

The Question of Self, The Question of Life: Identity in the Autobiographical Narratives of Domestic Workers

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Abstract

This article discusses the autobiographies of two domestic workers to study how they fashion their identity through their writing. The texts discussed are Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* and Amin Sheikh's *Bombay Mumbai: Life is Life, I Am Because of You*. The article aims to draw commonalities, as well as subtle differences in these narratives to focus on construction of identity; and writing as a means of empowerment and self-realization. It also argues how notions of the self and memory play a part in shaping the veracity of these autobiographical accounts.

Keywords: Autobiography, domestic workers, identity, self, memory.

This article discusses Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006) and Amin Sheikh's *Bombay Mumbai: Life is Life, I Am Because of You* (2016) to study how the complex process of self-fashioning takes place through the literary genre of autobiography. A close engagement with these narratives gives an insight into the courage of domestic workers, and derives a realistic idea of how they broke away from the debilitating poverty that defines their early lives. Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* stirred significant scholarly interest when it was published in 2006. Translated into 12 languages from the original Bengali autobiography, *Aalo Andhari*, it tells the story of Baby's early childhood and marriage. Her unfortunate circumstances compelled her to leave home and travel to find work. Working as a domestic helper became her only means of livelihood. After several work assignments, her luck turned when

she was employed by Professor Prabodh Kumar, who encouraged her to record her experiences after he noticed her interest in reading. Her narrative takes the reader through her tumultuous journey from a childhood in a broken home, to being a child bride at the age of 12, suffering an abusive husband and finally her defiance of social mores in leaving her husband and beginning work outside her home.

Amin Sheikh's autobiography, *Life is Life, I Am Because of You* chalks out his early life from rescued street child to being the famous advertising professional Eustace Fernandes' "ManFriday" and finally an independent entrepreneur. The D'Souza's, who were Eustace's neighbours, befriended Amin and encouraged him to write a book. Despite the differences of gender, religion and region, his experiences show stark parallels with Baby's. Amin ran away from his home to escape his stepfather's anger. The sense of loss of family and the sexual predation he encounters at a young age echo Baby's experiences. Yet, both share an uncommon grit, which enabled them to escape a common existence and create an uncommon life for themselves. His main intention behind publishing and selling copies of his book was to be able to fund his dream project of opening a library-cum-café named "Bombay to Barcelona".

Autobiography as a Celebration of Identity

Autobiography as a form of expression naturally challenges, as well as identifies with the politics of cultural identity. Roy Pascal defines autobiography as "a retrospective account that involves a "search for the true self" (Berryman, 1999, p. 77). The autobiography form is believed to best express what the writer thinks of himself/herself; it allows the author to explore, discover or in some cases even create or reinvent oneself. In that sense, autobiography is considered to be "truer" than any other form of literature as it stems from the writer's deepest memories and sharpest fears. The attitude of the author shapes the construction of the self in the work.

The traditional Western concept of autobiography is one that deals with the "history of the self" (Anderson, 2007). This tradition includes St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, Rousseau's *Confessions* and William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. Laura Anderson identifies the "development of a narrative for the self" as the quality that is common to these autobiographies. *Confessions* narrates the story

of St. Augustine's conversion to Christianity. The narration of incidents forms the larger idea of his personality. Other notable autobiographies, like Rousseau's and Wordsworth's, also highlight the growth of the narrator through their stories. Rousseau's *Confessions* shares a title with St Augustine's work, but is secular in content. Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude* is thought to have been inspired by Rousseau since they share common themes such as love for nature, a revelling in the memory of childhood, and a celebration of the natural, Romantic idea of the self. There is also a distinct emphasis on selfhood and an attempt to highlight the growth of the individual against the backdrop of the incidents narrated in the text. These texts can be said to have formed the dominant pattern and style of autobiographical writing. Georg Gusdorf, an eminent modern critic of autobiography, observes that "autobiography requires a kind of consciousness of self which is peculiar to Western man" (Anderson, 2007, p. 33). This interestingly restricts autobiography to a very specific cultural and social demography.

Traditionally, the autobiographical form has been seen as an act of privilege. By the very fact that the subject of an autobiography is the writer himself, the autobiography form can be interpreted as a glorification of the individual self (Kumar, 2010). Yet, this often does not hold true in the Indian context. Perhaps due to the cultural tradition of constant self-effacement, which is taught early in life—by virtue of one's social position—due to their gender, religion, caste, ethnicity or language, there is a reticence about acknowledging and accepting one's inherent strengths. Whereas a Western individual would revel in and showcase their virtues, the Indian subject displays humility.

As Raj Kumar points out in his book *Dalit Personal Narratives* (2010), the genre of the autobiography is not common to Indian literature or culture. The instances of autobiographies that exist can be better described as "personal narratives" since they are memoirs or recollections of events in the writers' lives. An argument that can be extended to other personal writing in the Indian context is that there is hardly any scope for the narrator to celebrate his life, as it may be full of pain and suffering. "By writing their autobiographies, Dalits are mobilizing resistance to fight against all forms of oppressions which they have been experiencing for ages" (Kumar, 2010, p. 4). The Dalits have thus used the autobiography form to develop a sense of identity, although Baby and Amin are not Dalits, they are marginalized in their own way. Baby is a poor woman,

which makes it easy for society to ostracize her. Amin is a Muslim street child, in both their cases, the reason for their oppression is class, rather than caste.

In the Indian context, the idea of the individual 'self' has taken time to develop. Due to various social, economic and cultural factors, the self has traditionally been thought of as subservient to the larger concerns of community and society. Thus, the autobiography form has not thrived in India, as it requires the writer to be immodest in placing himself/herself as the centre of attention. In India, the most famous autobiographies written in English, in the early twentieth century, are Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* and Nehru's *An Autobiography*. The idea of the autobiography as a social and historical document developed with Gandhi and Nehru. Mulk Raj Anand and Nirad C. Choudhuri's autobiographies also discuss their concern for social change. Most Indian autobiographical texts are not fully fleshed out autobiographies; they usually cover a short period of the writer's life, or concentrate on an issue that holds particular significance for them. B.R. Ambedkar's reminiscences, *Waiting for a Visa* falls in this category. The work gives short yet vivid accounts of instances in which he faced discrimination due to his caste.

Robert J. Graham acknowledges the potential of the literary genre of the autobiography. The unique characteristics of the autobiography form leads itself to straddling the forms of history and fiction. The author can manipulate the material to project what he/she perceives as the truth, for the reader to assimilate. Thus, the divide between actuality and the perceived notion of it forms the reader's idea of how the author is fashioning his or her image. The perspective of the domestic worker, I hope will add to this tradition of autobiography as a means of asserting one's identity. Through their reminiscences, the writers seek to create a history of their own.

The Notion of Self in Autobiographical Narratives

The author projects "self" in the autobiography. Their sense of selfhood makes them choose certain events over others. The very act of writing is empowering, it suggests an assertion of the individual's personality. On closer examination, these narratives seem to undercut the shaping of the narrator's self. Linda Anderson terms autobiographers as "historians of

the self" (Anderson, p. 18). The question is how much of the image they create is self-fashioned, and how much is an actual revelation of their true thought and character. One needs to study whether these writers achieve any extent of self-exploration. The texts explicate the story of the narrator, but beyond that, there are few details about the inner thoughts that shed any light on their turmoil. What minimal revelation of thought and character that spills out of the pages, seem to be unconscious. Self-assertion is evident, in the keenness with which the material is written, yet self-exploration seems missing. This could be linked to the fact that both these "authors" are not comfortable with the act of writing. They have a story to tell, undoubtedly, yet, the actual narration is achieved after cajoling from their mentors, and with reluctance due to their unfamiliarity with the written form of language. It is a point of interest that both do not wilfully go about writing their autobiography. In a sense, both are coerced into writing it—Baby by her employer, Amin by Sahir, the young neighbour he befriends while working for Eustace.

The singular statement made quite early in her book, that drives Baby's narrative is her declaration— "I felt no one could be as unfortunate as myself" (Halder, p. 12). This self-image sustains Baby's actions through much of the book, rendering her weak and helpless. Only when she decided to leave her village and seek a new life for herself, does the tone and tenor of her narrative change. This change is honed by her employer till she finally finds her voice. The same self-doubt and wonder are echoed in Amin's statement, "I cannot believe the life I have led." (Sheikh, 2016, p. 41). Both these autobiographical accounts show their creators evolve into more sophisticated narrators than what they were at the beginning of their journey. "Dreams are free", Amin says as he lays bare his heart about the plans he has for his future (Sheikh, 2016, p. 11). His positivity seems to be a product of his years at Snehasadan, which gave him love and acceptance that allowed him to be confident and happy despite his horrific experiences. Baby is also propelled by her singular desire to provide in the best possible way for her children.

The most significant commonality is that their journeys as writers begin when their employers recognize their potential and create an environment which is conducive to the development of their personalities. Their employers were able to create a space which gave them the freedom to understand and accept their situations, and then evolve into writers. The complexity of the relationships between employer and employee

that exist within these texts are evident in the manner in which both Baby and Amin need and seek constant validation from their employers. Their descriptions of their mentors form an important part of their narratives. It is important to explore the dynamics of this relationship since it reflects, very significantly, the interaction between two classes of people, between the use of language and between the different needs of the relationship.

Interestingly, both Prabodh Kumar and Eustace Fernandes not only sustained their employees through financial help, but guided them to actually improve their circumstances. In working for Eustace, Amin experienced a very different way of life from what he had seen previously. Eustace was an artist, and in contrast to all the other people Amin had encountered in his life, Eustace did not attempt to hold him down at all. "Okay! Stay as long as you like!" (Sheikh, 2016, p. 110) is his response to Amin's unwillingness to stay. For the first time in his life, flexibility and a sense of control was handed to Amin. Amin acknowledges Eustace's all-embracing nature when he says, "Eustace never treated Mary like a servant. To him, she was part of his family. And it grew to be the same with me" (p. 113). At the close of his memoir, Amin is doing well in life, has managed to find a place to rent for his mother and sister, and their improved standard of living is marked by their ownership of a television set and a gas stove. Living and staying with Eustace, Amin learnt many modern-day skills and improved his writing. Amin acknowledges Eustace as "a father and a friend" (p. 128).

Tracing Memory in Autobiography

The manner in which both autobiographies address memory is very distinct from the conventional autobiography form. Conventional autobiographies celebrate past memories and treasure childhood as an idyllic time. In Baby and Amin's narratives, childhood memories are scars which have caused consistent pain in their lives. Memories of bitter experiences propel them into a position where they strive to create a happier present for themselves.

Childhood memories are peppered with painful experiences for both Amin and Baby: the lack with which their families lived, Baby's sense of abandonment due to her mother leaving, the emptiness after her sister's death, Amin's anger at his family unit's disintegration, experiences

with their step-parents, the abject poverty which they suffered—their childhood memories do not offer the beautiful escape from reality which most *bildungsromans* dwell upon. The breakdown of the family unit is a scar in the memories of both Baby and Amin.

In *Memory* (2009), Anne Whitehead traces the history of the engagement of Western literature with the concept of memory. She writes, “memory is concerned with the personal and is inherently bound to identity. Through memory, then, the past of the individual can be revived or made actual again, in the sense of being brought into consciousness” (Whitehead, 2009, p. 7). This statement is of particular significance when seen in the context of Baby’s occasional use of the third person for herself. Baby distances herself from her memories in order to not let them come to the surface of her consciousness. Baby uses the third person when describing those events and periods in her life in which she experienced the most trauma or emotional upheaval. “Her childhood fascinates Baby. Perhaps everyone is fascinated by the things they’ve been deprived of, by the things they long for” (Halder, 2006, p. 28). The second time she resorts to this manner is at her wedding, where she is a child bride— “Baby wonders how she spent that day of sorrow in such merriment” (p. 34). Later, after having experienced childbirth, and then in a recollection of snatches of happiness in her childhood, her reference to herself as a separate entity that she can see and comment on, can be seen as her psychological defence. By doing so, she can distance herself from the event, and not let it affect her as it did when it actually happened. Memory, in her case, is debilitating. Similarly, Amin fights the memories of his past, although in his case, this emotion manifests itself as a desire to buy a home for his mother. “It was a very important dream for me—to give my mother a home” (Sheikh, 2016, p. 127).

Autobiography and its Socio-political Context

An autobiography draws attention to the writer as a subject, to be “studied” by the reader. Thus, the idea of the self that it creates would necessarily be a strong social and political statement. An important factor to be kept in mind, while studying these narratives, is that these writers are new to the world of letters. Neither Baby nor Amin completed their basic school education—one due to the lack of cooperation from her family, and the other owing to his own disinterest. How much of the narrative then, can be seen as independent creation, and how much as

an external fashioning of their ideas? Personal narratives of race and gender necessarily rely heavily on memory. This naturally blurs the line between history and fiction.

Both texts under scrutiny reveal the narrators' intense examination of the self. Baby Halder and Amin Sheikh offer self-reflexive accounts of their own experiences. Amin describes the difficulty he faces in expressing his thoughts and his emotions in a tangible form. "I don't quite know how to explain all that is inside me" (Sheikh, 2016, p. 13). He says, "I wish I could write it all down, All that I have inside me, but I don't have the words" (p. 59). The simple language of the texts conveys a simplicity and honesty of expression that may not have been found in a more sophisticated text. Baby Halder's tone appears quite matter-of-fact and emotionless at first glance. Her initial experiences are a string of horrors. However, as one immerses deeper into the narrative, it becomes obvious that her tone is a shield to protect herself from the hurt she feels. It is a screen which Baby uses to hide her bruised soul, caused by the travails of her early life.

The tool for this self-creation and self-consciousness is language, and this is a problematic area. Both have to confront their awkwardness with the language they use—Bengali in Baby's case, and English in Amin's. They need to be fluent to the extent of being able to convey their emotions. Both encounter problems in handling language, and being able to express their feelings through their memoirs. Halder's text is so raw, that one can actually see the progression of her writing—from shaky, indecisive sentences to a confident voice which is capable of creating discerning arguments and passing judgements. In Sheikh's narrative, the story seldom rises above a surgical compilation of facts. Yet, his desire to change the course of his life transforms the record of facts about his life into a genuine heart-felt memoir. By the end of the narrative, the descriptions paint a realistic picture of his transformation from a street child to finally becoming an entrepreneur in his own right.

The Position of Truth in Autobiography

In the course of writing an autobiography, the question of verity and objectivity arises. An autobiography may not be totally authentic, in that it could be influenced by external pressures. Despite the personal growth one sees in the narrators of these autobiographies, the very

nature of the autobiographical form can render this progression suspect, as their narrative can be questioned for its reliability. Since this form of writing is personal and strongly expressive, the professed intent of the writer may be at variance with what appears from a critical study. The autobiography may be compromised by influence of others. Sympathy and support from others could make the writer naturally develop a soft corner or a positive bias for them. In this context, Halder's narrative holds Prabodh Kumar's role in her life as stellar, surprisingly Sheikh shows a more refined examination of his mentor, Eustace Fernandes. While on the one hand he repeatedly acknowledges the role Eustace played in his life—he does not spare him for any slights that came his way. Sheikh exhibits a depth of sensibility which is missing in Halder's narrative. Of course, one reason for the difference could be that while one has access to Sheikh's narrative in English, Baby Halder's comes as a translation from Bengali. Halder's narrative is filtered through her mentor's translation. Therefore, the reader can never be certain of the honesty of the text.

This raises the question of "intention". Intentionality is the idea that the author, being the creator of the text, controls its meaning. Here, the inherent assumption is that the authors have complete authority over their own texts; the author's authority dictates the inclusion or omission of facts. A surprising gap in Amin Sheikh's narrative is that he does not talk about his religion while his name clearly identifies him as Muslim. Given the emotionally charged opinions among common people in India on religious difference, it is difficult to believe that he did not experience any persecution which can be attributed to his religion. One could say, by way of explanation, that he was brought up at a Christian orphanage and he inculcated Christian values. Yet, this would not ring true. The text is as much what it presents, as what it omits. It is a clear instance of choosing not to highlight this aspect of his life at all. He may have realized that it is a controversial and complicated issue, which could lead to animosity, or a loss of interest in his book and, as an extension, his café project, which is why he probably chose to not mention it all.

Both Baby Halder and Amin Sheikh are exceptional individuals. What stands out in both their autobiographies is their grit and the "never-say-die" spirit with which they coped with all the challenges. Baby Halder has now successfully written a second book. An eloquent speaker, and a regular at book festivals, Halder has moved to West Bengal. Her children

are well-settled and she is no longer a domestic worker.

Amin Sheikh has successfully set up Bombay to Barcelona Library Café—and moved on to fulfil greater dreams. The café in Bombay is based on the concepts he clearly laid out in the introduction to his book. The café would provide a livelihood for children as they attempt to get their bearings in the real world. He also saw the café as a space where people could explore their artistic nature. Not only did Amin succeed in creating his dream café, but he now also has an extremely strong social media presence. He is well-travelled, and was in 2019 touring Spain, organizing talks about the course of his own life—managing to raise awareness and funds for all the ideals he stands for.

Both the works discussed in the paper are memoirs which reflect on the idea of self. Since the writers present their own experiences, the emotion that emanates from their writing is raw and intense. Despite slight flaws in the language and syntax of the texts, the narratives record a strong sense of individuality of the writers. The autobiographical form here becomes a route to self-realization, and representing the self becomes the natural progression towards realizing the self.

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