



Autobiography and Historicism in

Ramadevi Choudhuri's *Into The Sun: An Autobiography*



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Abstract:

Literature and History appear to be sharply distinct disciplines but has been overwhelmingly concomitant to each other since their inception. Literature and history had been relying upon each other through centuries of inquiry. Within literature, autobiography/self-life writing shares an intense coalition with history to the extent that a specialized type of autobiography known as 'historical autobiography' has emerged. The historical autobiography is the vista where history and literature encounter and encourage. India with a glorious antique history has yoked incredible historical moments and leaders who have transcribed their bequests in the form of their autobiographies. Ramadevi Choudhuri is a noteworthy Indian nationalist who decreed the freedom movement in Orissa. Her autobiography *Into The Sun: An Autobiography* is a beguiling historical document that venerates both the narrator and the freedom movement both within Orissa and India. The historical discourse adds more light and new dimensions to the already existing antiquarian history.

Key Words: Historical autobiography, Historiography, Ramadevi Choudhuri.



Introduction

Autobiography has transmuted itself into a potential genre of literature that yields itself to the structuralist and post-structuralist concerns of the present century. Autobiography has transgressed into other disciplines of knowledge in order to compliment the other disciplines as well as itself. Its interdisciplinary adaptability makes it an effective genre that yield itself to multiple speculations from varies perspectives. Autobiography as a historical document has been a much investigated subject both by literary theoreticians as well as historical theoretician. Interestingly, they have unanimously accepted the productive outcome of the alliance between autobiography and history. History is the document of the important events that has occurred in the past. History is concerned about the events of the nations and the great leaders of different nations. History is macro in nature. History as a specialized branch of knowledge associated itself with 'truth' or 'fact'. History battles to disassociate itself from arts and inclines more towards science by its preoccupations with facts. Ancient Greek philosophers like Herodotus, Thucydides and Trevelyn have treated history as a branch of literature. In due course because of multiple theorizing, history started disassociating itself from literature and even holds an antithetical position against literature.

History is written for the people at the bottom about the leaders at the top. Hence the historical discourse is bottom-up. Another characteristic of history is its preoccupation with objectivity. Subjectivity is seen as an aberration that a good historian has to wean away from. An objective rendering of the historical events would rip out the emotional aspects that are associated with the event and the leaders. The extreme objectification of the events makes history dull and lifeless. History is national history or public history that by itself stands aloof from the common public.

Autobiography/self-life writing is a personal history of an individual by himself/herself. It shares the same agenda as history in documenting the events of the past. But it is antithetical in the characteristics of history. It is a subjective narrative that reflects both achievements and failures of an individual. It is a history about the individual in the bottom.



Hence, it is a bottom-up history. The autobiographical narrative aims to kindle and rekindle the emotions of both the writer as well as the reader. Catharsis is an important aspect of autobiographical writing. The individual self, which is the personal self, becomes the epicenter of an autobiography where as in regular history, the social/public self is the epicenter. History and autobiography are engaged with the facts and are differing only by a slight degree. Twentieth century has opened its doors for the more monumental histories like autobiography and has sidelined antiquarian history. Literature is a reflection of life, a life that follows chronology. Time and space are the two modifiers of life. Hence any literary work that sincerely tries to reflect life has to abide the chronology and spatial references. Literature in any form therefore imbibes history within it and also vice versa. Of all the genres in literature, biography and autobiography are deeply concerned with the temporal and spatial signification. The coalition between literature and history has initiated a stream of inquiry that has developed into a specialized theory known as 'New Historicism'. It has become a much debated subject that has revamped the hegemonic understanding of several related subjects.

Historical autobiography is a specialized kind of autobiography that provides an alternate historical narrative with different perspectives against the regular historical discourse. Autobiography by itself has the element of history (i.e.) micro history within it. Historical autobiography as a specialized variety has the historical events of national and international importance as the main subject with only a different perspective from that of the narrator, who might have been a victim, survivor or a participant of the historical event. Historical autobiography has a post-structural attitude in trying to rewrite the master narrative and contributing many alternative histories that can either reconstruct or deconstruct the already established historical master text. The deconstructive inquiry into the binary opposite of truth and untruth has challenged the empirical status of history. The deconstruction of history checks the scientific claims made by it as a treasure ground of truth. Therefore, the readers can expand their inquiry into other source of historical data.



Literature becomes the next potential source for historical inquiry. Historical autobiography can substantiate the readers with a rare kind of historical data seasoned with emotions. Historical autobiography reincarnates the past events and individuals within the present as well as the future. Historical autobiography has the potential to resurrect the past spontaneously at any time and space. For readers, the realization is certainly more pronounced while reading the historical autobiography when compared to antiquarian history. For the narrator/subject, who is the first person narrator, historical autobiography provides greater autonomy to express freely their thoughts and ideas with socio-political connotation. But in antiquarian history, the subjects have to depend on the third person narrator/historian to express. Hence, history texts are twice removed from reality.

Indian sub-continent had been the center of several important historical moments from antiquity. Every inch of the country and every aspect of Indian life are dominated by history. India's partaking in multitude of historical events has produced remarkable political, religious and social leaders down the ages from the remote past to the present times. Indian independence movement is a spiritual and philosophical movement that has facilitated the emergence of great leaders who have left back their great legacy in the form of their historical autobiographies. Leaders from almost all the corners of India and especially many women freedom fighters have written their historical autobiographies to substantiate the already available historical discourses.

Ramadevi Choudhuri [1899 - 1985] is an extraordinarily sensitive and capable woman who is adored by the people of Orissa as the Mather-Maa of Orissa. *Into The Sun: An Autobiography* [1998] is the English translation of Ramadevi Choudhuri's autobiography that was originally published in oriya as *Jiwan Pathe* [1984], which bagged the state Sahitya Academy award. Ramadevi was the younger of the two daughters of Gopal Ballabh Das, a magistrate under the British government. Influenced by Mahatma Gandhiji,



she fought against all familial and social constraints to evolve as a prominent freedom fighter and a social activist. She was immensely supported by her husband Gopabandhu and mobilized the people of Orissa to participate in Gandhiji's satyagraha movement along with her son Manmohan Choudhuri and daughter, Annapoorna. Ramadevi was influenced by her uncle, Madhusudan Das who was the first Oriya to get the honorable law degree from London. He awakened the spirit of nationalism in Orissa and was the fountain head of many original ideas. Her autobiography bears a testimony to the travails and turmoil of the important historical events of this period. Her transition from isolation to the center stage of national movement, from inertia to dynamism has been brilliantly depicted in the autobiography.

The autobiography in the initial chapters elaborates on the upper class society of Orissa, its joint family culture and the deep network of relations and obligations that brought them together. Ramadevi was inspired at a tender age of seven by the martyrdom of Khudiram Bose who tries to kill a tyrannous British officer and had been hanged for the offence. The traits of loving, caring and fighting spirit become synthesized in her to make her a befitting follower of Mahatma Gandhi. She was married at a very young age and elaborately writes about the arranged marriage system in India. She also writes about the encounter of traditions and modernity that was beginning at that time. Ramadevi was not accepted by her in-laws as her uncle converted to Christianity. Later when her brother-in-law Nabakrushna wanted to marry Malatidevi, a Brahmo and a Bengali, Ramadevi's mother-in-law was vehemently opposed to the marriage and has to promise her to curtail her activism in order to waive her objection. She was literally locked within the four walls by the promise. But Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Orissa gave her the liberation that she was yearning. She once again actively engaged in the freedom movement. Ramadevi also supported her husband Gopalbandhu to resign his deputy magistrateship to join the freedom movement and follow Gandhi. She fought together against the British rule and later continued their activism for the most downtrodden people of the state. Ramadevi was



a courageous woman who inspired thousands of simple and timid village women to break the salt law and several other operations that left the British authorities astounded due to the powerful women uprising. After the independence of India, Ramadevi Choudhuri plunged into the Bhoodan movement both with her heart and soul with the faith that the movement would generate a powerful force for change from among the people. Ramadevi influenced hundreds of women and girls from the marginalized sections of the society who have imbibed the twin spirit of compassion and non-violent militancy from Ramadevi. She also fought for the rights of the adivasis who were exploited by the avaricious forest officers. She also organized massive relief operations during the repeated floods and cyclones in Orissa. During the partition of East Pakistan in 1971, Ramadevi managed a massive humanitarian relief camp in Orissa for the war refugees from Bangladesh. Ramadevi also showcased her solidarity for the North-eastern India during the Chinese aggression in 1962 by boosting the morale of the people who had been distressed by the traumatic experience. Her autobiography traces her life till the emergency rule of Indira Gandhi from 1975 to 1977.

The autobiography just like Ramadevi's soul is no longer restrained to the cherished circle of family and friends but extends its wings into the outer world, with the nation and also the world as its canvas. Her son Manmohan Choudhuri, who has translated her autobiography into English, has remarked in the preface to the autobiography that, "This autobiography narrates in an unadorned and matter-of-fact style the momentous events in the life of the author and the nation." [VII]

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