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# UNIT 1 TERMS, HISTORIES, DEBATES

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Usha Bande

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Writing autobiography or presenting any self-portraiture has always been a difficult task for women, particularly because of socio-cultural constraints. Despite that, women have evolved a tradition of their own in autobiographical writings, and with the rise of feminist consciousness, they have gained success in reconstructing their personal lives with bold strokes. In this unit, we begin by introducing you to the origin of biography and autobiography as a literary genre. Subsequently, we will discuss some essential aspects of women’s autobiography.

Self-portraiture has fascinated human beings for centuries. All art involves self-portraiture in some measure. When painters capture their own image through painting they portray the self as they see it. But the main focus is on external appearance; when literary artists express the self in writing,

they are able to portray the working of the mind and give expression to the inner being. In biography, autobiography, self-narratives and other forms of writing the 'self,' self-portraiture is prominent. Who am I? What am I? How do I look? What did I do? - these are some of the questions that have motivated people to capture the moments of their lives. For example, diaries, letters, reminiscences, memoirs are all forms of self-portraiture. But each has a different perspective. Every age has produced some form of autobiographical and biographical literature. In this unit we shall define and discuss the various forms of narratives that come under self-representation or self-portraiture. We shall also assess the defining lines to see how one form is different from the other, and the distinctive nature of women's self-narratives.

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## 1.2 OBJECTIVES

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After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Define various forms of life-narratives such as autobiography, biography, diary, letters, confessions and memoirs;
- Explain the distinction between these terms;
- Discuss biography and autobiography as literary genres;
- Reflect on socio-cultural constraints on the writing of autobiography by women; and
- Examine how and why women's autobiography differs from that of men.

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## 1.3 UNDERSTANDING “AUTOBIOGRAPHY” AND RELATED TERMS

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Throughout this course on “Gender & Life Narratives”, you will come across the term ‘autobiography’, along with its various related terms in many different contexts. Therefore, it is important for us to begin with a very clear understanding of the terminology related to the area of life narratives. In this section, we will examine each of these terms so that we are able to define and describe them.

### 1.3.1 Autobiography

At the outset let us get to understand the term autobiography so that we are able to distinguish it from other forms that resemble it and are sometimes construed as autobiographies. In simple words an autobiography is the “life” of a person recorded by her/himself. S/he is the writer of her/his life as s/he lived it. It records personal experiences of the writer and contains his/her inner feelings. Likewise, life-writing, self-narratives, diaries, journals,

letters, memoirs, self-portraits and confessions also recapture significant segments of life and personal experiences. But can we term them autobiographies? Again, these forms also contain inner feelings and thoughts of the writer like an autobiography. Where do we draw the line between autobiography and diaries, journals, letters, memoirs and other forms? Let us admit that these other forms have autobiographical elements but from a literary view point, none of these are autobiographies in the real sense. Because the specificities of style, pattern, design, aesthetics and technique differ and separate autobiography from other biographical/autobiographical writings. Let us then begin by defining autobiography.

### 1.3.2 Definition of Autobiography

The etymology of the word “autobiography” may be traced to its roots in the Greek words “*autos*” (self), “*bios*” (life) and “*graphein*” (to write). Thus, literally, autobiography refers to writing the life of the self or as M.H. Abrams notes, “it is a biography written by the subject about himself” (Abrams, 1978, p.15). Basically, autobiography is a hybrid form containing traces of diaries, memoirs, journals and other self-writings. The main distinctive feature is that whereas autobiography has a rational sense of self, progressive narrative style and an appeal to the reader, the other forms often lack these consistencies. By and large, critics and scholars have defined autobiography as a retrospective prose narrative, written by a real person concerning his/her own existence, where the focus is on the individual life, in particular the story of the author’s personality. Stephen A. Shapiro calls autobiography “an art of perspective, an art of juxtaposed perspectives: the present commenting upon the past, the past commenting upon the present. It is an art of contrast and integration” (Shapiro, 2007, p. 119). Analysing this definition we find that the perspective is retrospective (that is the writer is looking back at his/her life); and also it is introspective (the writer looks within). The writer recounts her/his story in the first person “I”; it is the story of his/her life and the development of his/her personality. While telling their stories these authors chronicle the social, cultural or political events of their times.

Autobiography as a form is a personal mode of expression. It exposes the private truth about the “self” of the writer, it gives writers a chance to reveal this “self” and also to assess their life. The reason for penning down an autobiography may be a quest for identity, the need for self-expression, release from the pressures of living and even to offer resistance against constraints. For example, most of the autobiographies coming from the tribals and the Dalits not only expose social discrimination but also offer resistance to the prevailing detrimental norms. For women, autobiography can similarly offer a way of expressing their resistance against oppressive

patriarchal mores. It is generally believed that people are motivated to write autobiography for two reasons -failure and success. It is, in a way, their strategy to assess and analyse their decisive moments. From a psychological point of view, this is an effective mode of releasing tension. The autobiographer weighs his/her personal aspirations and ambitions and can evaluate the decisions that led to failure or success. It gives her/him a chance to improve and it also shows the path to the coming generation. For example, some chapters from Gandhiji's autobiography are usually included in school or college reading material for their ethical and moral significance for children.

#### Box No. 1.1

*In brief, we surmise that autobiography has the following basic elements:*

- *Self-consciousness;*
- *Intensely private aspects of life but developing binary relationship between private and public;*
- *Need to explain and justify the self;*
- *Intellectual exploration in the metaphors of life;*
- *Assimilation of real, historical time and space;*
- *Special relevance to cultural criticism;*
- *Self-construction laid out for readers to share.*

### 1.3.3 Life Writing

Life-writing is a general term used for life-narratives, autobiography, biography, diaries, letters, journals and memorials. Psychologists have noted the positive effect of writing life stories as they enhance learning that leads to personal growth and draws a person's life towards wholeness at its own tempo. Expression of feelings and sentiments can have a positive effect on the development of self-confidence, problem solving and gaining self-reflection. Another benefit is the pleasure and positive experience in re-living old memories which can also pass down family traditions and memorabilia.

Life-writing is almost 2000 years old. It was St. Augustine who wrote *Confessions*. It is his spiritual autobiography in which he speaks directly to God. In a way Mirabai's songs addressed to Lord Krishna are highly autobiographical as they express her feelings and urges. Margery Kempe, an early 15th century English woman, is believed to have written the first autobiography in English. In India, there is no strong tradition of life-writing

though some old pieces record the personal histories or stories of the writer. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha's *Women Writing in India* (1991) contains a number of pieces by women that demonstrate an autobiographical strain. Tharu and K. Lalitha find in these pieces "gestures of defiance or subversion" which were important for women to establish their identity (Tharu & Lalitha, 1991, p. 39).

### 1.3.4 Life-Narratives

The word 'narrative' derives from the Latin verb '*Narrare*' meaning to recount. Usually, the word '*story*' is used as a synonym with narrative. In this sense a narrative may be a fictitious work; a story, oral or written. It may have one or more '*narrator/s*' telling the story. Thus, there are fictitious narratives and also 'personal experience narratives;' the latter are real life stories like autobiographies.

By life narrative we mean a self-referential text in which the author progressively unfolds the course of his/her life. The word autobiography is commonly used to name life narratives. But autobiography is the life of the writer whereas life narrative can be either autobiographical accounts or testimonies. The earlier slave narratives, for example, were small documents ranging from two or three pages to several hundred pages. These narratives were vastly different in style and form and were mostly linear and chronological accounts of the subject. The story started with, "I was born" and then proceeded to give family history and other details.

Women's narratives, slave narratives, Dalit narratives are some of the forms of this genre that have given a space to the victimized or oppressed to tell their stories and also contradict the prevailing myths associated with them. For example, *Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave: Containing His History of Twenty-Five Years in Bondage and His Providential Escape* (1856) is one of the early slave narratives. Similarly, Dalit narratives represent the account of Dalit life, their problems and struggles and the impact of social discrimination. Early women's self-narratives like those written by Anandi Bai Joshi or Kashi Bai Kanitkar from Maharashtra; or Bengali narratives of women like Binodini Dasi and others recount their struggle with the patriarchal system, their restricted lives and their days in the inner recesses. In a broader sense, these narratives are not fiction; they represent the life that was lived. In other words, these are autobiographical accounts but are not autobiographies in the strictest sense.

### 1.3.5 Diary and Journal

#### **Diary**

The word "diary" is derived from the Latin root '*dies*' meaning "days" which suggests the day-to-day nature of the writing. The diary is also a kind

of autobiographical writing but it is not autobiography per se because it is intensely personal and usually not intended for publication (though many have been published subsequently). The recording is usually in hand written format with discrete entries arranged by date; it recounts what happened during the course of the day. It may include the writer's personal experiences, thoughts and feelings and also comments on current events.

Diary writing belongs to a recognizable literary form and has a long established literary tradition. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (1893, rpt. 2011), for example, is a literary masterpiece which provides the record of the first decade of the Restoration period from 1659 to 1669. It throws light on the coronation of Charles II in 1661; the plague of 1665 and the great fire of London in 1666. This shows that in addition to providing a textual record of the diarist's personality, the diary also chronicles social and political history. The diary of Anne Frank published in English translation (1947) as *The Diary of a Young Girl* is the record of the years 1942-1945 when Anne was hiding in Nazi-occupied Holland. Her diary gives a powerful and authentic record of the traumatic events of those years. The diaries of authors like Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf and many others are powerful narratives of socio-cultural happenings and personal upheavals. At times, women have avoided diary writing because it is usually intimately personal; but that cannot be put forward as a blanket norm because psychoanalysts like Karen Horney, novelists like Virginia Woolf and poets such as Sylvia Plath recorded their day to day intimate feelings in their diaries. These diaries provide mines of information about their inner selves, the socio-cultural, familial milieu they lived in and also the intensity of their experiences as women living in patriarchal societies.

### **Journal**

The term journal is generally synonymous with diary but it is often used to cover events of a limited period of time, like Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785). It may be more elaborate or even more irregular than a diary. A journal is a continued series of writings made by a person in response to his/her life experiences and events. Diaries contain a description of daily events. A journal may include those descriptions, but it also contains reflections on what took place and expresses emotions and understandings about them.

Let us look at some important features of diaries and journals, in relation to autobiographies.

- *Both dairies and journals have autobiographical elements but they lack continuity that an autobiography has because these are records of a limited period.*
- *Autobiographies are meant to be published and hence are polished and sophisticated in style but dairies/journals are informal.*
- *The object of autobiography is to take possession of the past in as original and coherent a way as possible but diary/journal does not look far back. It may be at the most a few hours' happenings that it records.*
- *Autobiography is chronological and may give family details; diary/journal does not.*

### 1.3.6 Memoirs and Letters

#### **Letter Writing**

A letter is also known as an epistle. Epistles in olden days were letters written to the church. These were usually didactic, very formal and addressed to a person or group of persons. From the angle of literature, a letter is a literary composition addressed to a known person who is the recipient and reader of the letter. Letter writing is an art; it is personal but is meant for a single reader. Letters may contain private sentiments of the writer and his/her observations of the happening around, though they are not as intense or elaborate as in a diary/journal. A good private letter is supposed to be short, interesting and engrossing. It gives chance to the writer to express opinion and attitude. In Northern Europe, epistolary literature enjoyed great popularity and it became a good tool for women to express themselves and their intimate feelings. One of the most acclaimed woman letter writers in the seventeenth century was Madame de Sevigne of France known for her witty and engrossing letters.

Letters express deeper sentiments and are personal and private. This form was used by many writers to convey their intimate feelings or problems. Virginia Woolf was a prolific letter writer. Her letters compiled in five volumes entitled *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* (1982) provide important data about the writer's life, her mental state and existential crisis. For example, her attitude towards life is revealed in a letter she wrote to Gerald Brennan on Christmas Day, 1922 where she shows the impossibility of renouncing and says, "life has to be sloughed: has to be faced: to be rejected; then accepted on new terms with rapture" (Woolf, 1982).

Some letters may, like the journal entries, focus on the existing socio-cultural or political situation. But whereas diaries and journals are for personal use, letters are for a supposed known reader. These have autobiographical elements but they record only the mood of the instant. If you read the collection of Virginia Woolf's letters, you might be able to see her psychological problems, the record of London society of her days and many other events or happenings. But more than that, they shed light on her increasing madness, her disillusionments, her faith in her husband and their mutual love and so on (Woolf, 1982).

### ***Memoirs***

The word memoir comes from the French '*memore*' or '*memoria*' meaning memory or reminiscence. As a literary genre, memoir forms a subclass of autobiography. Memoirs are autobiographical because we can know the identity of the writer and the reported experience is personal as in an autobiography. But memoirs are structured differently. In autobiography the focus is on the development of the writer's personality and the entire life is recounted. In memoir external fact is translated into conscious experience but the eye of the writer is focused less on inner experience than on the external realm of facts. As Karl Weintraub points out, "In memoir external fact is, indeed, translated into conscious experience, but the eye of the writer is focused less on the inner experience than on the external realm of fact" (Weintraub, 2007, p. 238).

Earlier, memoirs were written mostly by politicians or people in the court or by military leaders. They dealt with the writer's career, his achievements and not his personal life. Thus they have been more external. Like most autobiographies, memoirs are generally written from the first person point of view. A memoir is how one remembers one's own life. Since an autobiography is history it requires research, dates and facts double-checked. The memoirs of Mukhtar Mai from Pakistan entitled *In The Name of Honour: The Memoir of Mukhtar Mai* (2006) is a record of her life, rape and after. It is recorded by French author Marie-Therese Cuny as told to her by Mukhtar Mai. The authors substantiate their points to advance Mukhtar Mai's story and her experiences by quoting her all through the book. This style is followed because Mukhtar Mai cannot read or write and put her life on paper.

Memoirs are, in fact, literary representation of memory. So like memory they may be imperfect or inaccurate. Since they are culled out from memory, they may be distorted. An autobiography is the story *of* life; memoir is the story *from* life. A memoir has a narrow focus. An autobiography generally covers the writer's growth, career, family life, education, relationships, and inner struggle. A memoir does not claim to replicate the whole life. Autobiography may move in a linear manner from birth to fame; memoir focuses on a time in the writer's life about which he/she wishes to write.



Gandhiji's autobiography, *My Experiments With Truth* (1957) is a record of his life, his South Africa stay, his London days, relationships, and his inner struggle to come to terms with his ideals. In the course of this we get a vivid glimpse of the times of socio-political changes.

### 1.3.7 Confessions

To confess means to own one's wrong or sin. Confession is a religious practice in a number of religious traditions and stands for the acknowledgement of sin or one's wrong doings. Confessions exercised a major influence on the literary tradition of the west. They introduced a new kind of autobiography. Some critics call them literary achievements of a unique sort. The first in the genre was the *Confessions* written by St. Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (397 AD). It was generally referred to as spiritual autobiography and was seen as a theological treatise. St. Augustine's *Confessions* was not intended to portray the worldly life of the writer. He wanted the readers to see beyond his life and praise the just Lord. Later, Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* and many other works of the same nature focused more on admittance of mistakes and though autobiographical in many ways, these were not fully autobiographies.

### 1.3.8 Biography

So far, you have read about various forms of life-narratives that have autobiographical elements. Let us now look at biography, which is a distinct genre, since it is not written in the first person, but with resemblances to autobiography, as, life autobiography, it records the life narrative of one person. Biography is the story or reconstruction of the life of a person written by someone other than the person whose life is being recounted. With Plutarch's *The Parallel Lives* (Kindle Edition, 2012), we come across a systematic rendering of lives with an evaluation of moral standards and worldly achievements. During the middle ages, saintly traits and miracles of saints were recorded more than their human failings or achievements. With the Renaissance came rekindled interest in worldly power and self-assertion. A biography is a description of someone's life. It gives details of facts like education, work, relationships and the like. Biography also portrays the subject's experience of those events. A biography represents the subject's life story, highlighting various aspects of his or her life, including intimate particulars of experience, and may include an analysis of the subject's personality. Biographies provide authentic material on the socio-cultural, political and religious views of the time when the subject was living. For example, there are dozens of biographies of our great leaders like Swami Vivekananda, Lokmanya Tilak, Sri Aurobindo and many others written by scholars who look at their lives from different angles - freedom struggle, their quest for knowledge, spiritual inclinations, family life, the Indian renaissance and the like.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) *Define Autobiography.*

ii) *Fill in the blanks:*

i) *The word autobiography is a combination of ..... root words..... and .... and ..... . (4 words)*

ii) *The word narrative derives from..... verb..... meaning to .....(3 words)*

iii) *Another word for letters is .....(1 word)*

iv) *Memoir comes from the ....word ....meaning .....(3 words)*

v) *Confession is a religious tradition and means ..... (1 word)*

ii) *Define a diary and a journal. How do we differentiate between the two?*

**Activity:** *Read excerpts from the Diary of Anne Frank and of Mukhtar Bai. Think about and jot down the cultural and historical differences which make these diaries distinct from each other. Now, jot down any commonalities that you find, based on the gendered experiences described in these works.*

## 1.4 HISTORY OF BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In the previous section, we gained an understanding of terms such as biography and autobiography, and their various manifestations. Now, let us look at how these forms of life narrative evolved over the ages by examining them within changing historical contexts.

### 1.4.1 History of Biography

Biography writing started in the early middle ages when the authors wrote the life story of religious leaders like church fathers or monks. These had religious overtones. In the Islamic world, biographies documented the lives of many historical figures, prophets and others. But in the Middle Ages the trends changed and in Europe the lives of kings and knights were written about. For example, Sir Thomas Malory's *La Morte d'Arthur* (1485) is an account of the life of the fabled king Arthur. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century the trend changed with Thomas Fuller's *The History of Worthies of England* (1662) in which the focus shifted on public life. In America, the biography assumed a more didactic form and sought to define national character. With printing facilities developing fast, a large number of biographies came out in the USA from 1840 to 1860 and many were serialized in news papers. In the twentieth century, with interest in psychology, biographies often took to psychological explorations of personality. In India, during the Mughal period, the Emperors' lives and works were written by scribes - *Babarnama*, *Akbarama* can be quoted as such examples.

### 1.4.2 History of Autobiography

In the earlier times, the name used for autobiography was '*apologia*.' As the word suggests, it was a kind of apology and more in the nature of self-justification than self-representation. However, the purpose of life-writing is not to justify the self to people but to present the self and lived reality. In simple terms, critics have defined autobiography as "life" or as "a person's life written by himself." Many scholars of autobiography opine that autobiography cannot be bound within the boundaries of definition because it is related to the person's conscious "I" and springs from the person's psychological source.

As we mentioned earlier, the earliest autobiographical writing was St. Augustine's *Confessions* (397 AD). St. Augustine's tone is confessional as he tries to see beyond the worldly life to his spiritual growth. In the eighteenth century Jean Jacques Rousseau also titled his autobiography as *Confessions*. The autobiography of Benevento Cellini the sculptor written between 1556 and 1558 is considered one of the great works. He entitled it *Vita*, meaning "Life" in Italian.

By the eighteenth century change came in the subject matter. Emphasis shifted to the exploration of emotions and an examination of intimate problems of life as in William Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* (1823) . This work explores the author's love-life. By the nineteenth century, with the rise of education and printing facilities, modern concepts of fame and celebrity began to develop and it became a fashion, particularly among writers, politicians and public figures to write about themselves. In accordance with the romantic taste, these accounts also began to deal with childhood, upbringing and other aspects.

Of women's autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, written in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century but published only in 1936 is an outstanding account of transformation through religion. In the seventeenth century many autobiographical works came out like John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinner*, 1666. Since Autobiography is the art of self-portraiture it focuses on the "self". Due to the subjugated status of women, we notice a dearth of women's autobiographies since publishers may not deem a woman's autobiography and her quest to answer the question "who am I?" worthy of publication. As in other forms of literary writing, therefore, women's autobiographies were marginalized/ effaced or did not see the light of day due to the gender of the author.

### ***Research Interest***

By the nineteenth century autobiography came to be considered as the most refined product of the finest minds of a highly cultivated society. This resulted in the development of research interest in this field. Critical studies have revealed that autobiography is not simply a life narrative; on a higher plain, it has therapeutic effect. For example, William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850) shows his spiritual development and also how in writing it he got over his psychological problems. In order to understand the man or the woman behind the word, scholars started probing the psychological, social and cultural aspects of the writing.

Now that we have gained a good understanding of biography and autobiography and their historical evolution, let us turn to the issue of women's autobiographies. In the next section, we will examine these in the context of India.

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## **1.5 WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY: INDIAN PERSPECTIVES**

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An autobiography is a portrayal of the 'self' and depends on self-appraisal. Autobiography demands self-assertion in which one is conscious of the "I" and when one is writing about the self, one is indulging in a deep and sustained absorption with the self. In a culture which equates self-absorption

with self-centredness, and dissuades people from self-praise or self-portrayal in the interest of self-abnegation, writing autobiography could not become popular. We took to autobiography writing only in the twentieth century since we do not have many examples of earlier autobiographies, especially by women. But today, we have autobiographies of sportspersons, mountaineers, politicians, military leaders, actors, and ordinary women and men from almost all walks of life.

### 1.5.1 Women's Autobiography

Writing autobiography has been a difficult genre for women. Autobiography requires revealing lived realities, inner feelings and thoughts; this goes against the social norms of chastity, silence and self-effacement imposed upon women in patriarchal societies. Women lived in the milieu of self-denial and self-effacement and were trapped in the cultural norms of shame, modesty and submission. Despite that, there are a few brave women in the world who have written their autobiographies. In the Indian context, Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam, Maharani Gayatri Devi and Vijaya Raje Scindia have written boldly about their lives. Likewise biographies and autobiographies of actresses, danseuses and those in the performing arts have also been published. More recently Bama, Urmila Pawar and many Dalit women have made concerted efforts to focus attention on their doubly marginalized status and problems as women and Dalits. You will read more about these authors in the unit on "Dalit Life Writings" (Block 4, Unit 3) of this course. These women have set an example of powerful autobiographical writings.

A woman usually writes her autobiography not as an isolated "I" but with an awareness of the collective identity. To understand the genre of women's autobiography, one has to evaluate how gender identity influences their writing both in form and content. Women's autobiographies can be broadly identified as flowing into two streams: the writing of acceptance and the writing of protest. The former is governed by self-effacing trends and the latter shows resistance. Of the earlier women autobiography writers we can name Anandibai Joshi, Kashibai Kanitkar, Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade from Maharashtra, Binodini Dasi, Rassundari Devi from Bengal and many others from other parts of India. Some of the well-known autobiographies of women in the twentieth century are Sudha Mazumdar's *A Pattern of Life*, 1977; Durgabai Deshmukh's *Chintaman and I*, 1980; Kamala Devi Chattopadyaya's *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces*, 1986; Kamala Das's *My Story*, 1976 and Amrita Pritam's *Revenue Stamp*, 1977. Generally, women's autobiographies deal with sentiments and emotional upheavals and relationships but in recent years many women writers are giving bold portrayals of their lives like Kamala Das, Dilip Kaur Tiwana, Ajit Cour and many others. They are no longer passive witnesses to life; they take

challenges and face changes with courage. They thus become role models for the coming generation of women. In the twentieth century, the autobiographical genre got a new meaning as a tool of expression and resistance against patriarchy and opened up new vistas for women.

### 1.5.2 Biography and Autobiography as Socio-Cultural Documents

No life can be written in a vacuum. Biographies and autobiographies are about real persons living in a real time span and undergoing real-life experience. They live in a society conforming to its norms and undergoing experiences. The self-portrayals by both men and women reveal the socio-cultural realities. For example, Dalit women's autobiographies show the impact of Ambedkar's call to the Dalits to take to education and try to improve their lot. In the process we come to know of many facts about social discrimination against the downtrodden, their efforts to ameliorate their lot, the community's attitude and the political milieu. We get to know how caste becomes the main hindrance in a person's growth, and how one has to fight with the dominant cultural norms to get justice. But if we juxtapose, say, Bama's autobiography *Karukku* (2012) and Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) we find women's double marginalization. Another example can be cited from Gulab Bai's biography which we will examine in greater detail in the next block (Block 2, Unit 3). Political happenings, contemporary history, cultural changes, communal feelings and many problems of the times get reflected in autobiographies and biographies.

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## 1.6 FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S LIFE WRITING

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Reading women's biographies and autobiographies is significant from the feminist perspective and can be of additional interest from the socio-cultural aspect. In women's writing there is a steady current of resistance to patriarchy and patriarchal hegemony within the normative models of the given socio-cultural constant. It cannot be denied that women's writings are marked by questions of gender. Gynocritics often opine that all writing is articulation of gendered experience and women's autobiography shows a marked existence of the gendered realities of their lives. From the early narratives of nineteenth century to the present day, women's self-portraits open up vast vistas of feminine experience. Women have recorded their reflections on the peculiar problem of being a woman because living in constricted and restricted circumstances, they are able to view their life-story more intensely. Their inner voices reaching out to us across almost two centuries claim attention on several grounds: the portrayal of socio-cultural reality and women's struggle to change their lot, their coping mechanism, and search for the female self.

**Check Your Progress:**

- i) Which of the following diary/journal provides the record of the Restoration period from 1659 to 1669?
- a) *The Diary of a Young Girl*
  - b) *Journal of a Tour of Hebrides*
  - c) *The Dairy of Samuel Pepys*
  - d) *The Berlin Stories.*
- ii) Define (i) Memoir (ii) Letters. Distinguish between the two.  
(50+50+50)

- iii) What is the title of St. Augustine's spiritual autobiography?

On the broad national level women's biographies and autobiographies help us to understand the rise of feminist consciousness in India. The reconstruction of their personal lives can hold a mirror to the wide spectrum of socio-cultural-historical reality and psychological dimensions of their personalities. Women's autobiographies and biographies show their confusion, anger and a deep sense of hurt at being treated as second-class citizens, at the discrimination, marginalization, marginality and restrictions imposed on them. Sometimes, they even give vent to their anger as in the case of Kashibai Kanitkar, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra who titles her autobiography as "Purush Droha" which translates as "Treason Against Men."

### ***Women's Life Writing as a Distinct Genre***

Genre is a French word used in literary criticism to signify a literary species or a literary form into which literary works are classified. Further classification depended on established literary norms regarding subject matter, form, style and effect. In this scheme autobiography did not fit in for long. Critics questioned the authenticity of the self-determining narrator, the role of memory and the reliability of the experience. There are at present two schools of thought: those who consider autobiography to be a genre and those who refuse to see it as such. Those who do not consider it a genre argue that autobiography cannot be defined, its boundaries are not fixed and the style of narration gives an idealized picture which may be between fiction and reality. Further, it is said that autobiography is representation of life; life has no form and as such autobiography can do without form. That is not its weakness.

About women's autobiography as a separate genre, critics have different views. Some opine that it is a distinct genre as it records the experience of a woman's life beyond her individual/isolated experiences and within the context of the whole tradition of women's writing. Others claim that writing autobiography means transcending her female identity and obliterating the two spheres: public and private. Since she cannot do this for civility and urbanity, her writing cannot be authentic. Mohinder Singh (1985) places women's autobiography alongside the disadvantaged groups' self-narratives and opines that "both women and dalits/tribals live in a milieu of self-denial and self-effacement; both are entrapped in the cultural mores of shame-oriented and reticent attitude of the society" (Singh, 1985, p. 47-52). They have stories but they cannot write the down revealingly, consequently art suffers as the gendered perspective restricts the autobiographical texts. However, women's autobiography should not be judged or defined from male paradigms. It may not fit well into the established canons, but let us not forget that women have created a space for themselves between "the cultural assignment of gender and the individual's translation of (those) assignments in autobiographical texts" (Nussbaum, 1989, p.149).



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## 1.7 LET US SUM UP

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Autobiography as a narrative form has a long history in the European tradition. Its form is very old but it came into existence only in the eighteenth century. Autobiography was a part of literature along with several other forms like confessions, diaries, journals, letters, memoirs, self-narratives and biography. But though these forms have autobiographical or biographical elements they cannot be called autobiography because of subtle difference in style, treatment or subject matter. Let us summarize these as follows:

- A diary or journal contains random jottings which may be date-wise but which are not edited.
- Self-narratives are organized chronologically and are mostly testimonies. These are not written like an autobiography.
- Confessions are admittance of some mistake and have a limited scope; they do not reveal life as the author lived it.
- Letters express the writer's feelings, emotions and fears but they are for a specific person and not for public reading, although letters of great writers or politicians have been compiled and provide rich material to know the personality of the writer.
- Biography deals with the story of an individual's life but it is written by a person other than the protagonist himself/herself.
- Memoirs focus on the life and time of a person but earlier these were written by politicians or military leaders to recount their public adventures and dealings, not their private self.
- Women's biography and autobiography present a gendered view of their lived experiences that are distinctly different from the male experiences of life. It is, therefore, vital to study them as a distinct genre to understand their literary and social value.

From the above discussion it is clear that autobiography presents the record of life of the writer, his or her attitude, actions, reactions, and growth and is set in the socio-cultural milieu of the writer's time. In the remainder of this course, you will learn in much greater detail about the genre of life-narratives, and the role these have played in women's lives, in terms of women as authors, readers as well as critics.

## 1.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) a) What do you understand by the term life-writing?
- b) Discuss the important elements of autobiography.
- c) Do you think that life-narratives have been particularly suited for women's life-writing? Why or why not?
- 2) "Diaries and journals have strong autobiographical elements but we cannot term them autobiographies. Why? Give four reasons and discuss each of these in detail.
- 3) Comment on biography and autobiography as socio-cultural documents, especially from a gender perspective.
- 4) "Reading women's biographies/autobiographies is significant from the feminist perspective." How and Why? Discuss.
- 5) Have autobiographies been a popular genre in the Indian tradition? Why or why not? Choose any one autobiography by an Indian woman to show how it has been used as a tool of expression/ resistance or both.

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## 1.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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There is continuing debate over the definition, nature, and scope of this system. Canal invested in by the US, located in Panama The last Chinese dynasty The war that led Western imperialism in China The trade of illegal narcotics in China A person in bondage or servitude US Commodore who defeated British on Lake Erie World History Terms and Definitions Unit 4 Set 1 52. Enclosure movement During the Industrial Revolution, it was the consolidation of many small farms into one large farm, which created a labor force as many people lost their homes 53.Â 64. Proletariat new class of factory workers that emerged as a result of the industrial revolution World History Terms and Definitions Unit 4 Set 1 65.