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Reconstructing Life And Identity: A Study Of Self-Representation In Select Women Autobiographies

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ABSTRACT:

Very few instances of women characters disclosing their intimate and untold experiences are upheld in history who struggle to break through the stereotypical construct of being tolerant care givers. This was merely because being set in the patriarchal set up there had always been the fear of being rejected, mocked, humiliated or ostracized. Autobiography writing by women, a literature of self-revelation which forms its existence in India since the early 19th century enables the woman author to express how she endures an invasion of self, the intrusion of inner space, or a violation of her sexual and physical autonomy. In contrast to other genres, this form unravels the innermost feelings of a writer and her self-exploration with a tone of truth. In the later part of the twentieth century, there are autobiographers like Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Shobha De, Tasleema Nasrin etc who have boldly expressed their innermost emotions and the socio-cultural impositions laid down by the society on women in particular. Their mode of self expression seem to construct a distinct form of agency that not only share their experiences but also impact on the psyche of all women. The present study takes into account the autobiographies of Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das and Dr. Indira Goswami who have boldly expressed their views on the socio-cultural realities during the late twentieth century. The study will also attempt to affirm the female voice as redeemers of their own "self" as well as the community of women at large who navigate through an oppressive structure encountering trauma but emerge out of it and rebuilds life. Despite their diverse geographical and socio-political affiliations their representations share commonalities that highlight a distinct woman voice. The poignant yet challenging expressions of various kinds of discriminations and conflicts that they have been exposed to in their public

and private life triggered their bold stances in the prevailing social order, that not only uphold their voice against patriarchy but also provide an alternative yet exigent source of history .

KEYWORDS: Autobiography, self-expression, voice, discrimination , patriarchy,agency, society

INTRODUCTION

Self-expression allows one to assert their unique identity and establish a sense of autonomy that plays a vital role in fostering emotional well-being. Irrespective of the historical time that they belong to and their doubly colonised status in the changing socio-political setup there has always been an urge in the Indian woman authors to articulate self and the society in their writings. With such a proposition perhaps since the later part of the 19th century a tendency to express their agony and dissatisfaction of patriarchal attitude get expressed through their works where they depicted the women as strong and focused in their vision to succeed in lives however, only in the space allotted to them by men and the society. In the early autobiographies women authors took to writing as the path to liberation from the constraints of the conventions and retaliation against hegemonic tools, and often as a means to recuperate from trauma.

Women's autobiographies have been of significant importance to feminist scholarship in India, and have been in many ways the single most important resource in constituting an archive of women's experience that have been greatly influenced both by activism and theory. Most of the autobiographies of the later part of the 20th century voice gender discrimination as well as their challenging life issues in the changing patriarchal order with a woman-centric point-of-view. Enriched with genuine female experience these self-representing accounts seem to construct a distinct form of agency. The feminist criticism has become a vital aspect in literature in contemporary society and the female perspective, expressed through these life writings is considered to be immensely valuable as it facilitates the authors' self that highly influence over the collective identity of women, thereby affecting and encouraging others to be subversive to similar context. It is this feature that makes the discourse in the women authored texts differ greatly from those authored by men as they articulate women's experiences in a language specific to the perspectives of the women.

In Amrita Pritam's autobiography *The Revenue Stamp*(1977) she delves into her rebellious thoughts and experiences as a woman. It is seen as a journey of self-recognition that explores the struggles of postcolonial women in India to encounter, negotiate and subvert the preconceptions of conventional women's representation as oppressed and un-emancipated that lacked in the power of self-assertion and self determination. Her postcolonial stance argues the nationalist discourse that portrays women as bearers and custodians of culture. It is a candid account of her journey of self-discovery, her struggle to retain her individuality that she calls freedom. Notably, She was the first woman to receive the Sahitya Academy Award in 1956. Her autobiography *Rashidi Ticket* was originally written in Punjabi and later on translated into English as *The Revenue Stamp* by Krishna Gorowara.

Kamala Das recounts her painful story of self-awakening in *My Story* (1973), that defies societal norms narrating intensely personal experiences as a woman. The book was originally published in Malayalam, and titled *Ente Katha*. *My Story* have been an inspiration to many, especially for the boldness and profound honesty in her voice that portrayed intimate issues of women, issues which were largely considered taboos during her time.

Another engrossing piece of self-revelation is the autobiography by the renowned Assamese writer Indira Goswami, *An Unfinished Autobiography* where she clearly documents her innermost thoughts and struggles relating to the existing patriarchy-driven social structure. While the initial part of her autobiography reveals her struggle against depression that drove her to suicidal longings the second part leads the readers a step towards a more liberating one where she portrays the oppressed, particularly the pathetic condition of the abandoned widows in Vrindavan which is also representation of a particular marginalized group.

The three women authors chosen for this study took to self-expression through writing by means of which they could liberate themselves from the xenophobic constraints of their societies nourished by patriarchy. In *The Laugh of Medusa*, the French feminist Helene Cixous advocates highly the idea that women must write so as to bring to the surface what has been repressed in them for long as there is close relationship between women's bodies and their writing because by writing women can reclaim themselves from being represented as weak and lacking. Cixous's theory of *Ecriture feminine* notably gets implied in the concerned texts because despite difference in their social and geographical contexts each of the three autobiographers chosen for study accentuates a distinct woman voice that situates itself beyond their peripheral gender roles and sometimes represent the collective voice of the marginalized and the oppressed redefining their relationship with men and the world and other women as well.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To identify commonalities in the selected texts that highlight bold distinct woman voices against patriarchy.
2. To examine traumatic experiences as a cornerstone of identity.
3. To reveal the construction of Female agency in the self-representation of the woman authors.
4. To argue the woman voice as agents of collective self-awakening

METHODOLOGY

The study follows a qualitative approach. The primary texts of analysis are the autobiographies- *The Revenue Stamp* by Amrita Pritam, *My Story* by Kamala Das and *An Unfinished Autobiography* by Indira Goswami. A few available resources on the critical ideas of the feminism and women writings are applied to justify the standpoint. The available references, historical and theoretical books are searched in both printed form and web sites to establish a considerable argument.

DISCUSSION:

The life writings of the three remarkable women writers, Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das and Indira Goswami welcomes profound insight. Women autobiographies have been a popular genre in India and women from multiple locations of society have used it to mark their hopes, aspirations, frustrations, sense of isolation and estrangement within the existing social system. Broadly speaking these life writings turn out to be inspirational narratives as they record real stories of powerful, assertive women who has already been able to occupy wider achievement in the public sphere owing to their respective identities related to education, authorship, other forms of creativity or social engagement.

With the emergence of postmodern literary thought trends women's life writings have also become acclaimed research subjects and have sparked academic debates due to its discourse. The two have influenced each leading to a rethinking of identity issues and the inclusion of concepts such as fluidity, multiple identities and contradictions under a broader definition of identity. The life writings of these women amply illustrate the point raised by Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) that gender is a social construct. Thus, in both biographies and autobiographical fictions, we believe that the early life of the autobiographical subject as crucial and influential.

In Amrita Pritam's autobiography, *The Revenue Stamp* her rebellious attitude and non-conformity to the established conventions is evident while she talks of her childhood days questioning her father at the age of ten regarding the existence of God after the death of her mother Raj Bibi. She questions the validity of religion, and there are many instances that symbolise her deep longing for a communal harmony. Kamala Das in her autobiography *My Story* also glances at the events and early phases of her life that she claims have moulded her perspective as a writer. Her childhood was filled with unhappy memories. She faced discrimination in the European school, suffered from isolation not having desired family ambience as her parents and siblings had frequent shifts between Kerala (her ancestral home) and Calcutta (her father's workplace). The most striking of all was her early marriage at the age of fifteen only that proved to be a life-altering disaster for her.

The role of memory appears to be consequential in connection with the construction of personal identity while belief and goals impact significantly while recollecting the past. As the subject 'I' of an autobiography revisits her past in order to recollect the episodes of her early life she is not free from the impact of her present socio-material context. Her point-of-view is thus framed in a manner that is suggestive of a moral that seems to outline the worth of life. Indira Goswami's mother was advised by an astrologer to cut her daughter into pieces and throw into the Brahmaputra when she was very young as her future was predicted to be too full of misfortunes. Indira's early life was filled with depressing thoughts. She was often obsessed with suicidal tendencies that she confessed had risen from the fear of her father's death whom she loved the most. The first record of her numerous attempts at suicide takes place in 1961 after her father passes away. The early death of the two strong personalities of her life i.e. the death of her father and later her husband left her shattered and she almost reached to the brink of madness when she started taking sleep inducing medicines to kill herself.

Kamala Das too narrates a period of hopelessness in *My Story* following her early marriage at the age of fifteen that ended in a disrupted and troubled relationship with her husband. The continuous surge of dissatisfaction and disappointment due to discrimination, negligence, lack of self-identity, absence of emotional support and affection she faced since her childhood inflicted her with grave trauma and at that critical point of her life she came to be obsessed with suicidal thoughts.

Indian women throughout the ages have considered themselves responsible of upholding the ethics of morality, culture and chastity; whereas, men are often relieved from this binding, and any breach of conduct from the former side, on similar issues is considered a blunder by the stakeholders of patriarchy. Helene Cixous, suggests that a woman's practice of writing has to be based on a very different order of meaning from that of men. The autobiographies selected for the present academic analysis contain in them seeds of various modern theories like postmodernism, post colonialism, feminism, post structuralism, depiction of self, quest of identity, and woman as an agency to bring change in society. The autobiographers selected for the present project belonged to that period of patriarchal order in India, when women had no option but to live up to the ideals of chastity and sexual passivity, in the role of a daughter, wife or a mother as laid down in conventional stereotypes. Their autobiographies present the theme of marital dissatisfaction and freedom of sexual code that were lacked in most writers. They expose the dreariness and entrapment of matrimony and resent its hollow morality. They reflect the progression of feminine sexuality outside the purview of marriage which as a new discourse serves as a platform to bring to the surface the repressed thoughts, transmuting the conventional heroine into a sexually liberated woman. Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam and Indira Goswami have represented themselves very boldly and honestly reveal frequently their sexual encounters despite hailing from conservative patriarchal backgrounds.

My Story documents Das's personal experiences of being a woman, her quest for love and most importantly her assertion of self epitomizes her as a modern Indian woman who extremely vocalises her feelings and experiences, and rarely succumbed to the tradition-bound situations. While playing her roles of a daughter, a lover, and a wife she fell into the rigid grip of a male centred world. She was different from the early women autobiographers in that whereas there were no references to sexual and intimate women issues like, menstruation, menopause and sexual experience in their autobiographies she is exceptionally vocal about her most private experiences. Amrita Pritam too was not an exception. She had to face harsh criticism by her contemporaries who labelled her works as being too sensuous and pornographic. Her non-conforming style which often contests the dominating ideologies is analogous to the concept of Helene Cixous' *Ecriture feminine*. Indira Goswami also did not conform to the established norms and freely expressed her disgust over the restraints of the patriarchal society over women. At various places of the autobiography she discusses matters of female sexuality that was considered a taboo or sin in her society. She honestly reveals of her inner conflicts and realization following her excitement in the company of other men after her husband Madhavan's death. When she talks of her predicament as a young widow she frankly emphasizes on her yearnings of the flesh and hunger for the sexual union of a conjugal life. The stream of consciousness technique employed by these three autobiographers leads them to focus more on their "self" and that also

becomes the altar to encourage them to face life boldly and without hesitation. Virginia Woolf, too, considers past an important element in writing an autobiography. She dwells on the theme of “self-analysis” and “self-judgment” through a series of recollections of the past (Anderson 101).

The self-portrayal in women autobiographies grab greater focus as they weave up multiple voices under one being marginalised and doubly colonised. Autobiographies of women are powerful social and historical documents as they provide us with micro-histories of the times they were written in. Pritam’s narrative in *The Revenue Stamp* pens an alternative picture of the history of partition from a perspective much beyond the nationalist enterprise. She poignantly depicts the trauma and turmoil endured by the ordinary citizen, especially women, due to the forced dislocation and their consequent sufferings. As one of the tragic witnesses of the Partition, Amrita Pritam experienced the upheaval firsthand. The forced migration ripped her away from familiar grounds and thrust her into an uncertain future. These personal traumas were compounded by the collective agony shared by people on both sides of the border, a theme that became central to her writing. The trauma of Partition deeply influenced her worldview and identity and to a great extent her narrative style. The tragedy pushed her into writing with a fervour that sought to bear, to witness, to remember, and to heal

The sense of self-recognition amidst a larger community appears to be a core concern in Indira Goswami’s life too when she is exposed to the harsh life of widowhood. Her loneliness and the separation being a widow caught her in a conflict between her “feminine self” and her “female self”. She poignantly depicts the various attempts made by the society to “de-feminize” and “de-sexualize” widows at that time. Their heads were shaven, and were supposed to wrap their bodies in white saris. They had to devote themselves fully in worshipping the God and lived an austere life. They were considered inauspicious and were cut off from all the social and religious gatherings. The calamity of her fate, her dejection and disappointment did not allow her to be at rest anywhere. Her decision to pursue her research under the supervision of her teacher Prof. Lekharu took her to the city of Vrindavan amidst the “Radheshyamis”. Her realization that the suffering of the individual self is symbolic of the sufferings of the people at large takes place during her stay in that city. Stanford’s views on the “collective identity” of the women are significant in Goswami’s case as she says, “Women’s sense of collective identity, however, is not only negative. It can also be a source of strength and transformation” (Smith and Watson 75). It is during this phase of life that the writer in Indira turns into a feminist as she recognizes her “collective identity” as a woman and as a widow. Like Pritam her narrative style too, impacted by her transformation, is marked by sarcasm and satire, when she speaks on behalf of the community of the abandoned widows in Vrindavan and also of the widows of the nation at large.

When a woman artist recognizes her private self in the larger identity language no more remains a barrier. This is how and when writing becomes an exercise to liberate one’s self. *My Story*, *The Revenue Stamp* and *An Unfinished Autobiography* are documents through which the three prominent writers endeavour to find voice for not only themselves but also of every other Indian women who attempt to free themselves sexually

and domestically.. As perceived in three of them, writing, which was initially a passion later led each of them to a path of liberation and emancipation. They have confessed in their own autobiographies that during their critical times it was writing and their self-expression only that helped to empty their burdened souls.

CONCLUSION

In conscious minds women autobiographies infuse insights as they not only provide a world of detail, but also unveil history from beneath the surface and the margins. Accounts which offer the everyday practices of women and minorities have gained immense popularity since they offer us history or her story from a different perspective. Women's autobiographies are also dominated by the passion to reveal the world within and show the other side of life which remained in the dark. The writer's mind is not merely creative but analytical and more than that it is receptive. The writer receives life not as it comes to her but as she reaches out to it. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* comments that self-reconstitution by writing the self becomes a strategy to resist the psychic disintegration that brought onto the colonial subject. Each of the three autobiographers selected for this study has proved to be dismantlers of insurmountable obstacles rising out from the plight of patriarchy. At the initial phase they are able to observe their status, later they recognize and perform accordingly to rein in their roles. In this way they ascend to the level of successful redeemers not only of their own selves but other women in similar circumstances.

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