, does not prove its applicability in the Indian context (Ghai, 2002: pp. 49-50). Such applications of the Western notions of disability, not just disregard the local realities, but also prove to be immensely detrimental to the disabled people in India. There are 2.2 million people with disability, most of whom reside in the rural areas, embroiled in the issues like poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, and the caste and gender issues. Addressing the issue of disability can only be fruitful when disability would be considered alongside these realities. Ghai points out that despite two legislations of disability, the disabled people in India still struggle for meeting their basic needs (Ghai, 2002: p. 50). These and many issues regarding disability in India can be addressed through the disability life writing.

Disability Life Writing in India

In order to make better sense of disability life writing in India, I first outline the notion of disability life writing. Couser states that every life narrative of trauma and suffering should be considered as the disability life narrative or disability memoir. He suggests that the disability life writing is a no-body memoir or a some-body memoir. The disability memoir is not an instance of creative expression of a person, but rather is a deliberately written political narrative, as the disabled persons exercise their own autonomy both as a narrator and author which is tremendously helpful in creating visibility to the, hitherto, invisibilised disabled community. The disability memoir corrects the long standing objectification by the biomedical regime, literature, society and culture, by situating the disabled person at the subject position of their stories (Couser, 2009: np. chap. I, Introduction: the Some-body Memoir). Thus, disability memoir becomes the tool of resistance to fight oppression. Likewise, Mintz (Mintz, 2007: np.



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Introduction), regards disability life writing as an important political and cultural act, by which not just the social, but also personal and embodies experiences of being disabled are articulated. Garland-Thompson associates disability life writing with the idea of disability pride similar to black is beautiful or LGBTQ pride (Garland-Thompson, 2005: p. 1567). Thus, disability, here, becomes a category of identity alongside gender, race, sex, class and so on.

Many men and women with disability in the west have penned down their disability life narratives, thereby, contributing to the emerging disability culture. The memoirs of Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* (1999), Simi Linton's *My Body Politics* (2006), Eli Clare's *Exile and Pride* (2015) and Harriet M. Johnson's *Too Late to Die Young* (2003), exemplify the variety and innovative ways in which these memoirs are written. These memoirs demonstrate that the personal is not just political, but scholarly (Linton, 2006: p. 115). The representation of the disabled selfhood in these memoirs is marked by a distinct academic and political consciousness posing challenge to the stereotypical understanding of the disabled persons by the society.

The disability rights movement in the west has moved from issues of accessibility towards more philosophical and theoretical aspects of disability (Ghai, 2006: 88). This transformation of disability rights movement translates into the disability life narratives of these memoirists. These life writers have vehemently replaced the traditional overcoming narratives of disability to innovative disabled life narratives (Couser, 2009: np. chap. epilogue, the *New Disability Memoir*). The overcoming narratives are understood as exemplifying rugged individualism (Mitchell, 2000: p. 312). Further, they sentimentalize disability, rendering the disabled body an object of stares by means of curiosity, sympathy, and charity (Davis, 1995: p. 4). Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* is vehemently rejected as a model of disability life narratives. Keller's narrative is often regarded by the disability studies scholars as the typical overcoming narrative or what Couser calls the triumph over adversity narrative (Couser, 2009: np. chap. 2). Kim E. Nielsen (Nielsen, 2004: p. 23) however, maintains that despite its overcoming overtones, 'the *Story of My Life*' is a highly political narrative in terms of it creating a *Freak Show* of Keller's life which enables her to acquire readers sympathy, thereby, obtaining charity for the cause of blindness and deafness. One can also cast the narrative as an example of disabled feminist life writing as there are two significant women who support Keller in acquiring



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education and be literate. Because the education in the Nineteenth and earlier twentieth century was thought by means by which the deaf and the blind became independent and spoke for themselves (Klages, 1999: p. 6).

The disability studies scholars greatly disregard the overcoming narrative owing to its focus on individual will to succeed implying that everyone regardless of disability is capable of achieving success. This over emphasis on the idea of struggling to succeed totally disavows the lived reality and the day to day negotiation with the hostile structure of the society and culture. This in turn overlooks the issue of socio-structural reform, thereby, privatizing disability. Despite its critique, the overcoming narrative has still its utility in the global south, wherein the disability experience is characterized by issues like poverty, illiteracy, religious influence, discrimination, lack of resources and lack of awareness (Grech, 2016: np. chap. 2).

As stated above, autobiography or life writing, as it is understood in the global north appears to be different. Just as in the case of life writing in general the disability memoir in India lacks a role model to be followed or deviated from. This non-availability of the model disability memoir reflects in the disabled memoirists following the examples of the early twentieth century memoirs like Keller's narrative or the Little Locksmith by Katharine Butler Hathaway (1943). This imitation of the Western memoirists by the disabled life writers in India also signals the claim of kinship across continents, but at the same time appears to be the superimposing of content over the form. Yet, this modeling of disability overcoming narrative or success stories proves useful for the disabled masses in India who on account of illiteracy, poverty, discrimination and lack of resources develop and internalize ableism (Campbell, 2009: pp. 21-22). Their self-esteem can be boosted through the successful life narrative of other disabled individuals, thus the disability memoir acquires its socio-political nature (Frank, 2013: p. xxi). The legislations of 1995 and 2016 in India have ensured education and employment for the disabled community. However, its advantages are chiefly availed by the disabled people residing in the urban areas, leaving the disabled masses in a great disadvantage. As Ghai (Ghai, 2002: p. 52) points out that the disabled activism is only concerned with the upper class issues of seeking waiver in the air ticket and so on. Even the agenda of women, sexual minorities, poor disabled people gets totally slid back to the backseat. The disability movement in India is, by and large,



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dominated by upper and middle class and caste people. The women, poor and Dalit disabled get delegitimized due to their multiple identities, thereby, becoming ultimate subalterns even in the disability rights movement.

The memoirs written by the disabled people also fall in the category of upper, middle class and caste people who on account of their resources manage to overcome the barriers, but for the rest it is impossible. For instance, the memoirs written by disability activists such as the *Other Senses* by Preeti Monga (2012), *Lights Out* by L. Subramani (2012), *One Little Finger* by MaliniChib (2011), *No Looking Back* by Shivani Gupta (2014) and the *Grammar of My Body* by AbhishekAnicca (2023) are all written in the English language which again is a problem for most of the disabled people living in India. They not just reflect their resourceful family background and upper caste, but also it appears that these memoirs are constructed for the global audience rather than India disabled population. Nonetheless, they perform an important function of representing lived reality of disability, stigma, isolation and discrimination. Moreover, these life writers have made a significant contribution in the domain of disability which cannot be overlooked. For instance, the work by Shivani Gupta in the domain of accessibility in the Indian context paves the way for empowerment of many disabled people (Gupta, 2014: p. 150).

Malini Chib's important contribution through her memoir and various articles spreads awareness about the issues of disabled in India. Even then, it is important that socio-structural reforms be made in order to enable the disabled community to express themselves by means of digital or print media. The disability memoirs in the Indian context may serve to assess the execution of the disability legislations, thereby, recommending alterations, amendments, and repeal of the legislation. The disabled memoirists give voice to the specific issues concerning the disabled people. For instance, L. Subramani through his memoir delineate the issue of the concern for cure in India among the family members of the disabled persons who takes refuge in the miracle cures when they fail in curing the person with disability biomedically (Subramani, 2014: p. 25), demonstrating undesirability of disability (Ghai, 2015: p. 34). The disabled women life writers voice the issues of disabled women such as marriage, conception of the body, beauty, and desirability. Therefore, the disability life writing should be considered a powerful medium of disability activism in the Indian context.



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