



On the Genre of Autobiography: Typology and Evolution

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Abstract

In this paper I explore autobiography, a sub-genre of literary writing at the intersection of other disciplines like history and anthropology. Most theoreticians classify autobiography as literary non-fiction; others who refuse to take these self-explorations at face value derisively refer to it as fiction. The most intriguing signifier of an autobiography is the first-person 'I', the subject as well as the object of the autobiographical narrative. This 'I' is however all the time in a flux and, by definition, the story of a Being written by the person himself—on a daily basis as a diary, in retrospect as memoirs, scattered in the works in a disguised manner or recorded as oral history—is full of contradictions and complexities. The genre is traditionally rooted in the West in the Catholic tradition of confessions. Like the genre of novel, autobiography too is not indigenous to the Indian literary landscape. I refer to Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, Günter Grass' *Peeling the Onion*, Gandhi's *The Story of my Experiments with Truth* and autobiographies of Dalit writers Omprakash Valmiki (*Joothan*), Baby Kamble (*The Prisons we Broke*) and Vasant Kamble (*Growing up Untouchable in India*) in order to trace the evolution of this genre and also to compare the typology of these texts which are otherwise very different in terms of content. The intricate relationship of autobiography to memory is also discussed.

Keywords: Genre, Non-fiction, Confessions, Memory, Perception, Individual, Modernity, Collective, Testimonials.

Genre is generally defined as a type or category of textual compositions with similar conventions. It is not surprising that artist's often rebel against this pigeon-holing preferring the freedom to experiment. German Romantics dreamt of a utopian narrative in which all genres of art, philosophy, rhetoric and criticism would dissolve to create what Friedrich Schlegel called a *Universal poesie*. The old Goethe, on the other hand, a sceptic of the young Romantics, acknowledged the genres by using them as titles for some of his works. A story was called *The Fairy Tale* (1795). After some years he wrote a novella with the title

Novelle (1828) and similarly one of his poems is simply titled *Ballade* (1813/16). This was Goethe's provocative way of demonstrating his respect for genres.

The problems related with genres are the same as those related with epochs. Often writings of a particular historical epoch are clubbed together and one expects *a priori* similar issues, motifs and narrative techniques. The confusion surrounding the French term 'genre' stems also from the fact that it is used on the one hand for the three broad categories in literature: poetry, prose and play and at the same time it is used for several sub-categories like sonnet, elegy, ghazal, novel, novella, fairy tale, science fiction, comedy, tragedy and so on. Despite the limitations and inadequacies in the idea of genres, they continue to be in use mainly because they satisfy the academic need for a formal theoretical frame.

In this paper I explore the typology of the autobiographical genre, mainly memoirs and their relation to memory. With the help of certain examples from the West and the East I explore the genesis of the genre and its evolution from antiquity across modernity to post-modernity. Saint Augustine's autobiography deserves special mention because it is widely accepted as the first clear-cut autobiography that set the proverbial ball rolling in this genre. Equal if not more space has been given to Günter Grass' recent autobiography in order to show how autobiographical writing of the late 20th century continued with the classical tradition in a secular Europe evolving at the same time new narrative elements like humour and irony. Both writers are acutely conscious of the power and limitations of memory. The article will not be complete without referring to the non-Western world which has produced its own typological variations in autobiographies. Dalit autobiographies are taken as a case study to draw attention to some recent trends and practices in this genre in the Indian context. The article is hence also a comparative study in which autobiographical texts that are temporally, spatially and existentially disparate and are written in different languages are compared typologically. Both the similarities and the differences in the typological comparison make the study worthwhile and interesting.

This article draws on my edited volume *Autobiography. Fact and Fiction* (2009), a collection of 18 research papers from scholars all over the world. Further, many examples cited in the article are from German literature as this is my area of specialization.

Saint Augustine's *Confessions*

Autobiography is traditionally a Western genre drawing on the Catholic ritual of confessions. The classical autobiographical genre based on introspection of the self, confession of sins, expression of remorse and guilt is indeed very theological in letter and spirit. Saint Augustine is generally considered the first exponent of the genre. His *Confessions* in Latin written in CE 397 is one of the earliest and finest examples of the European scholastic tradition that set the broad parameters of the autobiographical genre. Addressed to God, it traces those moments and incidents of his life that mark and shape his spiritual development (Augustine 2001). Augustine, a neo-Platonic philosopher, a professor of rhetoric in Carthage and Rome, had converted after many years of doubt to Christianity at the age of 33. Today he is widely recognized as the first important Christian philosopher. According to him, confession of sins or evil ways leads to their cleansing and that is how the sinner Augustine ultimately turns into a saint. The confessions, starting with his initial lack of faith in Christ, stealing fruit as a child, fornication and

arrogance of youth, may evoke an ironic smile in the contemporary world but they have to be understood in the context of early Christianity. From the point of view of this essay his remarkable observations on memory illustrated with the metaphors of an attic and a cave are significant, a few of which I quote here:

I enter the fields and spacious halls of memory where the countless images that have been brought into them from many things through the senses, are stored as though they were treasures. [...] When I enter this storehouse, I ask that the thing I want be brought out to me. Some things appear immediately, but some things require a search, and are finally dragged out, as it were, from some hidden closet. Certain other things rush out in crowds, and while something else is being hunted out, they scramble around as if to say, 'Perhaps we are the ones you wanted?' I brush these things away from my memory with the hand of my heart until the thing that I wanted is unveiled from its secret hiding place. (Augustine 2001: 89)

The vast cave of the memory, with its numerous and mysterious recesses, receives all these things and stores them away, to be later recalled as they are needed. Each experience enters by its own vast door and is stored away by the memory. The things themselves do not enter it, but only the images of the things that have been perceived are there for the thought to remember. [...] This power of memory is great. It is very great, O God, it is an inner room that is vast and unbounded. Who has penetrated to its very bottom? (Augustine 2001: 89–90)

To paraphrase: rivers, mountains, waves and stars are stored in the memory of a being as images. This is Augustine's way of referring to the role of perception in memory. At the same time he clarifies that concepts like logic and reason 'that one has learned from the liberal sciences' (2001: 90) are stored as such and not as images. Saint Augustine marvels at the 'immeasurable capacity' (2001: 90) of memory. The autobiography, a 'thanks giving' (2001: 87) with philosophical and reflections on language, time and memory, reflects also the dilemma of a philosopher whose intellect came in the way of faith and the other way round. The autobiography ends with 'Amen'.

Gunter Grass' *Peeling the Onion*

Augustine's conceptualization of autobiography set a trend through the ages which continued in European modernity as well. The Romantic epoch with its emphasis on the individual and subjectivity is marked by several autobiographies like those of Goethe, Wordsworth and Rousseau. Interestingly, Rousseau gave his autobiography the same title as Augustine. Twentieth century again saw a spurt in autobiographical writing in Europe. Marc Chagall's *My Life* (1922) with sketches in ink gives a sentimental peep into the childhood of the artist in a Russian Jewish ghetto. It reminds one of the German *Heimatliteratur* with nostalgia for the old way of life. The *Diary of Anna Frank* (1942–44, Dutch original, published posthumously in 1947) by a 13-year-old Jewish girl hiding in Amsterdam from the Nazis is one of the most moving works of 20th century. The diary is broadly categorized as Holocaust literature. A close reading of the diary however also reveals a rare insight into the world of an adolescent entering puberty — her aspirations, fantasies, frustrations and her way of looking at the world of grown-ups. The post-war German literary landscape in the 1960s witnessed several autobiographical narratives like those by Max Frisch, Elias Canetti and Thomas Bernhard (Heckmann 1984: 17ff). The current generation of established German writers like Peter Handke, Uwe Timm, Hans-Ulrich Treichel and Herta Müller are also writing a great deal of auto fiction, that is, fiction heavily loaded with personal experiences.

For a more comprehensive study I have selected Günter Grass' recent autobiography which is close to that of Saint Augustine's in terms of its conceptualization, that is, the convention of confessions and the relationship of memoirs with memory. In *Peeling the Onion* (2007) the 78-year-old Grass makes a sensational confession of his Nazi past, albeit a confession 'on his own terms' (Gardam 2007). The voluntary public confession written in literary German elevates the sinner to a saint, just like Augustine. Grass acknowledges his 'hero-worship' of the Nazis: 'my childhood years seem to have been completely untroubled by doubt' (2007: 19). Underlined is the collective failure of his generation of Germans to utter the word *why*. Grass makes this point by replacing the 'I' of the autobiography with 'we' while describing his life in the *Hitler Youth. Schuld*, he says, is a loaded word in German language:

One word evokes the other: *Schulden, Schuld*, debts, guilt. Two words so close and so deeply rooted in the soil of the German language. But while debts can be mitigated by instalment payments, long-term as they may be [...], guilt—whether proven, presumed, or concealed—remains, ticking on and on, and holds its place, even on journeys to nowhere. It says its piece, fears no repetition, is mercifully forgotten for a time, hibernates in dreams. It remains as sediment—not a stain to be removed or a spill to be wiped away. Penitent, it learns early to seek refuge in the shell of an ear, to think of itself as beyond the stature of limitations, as long since forgiven, as smaller than small, next to nothing, yet there it is, as the onion sheds skin after skin, now in capital letters, now in a subordinate clause or footnote, now clear and legible, now in barely decipherable hieroglyphics. The brief inscription meant for me reads: I kept silent (Grass 2007: 28)

Grass compares memory metaphorically to an onion whereby one can peel, one by one, the layered pages of life. This 'peeling' or telling-all is, however, not all that simple a process. It is entirely up to the cook to decide to what extent and how finely he would like to peel the onion. Grass (2007: 221) candidly admits the problematic of memory and its reproduction in words: 'What memory stores and preserves in condensed form blends with the story in whatever way it is told.' Particularly meaningful is the second part of this proposition: 'in whatever way it is told.' At different places in the book he elaborates this point:

Memory likes to play hide-and-seek, to crawl away. It tends to hold forth, to dress up, often needlessly. Memory contradicts itself; pedant that it is, it will have its way.

When pestered with questions, memory is like an onion that wishes to be peeled so we can read what is laid bare letter by letter. [...]

Then ambition raises its head: this scrawl must be deciphered, that code cracked. What currently insists on truth is disproved, because Lie or her younger sister, Deception, often hands over the most acceptable part of a memory, the part that sounds plausible on paper and vaunts details to be as precise as a photograph (Grass 2007: 3).

Memory likes to refer to blind spots. What has stuck turns up uncalled for, under various guises; it enjoys disguise. Often it gives only vague information. Moreover, its mesh is sometimes large, sometimes small. Scraps of feeling and thought literally fall through it (Grass 2007: 162).

Grass is clearly not confident about trusting his memory, his 'rear-view mirror' (2007: 36) as he calls it. At several places he hesitates, listing interchangeable possibilities with 'or', formulating rhetorical questions 'Did I ...?' or using expressions like 'could be', 'probably'. One can see how difficult it is for him to recover the self in the young Grass. Perception based on the author's mental universe invariably plays tricks on the reception of reality. The German term for perception is *Wahrnehmung*, that is, there is indeed, an element of *Wahrheit* or truth in the perception. This truth and the perception of truth merge and submerge

into each other, leading to a realignment of empirical reality and the transformation of facts into artefacts.

Grass describes his autobiography as the story of the becoming of an artist. He devotes the first half to the war years—the usual father-son conflict, life as a recruit in *Waffen SS*, prisoner-of-war, the battle with hunger, pimples and cooking lessons in the camp. The second half contains memories of his apprenticeship (*Lehrjahre*) as a sculptor and travels (*Wanderjahre*) till he tasted fame as a writer. He also mentions the events and incidents of his life that find their way into his various literary works. The autobiography contains after every 50 pages or so an illustration by Grass of an onion in various stages of being peeled.

Autobiography and its problematic

The most intriguing signifier of autobiographical writing is the first-person ‘I’ whereby the author, the narrator as well as the protagonist are one and the same. The Romantics used the trope of *Bergwerk* or ‘mine’ to describe the urge to dig deep into the inner self. A century later, Freud called it the ‘talking cure’. Introspection of ‘I’ begins, according to Jacques Lacan, with the Mirror Stage when for the first time a child looks at its own image in the mirror. The dialectics of the ‘real’ self and its ‘appearance’ (*Gestalt*) in the mirror makes the infant realize itself across the mirror. It is captivated by its own image and this moment of identification of the self-vis-à-vis the adult often marks a turning point in its development for it is the birth of the tricky issue of identity. Self-representation or interpretation can henceforth develop into narcissism. At the same time historical, cultural and political deposits flow into it, reflecting the *zeitgeist*. Also the ‘I’ of an autobiography is not a frozen entity but is in a flux with changing existential conditions. These complexities make the genre of autobiography difficult to classify, conceptually and formally (Singh 2009). If defined as the life-story of a Being, it cannot be termed fiction. Some critics therefore call it literary or creative non-fiction. Others who are more distrusting assert that autobiographies are more often than not works of fiction for they invariably ‘construct’ a positive image of the self (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2000). I cite the example of Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography written in Yeravda jail, Pune. The autobiography, originally in Gujarati and translated in English by his secretary Mahadev Desai and first published in 1927, narrates his life story till the year 1920. Mahatma Gandhi cleverly tried to make his autobiography (Gandhi 2008) sound sincere by giving it the title *The Story of my Experiments with Truth* (1927) with emphasis on ‘truth’ and on the scientific nature of his ‘experiments’. Gandhi further emphasizes his point in the introduction: ‘I hope to acquaint the reader fully with all my faults and errors. My purpose is to describe experiments in the science of Satyagraha, not to say how good I am. In judging myself I shall try to be as harsh as truth, as I want others also to be’ (2008: xiv).

All authors of autobiographies would claim that. There are also other complexities in the genre. Going back and forth in time and space is not a simple affair. The mystery of time has always fascinated poets, philosophers, painters and linguists cutting across disciplines and genres. One can also understand it in terms of the persistence and disintegration of the reservoir of memory. Salvador Dali’s famous painting *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) also called *Melting Clocks* or *Soft Watches* depicts time not as a frozen but as a soft entity. Ants eating away a clock become a surrealist metaphor for erosion or disintegration of time. Marc Chagall often painted flying clocks with heavy, rocking pendulums. At times he painted

clocks upside down. Then there is the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, both of which can be natural or intentional, chronological or selective. Certain images from the memory are selectively enlarged whereas others are allowed to lie dormant. This is linked with the human tendency to boast and the other side of it: shame and disgrace. Boasting in terms of highlighting and exaggerating one's successes may come easily to an author but how far can one be honest about one's failures and painful details of life? (Singh 2009: 3).

Despite all these inherent contradictions and complexities exemplified by Augustine and Grass, the autobiographical genre has not only survived the test of time but it is in fact booming in the contemporary literary post-modern landscape all over the world. Several recent studies in humanities and social sciences point towards a memory boom, some even call it a memory craze which is explained mostly in terms of a flood of 20th century war and holocaust memories. Even university professors, particularly those who teach or have taught literature like Terry Eagleton and Edward Said, have written their autobiographies transforming themselves from critics into authors. These intellectuals, who use 'exile' as a literary topos, have ironically acquired today a celebrity or rather a star status (Singh 2009: 70-78). It has also become a fashion for celebrities like film and pop stars, footballers and politicians to publish their autobiographies, many of which are penned by ghost writers. Blogs in the cyber space are a recent entry to this genre. Although there is a specificity of each autobiographical discourse, most authors generally begin by explaining and justifying their decision to write about the self. The reasons for the current popularity of this genre are not just historical, as mentioned above, but also psychological. In the age of Facebook and selfies, revealing the ups and downs of one's personal and/or professional life is no longer left to men of letters; it has mass appeal.

Other forms of autobiographies

Europe has a long tradition of autobiographies in the form of diaries, memoirs and chronicles. Apart from this 'pure' form, autobiographical strands are often dispersed, consciously or unconsciously, in various works like essays, letters, novels, travel journals, philosophy, paintings, photographs and films. Some dedications and acknowledgements at the beginning of a book are deeply personal, even camouflaged. Artists sometimes draw themselves as part of the crowd in their paintings. Pablo Picasso disguised himself as a harlequin in his series on a circus. There is no dearth of examples. It takes a keen observer to detect and decipher these disguised forms of autobiographical narratives. In such cases the critic functions like an archaeologist excavating a site, sifting through material, collecting fragments and putting them together. For Picasso, painting was akin to diary writing. According to Federico Fellini, a renowned Italian film-maker, all art is autobiographical, for the pearl is the oyster's autobiography. The term 'autobiographical writing' is more appropriate for such works of fiction. Flaubert is known to have said something similar: *Madame Bovary that is me*. Goethe however insisted that *Werther* was not him (Heckmann 1984: 22). While Flaubert was emphasizing the role of autobiographical experiences in fictional writing, Goethe tried to play them down. Both positions are acceptable as a novel is often a complex amalgam of factual and fictional elements. Personal experiences of an artist are indeed a point of departure for his art, but art cannot be an exact reproduction of those experiences. Considerable churning takes place and facts enter into new combinations and permutations. Flaubert also ultimately

created a woman protagonist with whom many women in the world still identify. Then there are also fictional autobiographies in the form of novels like Thomas Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man* (1922) and Rainer Maria Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). Many of these European narratives in self-exploration are today considered classics.

New trends and Indian autobiographies

A discussion on the autobiographical genre will not be complete without referring to some trends and practices in the genre which are very recent in origin, particularly although not exclusively flourishing in the non-Western world with crass inequalities and injustices, not always of its making. Oral history is a fascinating addition to autobiographies mostly used by historians and folklorists. These are the 'as-told-to' autobiographies where the authorship and the writing are split. One person tells and the other records, interprets, edits and ultimately publishes. These cooperative autobiographies do away with the traditional assumption of the genre that the author, narrator and the protagonist are one and the same person. Some noteworthy examples are the aboriginal autobiographies, Afro-American slave narratives (for example, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*) and in the Indian context *The Other Side of Silence* (2000) with real stories of people directly affected by the partition of Punjab in 1947 as-told-to Urvashi Butalia and *Bandit Queen of India: An Indian Woman's Amazing Journey from Peasant to International Legend* (2006) — the story of Phoolan Devi as-told-to authors Marie-Therese Cuny and Paul Rambali. The power relations between the narrator and the recorder and commercial interests often play a crucial role in such narratives (see Singh 2009: 12–24).

Interestingly the search for clear-cut autobiographies in India renders few results, particularly in the ancient and medieval contexts. Autobiographies by some prominent historical personalities in medieval India are *Babarnamah* (Memoirs of Babar, 1530) in Turkish, Guru Gobind Singh's *Bichitra Natak* (Resplendent Play, 1730/32) rendered in verse in early Braj bhasha and Mirza Ghalib's *Dastanbuy* (Diary, 1857) in Persian. Then there is *Ardhakathanak* (Half a Story, 1641), memoirs of Banarsi Das, a Jain merchant and a poet written in Hindi verse. These examples are few and mostly in poetry form. Should we then conclude that there is no established tradition of autobiography in India, that it is not an indigenous oriental genre but a genre borrowed in modern times from the West, just like the genre of novel? When Gandhi expressed his desire to write an autobiography he was warned by a friend that he was being swayed by Western ideas (Gandhi 2008: xi). I will return to this point a little later.

An interesting addition to postcolonial Indian literature is Dalit writing which has taken to the Western genre of autobiography without any second thoughts. These narratives are accounts of brutal caste-based discrimination, a phenomenon specific to India. Here I particularly focus on Dalit autobiographies because they show some new typological features, different in nature from Augustine and Grass.

Bhim Rao Ambedkar (1891–1956) aptly termed the caste system 'the principle of graded inequality' (2013: 58). Interestingly it has been classified by some as a kind of racial discrimination. Dalit autobiographies appeared first in Marathi in and after the 1960s because this was Ambedkar's home state where he started his agitation. They were followed by other

Dalit autobiographies in Tamil, Telegu and Hindi. Three examples that I have selected are Baby Kamble's *The Prisons we Broke* (1986) originally in Marathi, Vasant Moon's *Growing up Untouchable in India* (1995) originally in Marathi and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) translated from Hindi.

These texts are a 'report card' on the treatment of untouchables in various parts of India (Valmiki 2010: xi). Some critics however prefer the term 'former untouchables'. In this essay I do not go into the merits or demerits of using this term. *The Prisons we Broke* is the first book of memoirs by a Dalit woman. Unlike Dalit autobiographical narratives penned by Dalit men, where Dalit women make only a 'guest appearance', *The Prisons we Broke* also exposes Dalit patriarchy that leads to the triple exploitation of caste, class and gender (Kamble 1986: 158–70). It also captures the day-to-day life of Mahar Dalits in Maharashtra and how Ambedkar transformed their wretched existence. Valmiki's book is situated in the *Chuhra* cluster in a village near Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh. *Growing up Untouchable in India* focuses on the tumultuous times of Dalit militancy in the 1940s culminating in mass conversions to Buddhism in Nagpur in 1956, the high point of the Dalit movement (Moon 2000).

In detailed sections on eating practices, Omprakash Valmiki and Baby Kamble recall how their people would collect leftover food from the plates of upper caste households. Both books also describe the disposal of dead animals in the village as it was one of the tasks traditionally assigned to Dalits. There are long graphic descriptions of the cutting, preserving and consumption of meat from animal carcasses as if the authors deliberately want to highlight how different their culture was vis-à-vis the mainstream Hindu culture, a sub-culture in many ways. In fact an interesting aspect of these authors is their uneasy relationship with the 'Other', that is, the Hindu religion, its scriptures and its gods and goddesses. According to Omprakash Valmiki:

Not only in our basti, but in the entire Valmiki community, people do not worship Hindu gods and goddesses. It is another matter for the educated among us who begin to worship them in order to assimilate. The Valmiki community worships its own gods and goddesses whose names are not to be found either in the Vedas or in the Puranas. The rituals and methods of worship are also different (Valmiki 2010: 62).

Vasant Moon similarly mentions the Dalit boycott of Hindu festivals like Diwali, Janamasthmi, Holi and Ganesh Chaturthi in favour of Ambedkar Jayanti and Buddha Jayanti.

The other common motif in Dalit autobiographies is the prominent space given to the difference of opinion between the two intellectual and political giants Ambedkar and Gandhi over emancipation of Dalits. Dalit autobiographies are marked by a strong anti-Gandhi sentiment. The authors admire Ambedkar for his firm stance demanding political power for the Dalits and they are highly critical of Gandhi for his patronizing attitude towards untouchability as he was simply seeking a voluntary 'change of heart' of the upper castes. The term *Harijan* (children of God) was coined by Gandhi and hence used by the Congress Party and *Dalit* (the crushed) was coined by Ambedkar and readily accepted by the Scheduled Caste Federation. Ambedkar does not mince words: 'I have criticised the Hindus. I have questioned the authority of the Mahatma whom they revere. They hate me. To them I am a snake in their garden' (Ambedkar 2007: 30). Valmiki (2010: 72) states that 'after reading Ambedkar, I realized that by naming the untouchables Harijans, Gandhi had not

helped them join the national mainstream, but had saved the Hindus from becoming a minority. Guarded their interests, in fact.’ The identity problems of the emerging Dalit middle class are also articulated in these books in terms of the deliberate efforts of some of them to hide or change their family names.

In formal terms, Dalit autobiographical narratives show some common features. The individual and the community, that is, the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ invariably overlap. For example, the title of Baby Kamble’s autobiography contains ‘we’. She argues without ambiguity that, ‘Anyway, for me, the suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And therefore *Jina Amucha* was the autobiography of my entire community’ (1986: 157). The original Marathi title of Moon’s autobiography is *Vasti*, clearly stressing the importance of the community over the individual.

Secondly, these authors are not bogged down by memory issues. Collective memory or the more recent term ‘cultural memory’, drawn from the memory theories of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and the German couple Aleida and Jan Assmann, is trusted and celebrated. The authors lay great emphasis on the factuality of their narrations, the authenticity of experience. In fact ‘experience’ is placed above ‘contemplation’ to showcase the deeply entrenched sense of purity and pollution in the Indian psyche. These texts may not be great literary works, for the language, architectonics of the texts and narrative techniques are fairly raw. But that is understandable considering that Dalit literature is relatively young and many Dalit autobiographies are maiden attempts at writing. They should be read and appreciated as acts of assertion. The intention is also to remember and record Dalit history and perhaps to ultimately heal wounds. Ambedkar’s speeches and writings are in that sense also autobiographical where the personal and the political invariably intersect. In his essay ‘Reminiscences of Untouchability’ he describes as an insider the indignities he had to suffer although in terms of education he was clearly way ahead of most Indians of his time, an elite in fact, with a degree in law from England:

It is then I learnt that a Hindu *tonga walla*, no better than a menial, has a dignity by which he can look upon himself as a person who is superior to all untouchables even though he may be a Barrister-at-law. (Ambedkar 2011: 22. Italics and English of the author)

Foreigners of course know of the existence of untouchability. But not being next door to it, so to say, they are unable to realise how oppressive it is in its actuality. It is difficult for them to understand, how it is possible for a few untouchables to live on the edge of a village constituting of a large number of Hindus, go through the village daily to free it from the most disagreeable of its filth and to carry the errands of all and sundry, collect food at the doors of the Hindus, buy spices and oil at the shops of the Hindu Bania from a distance, regard the village in every way as their home, and yet never touch nor be touched by any one belonging to the village (2011: 3).

Conclusion

In Europe the genre of autobiography has mostly focussed on individual experience often marked by a literary language and a sophisticated mode of presentation, whereas the recent autobiographies in the non-Western world record the collective experience of a specific group, often socially disadvantaged like Dalits, women, AIDS and cancer patients, sex workers and very recently domestic maids. In the latter case the autobiography becomes the testimonial voice of a subaltern people be it in terms of race, religion, caste, colour, gender or

physical challenges, with the protagonist in the role of a victim or a witness or both. The accumulated injustices find a literary outlet and telling one's story translates into a cathartic experience and/or a means of political resistance. In this case, the veracity of the statements becomes more important than the skills in language and creative writing. The 'auto' of the autobiography is turned into a collective 'auto'.

Certain conditions of modernity like emphasis on individuality promoted the writing of autobiographies in the West. Some theoreticians like Gopal Guru have argued, and rightly so, that Indian traditions celebrate renunciation rather than the self and hence the inevitable absence of the autobiographical genre in India (Kamble 1986: 158). I would argue that firstly, the absence of a particular genre need not be viewed as a lack or a shortcoming. There are evolutionary patterns, historical and cultural, that determine the popularity of a genre. Ghazal, for example, has a long and established tradition in the poetry of the Orient, whereas it is conspicuous by its absence in Western poetics. Secondly, the Orient has had different autobiographical practices. Autobiographical material is not available in the Orient as clear-cut texts in prose but it is realized indirectly in genres like poetry, travelogues and letters. Mirza Ghalib's letters document the political upheavals of his time as well as his existential condition. Lyrical poetry, particularly, has deep roots in the Orient and that is where the autobiographical urge finds its partial or full expression. The postcolonial India has however embraced the autobiographical genre with open arms altering its form and content to suit its specific needs as is evident from the emergence of Dalit autobiographies in the last few decades.

There are all kinds of autobiographical narratives. The genre has come a long way from the eloquent theological and philosophical treatise of Saint Augustine confessing his initial lack of faith in Christ to the atheist Günter Grass confessing his youthful 'rock-solid' faith in Hitler. Guilt and remorse are intrinsic elements in these public confessions. Gandhi's autobiography also follows these characteristics of confession and guilt. After all he was educated in England and that is where he came in contact with certain ideas. At the same time the genre has evolved historically in terms of form and content. In recent times the genre has undergone transformations which I have tried to document with the example of Dalit autobiographies which record the violence, physical and mental, that the Dalit outcasts suffered at the hands of the 'Other'. The Swiss-German literary critic Adolf Muschg (Heckmann 1984: 32) termed such writing *Abrechnungsliteratur*. Muschg was referring to German post-war authors who criticize and condemn in their works their parents' generation for its beliefs, deeds and upbringing of children. Muschg's term of *abrechnen* or settling scores through writing could be applied to Dalit literature as well, although it has negative connotations. The basic idea of confession remains, but these confessions are of a different order. The relationship with memory is also considerably different. Self often refers to group identity and memory is more often than not considered sacrosanct.

It would not be fair to say that Western and Indian autobiographies are fundamentally different. The idea or theory of a genre sets a common universal denominator. After that there is the specificity of each narrative in terms of form and content. Typologically, the boundaries of a genre can always be stretched to accommodate the changing world and worldviews. Intellectual ideas received from the past and from other parts of the world can always be reworked to suit contemporary needs. All memoirs take memories as the point of

departure and memories are not on the same plane as facts. The ultimate idea of telling-your-life story and healing through the written word is however common to all autobiographies. Ultimately they all grapple with the most fundamental yet perplexing question of human existence: ‘Who am I?’

I would like to end this article one personal note. Sometimes teachers narrate anecdotes and experiences from their lives in the classroom, voluntarily or through Freudian slips. This too is an autobiographical gesture.

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