

An Analysis of Self and Society in J.L. Nehru's *An Autobiography*

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ABSTRACT

Autobiography as a genre serves the purpose of self-expression and self-explanation. The attainment of self is also a common practice since the time immemorial but it has different ways. Autobiography presents a long history in a narrative form having narrative techniques with varieties in which the author pours his own personal experience blended with self and society. J.L. Nehru's autobiography written at the threshold of Indian freedom struggle assimilates the feelings of his own countrymen and countrywomen. His main objective was to trace his own mental development reflecting his personal views and reactions having the voice of a typical Indian citizen. In fact Nehru never isolates self from society. The self as an entity represents the society and its functions. *An Autobiography* has special traits of self-analysis in a philosophical form where Nehru's skill of expressing poetic self is quite evident. In autobiographical channel Nehru not only throws light on his own personal self he makes an acute analysis of the struggle initiated by people of Indian society as well.

Keywords: Self, Society, History, Introspection, self-expression.

INTRODUCTION

Autobiography presents a long history full of varieties in a narrative form having narrative techniques in which the author pours his own experiences delineating the contemporary surroundings and society. It has a historical viability that started from classical era and still exists in modern time that involves discourses on historical, psychological and cultural factors in which the ideology of self is quite evident. Buckley defines this genre as "a life journey confused by frequent misdirection and even crises of identity but reaching at last a sense of perspective and integration....a satisfying wholeness". Since an autobiography consists of interesting elements of the history of author and his time it arouses a keen curiosity in students or readers about his society and surroundings. The term autobiography is a combination of three words viz. 'auto' means self, 'bio' means life and 'graphie' means written account hence autobiography is a written account of the life of author. In autobiography the subject of story must be author who presents a systematic analysis of self. The autobiographer begins it with a sense of being alone. It is an orphan form. It offers a channel by means of which self is introspected and explored. According to Brian Finney "Autobiography specifically presents the writer with an opportunity to pursue the truth about himself, from himself" (Finney, 12) It gives the author an opportunity to enter the arena beyond individual and into the state – culture and society.

The life events in autobiography remain in continuity with the contemporary history of author in which he represents the self with experiences gained during the span of his life and tries to reveal them to all. The self contained in autobiography gets entangled with contradictions hence primary concern of autobiographer is to bring this self into light. Because of this trait of autobiography this genre is considered not only as act of revealing truth or fiction but it is a process in which self is confronted. Regarding non-fictional character of autobiography it may be taken into consideration that there are some fictional elements or situations of autobiographer's life and he would never hesitate to include them in his autobiography to correlate the fictional elements. Being an expression of self the autobiography fulfils the responsibility to connect self with outer world viz. society and culture. The writer goes beyond the predefined bars of society to establish and justify his arguments knowing that whether he might be put on the edge of positive criteria or not. Self is only the factor that decides the outline to search materialistic approaches because physical or external atmosphere directly indirectly affects the self. Even psychologically if we analyze we come across that self and temporal elements are inseparable. The fluctuations that occur in our life are due to amalgams of inner or outer self i.e. outer physical elements also play a vital role.

J.L. Nehru's autobiography is worth noting because (a) it gives a historical self explanation, (b) it analyzes the self philosophically and (c) as a genre it takes a form of poetic self expression. Nehru in his autobiography makes a critical evaluation of Indian social life in general and his own personal life in particular. He includes the facts in confessional style to deliver the self expression publically. *An Autobiography* tells us about the self which is submerged in the whirlpool of the dynamic forces of historical changes. Nehru's *An Autobiography* possesses the qualities of frankness, sincerity and intimacy. All these qualities make it very popular and worth appreciating. Being an introspective in nature his autobiography gives a systematic record of his growth and development with sincerity showing his intimacy with his milieu. It also throws light on his political and intellectual development during the crucial period of struggle for Indian nation. Mulkraj Anand aptly writes that "the cue for passion seems to have come from the contemplation of the fiery, bitter and arduous and different struggles in which the hero had taken part"(Anand, 352) This aptly quoted statement marks the contemporary fiery and adverse circumstances during freedom struggle and Nehru's intense passion to reveal his conviction to raise voice against the British Rule. He had many questions in his mind to which answers could only be found through his own mental development that is the reason he employ rhetoric technique in some parts of his autobiography. Gandhi wrote his autobiography with the aim of seeking Truth, the Sovereign Truth but unlike Gandhi, Nehru began to write his autobiography to trace his own mental development: "I began the task in a mood of self-questioning and to a large extent, this persisted throughout. I was not writing deliberately for an audience, but if I thought of an audience, it was one of my own countrymen and countrywomen. (Nehru, XV).

Besides this, since Nehru was in the stream of pragmatism his primary aim was to fill times in prison. Hence he admits in his autobiography "the primary object in writing was to occupy myself with a definite task, so necessary in the long solitudes of gaol life. (Nehru, XV) Nehru in his autobiography expresses his inner personality with his rich emotion and imagination in which his keen aesthetic sense comes out deliberately. An Autobiography vividly portrays his role as a hero having qualities of sincerity, transparency, unflinching self analysis and self quest. One of the great examples of his self quest and analysis occurs in the pages of An Autobiography when he states "I have become a queer mixture of the East and West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere..(Nehru, 596) His deep attachment for his motherland can be assessed when he outburst his feeling as "I am stranger and alien in the West. I cannot be of it, but in my own country also, sometimes, I have an exile's feeling. (Nehru, 596). Nehru as an autobiographer confines himself in a complex arena of his friends and family. He does not escape to discuss the major and burning issues of society. Since he was also involved in freedom struggle he positively responded to the nation's call with daring spirit. But unlike Gandhi Nehru is free from spiritualism; his quest for self, poetic self expression rely on his rational thinking and ideas. He denies approving the validity of non-violent approaches employed by Gandhiji with religious colouring. According to him the basis of any movement must have scientific temperament, rational thinking and facts not the association of spiritual elements. He opines that society as system consists of rational thinking; it allows only those aspects which are based on facts, realities and constructive innovations. An Autobiography also presents a systematic commentary on Indian social life during the struggle of independence and his ardent desire to be an integral part of it. To him, self and society are inseparable; they are complementary to each other. A critical evaluation of his autobiography gives vivid traits through which his self as a society is quite evident "I have been one of a mass, moving with it, swaying it occasionally, being influenced by it, and yet like other unit, an individual, apart from the others living my separate life in the heart of crowd"(Nehru, 615).

Nehru in his autobiography is in favour of classless society, he never advocates for Zamindari or Feudal system. He participates the movement initiated by UP peasants to abolish Zamindari system. A society based on creed, class, colour, religious beliefs cannot provide a successful platform for individual growth. In An Autobiography Nehru also marks the conflicts between Hindu and Muslim in society that occurred during his time period. He considers these conflicts very callous and brutal for they interrupt the progress of nation and cause instability in society. The best way to unite the people is to provide the firm ground for individual progress in a free and human atmosphere. Hence he always advocates that Indian social structure must be based on social justice, equality in allotment of resources and security for each and every citizen "Not only opportunities be given to all. But special growth must be given to backward groups so as to enable them to catch up to those who are ahead of them".(Nehru, 122).

Likewise Gandhi, Nehru also believes in equality of men and women in society. Gandhi always condemns the exploitation of women; he is in favour of the active participation of women with their equal mental capacities. He longs for their pride place in sphere of social as well administrative activities as men are. Nehru too believes in the equality of genders. He shows his anger against barbarous traditions and conventions which create hurdles in their progress. His modern critical thinking always enabled him to make a scenario as per the requirements of society where positive changes may take place to get positive results.



An Autobiography consists of valuable thoughts and ideas of J.L. Nehru. It is a treasure of knowledge contained by Nehru after making deep perusal of contemporary social circumstances. Almost all subjects including secularism, religion, politics, Marxism, communism, ahimsa, humanism, and rationalism are stored in it. The most important feature of his autobiography is the process of self-introspection in which Nehru tries to present himself amidst his fellow people. His technique to portray in his life memoir gives living glimpses of Indian society. The whole book, it seems, even one single statement in every chapter of his autobiography comes out of his introspective process adopted by him to quest for self and his curiosity to attain self amidst the society. *An Autobiography* also marks his personality in different forms tracing the existence of self from childhood to youth and journeying to maturity. It presents Nehru as a man of action and rational thinking having modern scientific outlook.

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