

Autobiography: The Non-Hierarchical Creative Narration of Truth

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ABSTRACT Life narratives has become one of the pervasive and thriving literary genres today. There have been contestations and discourses on the validity of perceiving autobiography as serious art, sometimes even questioning its aesthetic and literary status. This paper attempts to understand some of the critical nuances of autobiography as a genre. It specifically argues self-life narrative as a non-hierarchical genre whose essence is rooted in creative construction of subjective truth. Through reading of some celebrated authors, such as: St. Augustine, Rousseau and Gandhi along lesser-known and marginal writings of the like of Sharan Kumar Limbale, Baby Kamble and A. Revathi; the paper briefly traces the historical development of the genre, the variations and intersection of gender, race, class, and caste in gendered expression. The paper maintains that the non-hierarchical nature of the genre is among others what led to its emergence as one of the meta-narratives in the era of post 'absolute truth'.

KEYWORDS: *Autobiography, Self-life Narrative, Non-Hierarchical, Pervasive, Thriving Literary Art, Creative Construction, Multiple Truth, Celebrated Genre, Marginality, Intersection, Gendered Expressions.*

Date of Submission: 25-06-2022

Date of Acceptance: 30-06-2022

1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'autobiography' has commonly been attributed to nineteenth century poet Robert Southey (Anderson 7), though the etymology is believed to have derived from the Greek word, αὐτός-autos self + βίος-bios life + γράφειν-graphēin to write. It has gained tremendous significance in contemporary times. People have penned down their lives and moments for different reasons and on diverse subjects. Some have chosen to narrate about certain specific aspect or incident in their life, while others chose to give broad general overview. In contemporary times, the genre has become one of the most widely published and celebrated literary forms despite of the continuing hiccups in defining the genre conclusively.

Paul de-Man discussed on why empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition. "Since each specific instance" he argued, "appears to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighboring or even incompatible genres..." (Man 920). Defining autobiography has not been easy because of its evolving nature and shifting priorities in literature and society. As Raj Kumar opinionated, some "critics even discouraged definition" because any definition, either on the basis of inflexible stylistic or compositional criteria is unable to encompass the processes of historical development and change (10). Autobiography as a genre thus remains elusive and irregular and perhaps rightly so, for diverse life and their subjectivity cannot be universalized. As James Olney succinctly puts it this way,

definition of autobiography as a literary genre seems to me virtually impossible, because definition must either include so much as to be no definition, or exclude so much as to deprive us of the most relevant texts. (Olney 38-39)

Despite the lack of comprehensive definition of what the genre necessitates, it is important to have certain generic stability and demarcations for it to emerge as a distinct literary genre. To borrow Anderson's expressions, "the very pervasiveness and slipperiness of autobiography has made the need to contain and control it within disciplinary boundaries all the more urgent" (2). Attempts have been made to differentiate autobiography from its related genres of memoirs and diary by terming it as "reflective subjective reconstruction" as opposed to mere recollections. Social distinctions were carried across into literary distinction whereby 'memoirs' for instance, is perceived as occupying lower order of literary hierarchical value. To use Linda Anderson's phrase, "since they involved a lesser degree of 'seriousness' than autobiography" (8). Alternately, Laura Marcus reiterated, 'The autobiography/memoirs distinction—ostensibly formal and generic—

is bound up with a typological distinction between those human beings who are capable of self-reflection and those who are not¹.

Philippe Lejuene in *The Autobiographical Contract* (1982) produced the following widely quoted definition: “A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (Anderson 2). He brings in four elements to define autobiography: prose as the medium; real life as the subject matter; author as the narrator and retrospective as the point of view. As Anderson pointed out, however, Lejuene himself remained dissatisfied, since it did not provide sufficient boundary between autobiography and the adjacent genres of biography and fiction (2). Nevertheless, for the discussion here, I will be referring loosely used the term autobiography/self-life writing to the self-conscious representations and reconstructions of the subject by the self retrospectively.

II: BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Though self-narrative/autobiography continuous to be a genre in the making in terms of definitive discourse. Today we find a lot of self-life writing and biographers sharing affinities with its precedents stylistically or structurally in several aspects. It then becomes significant to address and raise important questions such as: Why do people write autobiography? Who can/should write autobiography? What can/should be included in it? Who has written it historically and how has it transitioned recently? What is the place of self-life writing in the postmodern period? What is the truth in autobiography? Is self the best mouth piece and reliable source for life-narratives? What are the drawbacks and limitations of self-life writing? How does autobiography contribute in understanding the socio-political and cultural history? What and how is art and aesthetic determined in writings which essentialized ‘truth’? How is the role of memory, imagination and creativity negotiated in autobiographical writings? And how did life writing emerge as the “Meta-Narrative” in the era of post-modernity?

III: METHODOLOGY

Research involved studying celebrated autobiographies such as St. Augustine, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin and Mahatma Gandhi alongside lesser-known and emerging marginal narratives such as: Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste*, Baby Kamble’s *The Prison We Broke* and A. Revathi’s *Truth About Me*, Richard Wright “The Black Boy” etc. Close reading of selected autobiographies to comment cursorily on the variations and intersection of gender, race, class, and caste in gendered expressions and identities. Detailed discussion of specific text has been side-lined or is rather beyond the scope of this paper. The prerogative here is on giving general overview and emphasizing on some of the nuances of the genre that made it a well-received genre in recent times. Important theorists and critics of the genre were consulted to understand the primary texts. Works such as Paul de-Man’s “Autobiography as De-facement”, Mary G. Mason’s *The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers* and James Olney’s “A Theory of Autobiography” were referred for theoretical framework while delineating observations and conclusion on the subject of investigation.

IV: OVERVIEW ON SELECTED PROMINENT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

St. Augustine (and many others following him) has prioritized the religious and spiritual flavour of his life. Reflecting about his life before and after conversion, he wrote about his overarching concern of his relationship with the ‘God’. The title *Confessions* itself thereby replicating the religious function and connotation of the word. Mahatma Gandhi’s *The Story of My Experiment with Truth* and Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography resonated in the fact that they were both preoccupied with self-emancipation and self-discipline. Though, Franklin does not negate the role of God in his success story, he confessed how he was heavily influenced by the deistic worldview, his memoir thus attributed the foremost onus on self-reliance in materializing one’s dream. His famous quote, “God helps those who help themselves” is an apt illustration of his life motto. Success in life for him entails mental, spiritual and material affluence. Gandhi’s self-restraint and experimentation took a spiritual and religious tone as the ‘Truth’ in his narrative is the absolute truth that he claims to believe and emulated in his life. Gandhi drew largely from the spiritual and the religious principles of the Hindu traditions in his experimentation with self-abstinence. The shedding of the material luxuries is part of his larger search for

¹P,21 in *Auto/biographical Discourses*, Manchester University Press (1994) as quoted in Anderson, 8

unity and oneness with the ultimate truth that he seeks. Thus, in a way like Augustine's, the spiritual and moral take precedence over the political and material in his narrative as well.

Thinkers and philosophers have insisted on the notion that there is nothing really "new" in the universe. Greek cosmologist Parmenides for instance advocated "permanence" with his eminent statement, "one cannot step into the same river twice" (Cohen 34). Deliberating on the possibility of a thing possessing opposing qualities, he asked, if one quality can become another? He contested the idea, of something coming out of nothing and something becoming nothing. We also have Solomon the wisest of kings reiterating similar ideology when he concluded, "there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). In stark contrast to such discourses on the unchanging essence of things and actions in cosmos, autobiography as a genre flourished on its claim of exclusivity and uniqueness of each individual that ever lived on earth. In the preface of *Confessions*, Jean Jacques Rousseau, the precursor of modern and secular autobiography writings asserts:

What I am engaged on here is my portrait...I will be painting a double portrait of my state of mind, at the moment when the event happened and at the moment when I described it.... In short, in whatever style this work is written, it will always, because of its very object, be a book that is precious to philosophers; it offers, I repeat, a point of comparison for the study of the human heart, and it is the only such document in existence (Rousseau 648).

Rousseau's work has served as one of the fundamental bases for the genre. It is a shift away from St. Augustine's and other evangelistic life writing of the earlier centuries. Rousseau, no doubt, reflected awareness of his predecessors in his autobiography. For instance, the title is a replication of St. Augustine's and yet Rousseau subverts the very tradition of religious confession by deliberately focussing on his mundane daily experiences rather than grappling with abstract and metaphysical religious doctrines. Rousseau appeal to his inimitable location in history and his uniqueness as a human being to justify his undertaking. In doing so, he also postulates certain essential characteristics of the genre. He began his *Confessions* by declaring that his "work has no model and will have no imitator". The invocation of the "Eternal Being" is an attempt to prove his commitment to truth, for it is unlikely to call on the supreme being to witness to his account's veracity when one is consciously being deceitful. Though nevertheless, Rousseau fairly warned readers when he writes,

No one can write a man's life except himself. His inner mode of being his true life, is known only to himself.... The sincerest of people are at best truthful in what they say, but they lie by their reticence, and what they suppress changes so much that they pretend to reveal that in telling only part of the truth, they tell none of it. (p.644)

In a more subtle version of self-glorification and justification, Benjamin Franklin reproduced letters from friends who have insisted him to archive his life. Franklin quoted Mr Benjamin Vaughan's verbatim, "Your history is so remarkable, that if you do not give it, somebody else will certainly give it, and perhaps so as nearly to do as much harm, as your own management of the thing might do good" (Franklin 72). In this as elsewhere in the autobiography, Franklin celebrates his achievement through rigorous self-discipline and self-reliance. In the opening letter to his son, he explains how he has emerged from the "poverty and obscurity to a state of affluence", and therefore posterity may find his life worth emulating (1).

Generally speaking, writing autobiography has been historically considered as a 'privilege act'. For with the exception of few religious confessions which had didactic and evangelical orientations, self-narratives were mostly written by individual of high socio-economic or political status. Figures such as St. Augustine, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin are prolific and prominent historical figures. St. Augustine was a bishop, a renowned theologian besides being a skilled preacher and rhetorician. Rousseau and Franklin were polymath and celebrated figures of their age. Speaking of Indian context, most of the auto-biographers were social reformers and public figures, which includes: Narmada Shankar's *Mari-Hakikat*; Narayan Hemachandra's *HoonPote*; RajnarayanBasu's *Atmajivani*; and Debendranath Tagore's *Autobiography* (Kumar 57). M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Nirad Chaudhari similarly are prominent figures who went on to record public events while simultaneously reflecting upon their personal lives.

Augustine's *Confessions* expressed 'in full rhetorical splendour' the Christian imperative to the confession of sins and thus promote that inward-turning gaze which is the origin and basis of autobiography (Anderson 19). To a cautionary concern shared by a God-fearing friend, 'What has set you on this adventure? Writing an autobiography is a practice peculiar to the West...what will you write?' Gandhi clarified in the introduction that it was not his prerogative to attempt a real autobiography. That he simply wanted to tell the story of his "numerous experiments with truth...that the story will take the shape of an autobiography." (Gandhi 12,13). Nevertheless, Gandhi reflected in his writing, the awareness of the western religious or philosophical worldview that has configured the autobiographical tradition. When he emphasized that his attempt was not a "real autobiography", he seemed to be referring to the conventional trajectory of the western counterpart and predecessors such as St. Augustine, Rousseau, Franklin and the ilk. These early auto-biographers comprises

generally of individual who have gained prominent place as public figure for their unusual feat/achievements. Their works with the exception of St. Augustine's, is about celebration of the past struggles and achievements that have brought them glory and recognition in history. It is then a way of flaunting self-congratulatory and appreciative notes. Their autobiographies, by default of its historical positioning and persona become the standardized patriarchal criterion for writing self-life narrative.

V. REVIEW OF SELECTED MARGINAL AND FEMALE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

In the essay, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers", Mary G. Mason traces the history of four women autobiographies: Margaret Cavendish's *True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and life* (1656), Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1432), Julian's *Revelations or Showings*, and Anne Bradstreet's spiritual account "To My Dear Children". Mason concludes these four models, "who record and dramatize self-realization and self-transcendence through the recognition of another, represent an important addition" to that history of obsession with self and the desire to escape that obsession (Mason 235).

Reading women autobiographical tradition in India, one notices a striking similarity in the title of the personal narratives. In autobiographies such as Rassundari Devis' *My Life* (1868), Saratkumari Deb's *My Family*, Indira Debi Chaudharani's *My Notebook* and Binodini Dasi's *MY STORY and MY LIFE AS AN ACTRESS*, one sees how the possessive pronoun were favoured. The preference for 'katha', Rimli Bhattacharya pointed out, "suggest an informal discourse which is both a confession and assertion" (25). Resemblance in the title seemingly is one of the literary tropes within the genre in general. Amongst the narrative that privileges religious discourse one notices recurrence of the prefix "Why I am/am not..." depending on the faith the individual has embraced, for instance *Why I am a Christian* (John R.W. Stott), *Why I am a Hindu* (Shashi Tharoor). These illustrations however, does not imply that the title in itself is always generic. As there are varied list and title within autobiographical writings which does not necessarily fit into this norm. Bama's *Karruku* (2012), Mary Kom's *Unbreakable: An Autobiography* (2013), APJ Abdul Kalam's *Wings of Fire* (1999) etc., are few examples. From tracing of intimate personal feeling to professional career growth, from political and social, to cultural and religious subjects, autobiography have proved to be a good host. It has, as Meenakshi Malhotra puts it, "proved hospitable to a chorus of voices" including the marginalized and oppressed groups of people (311).

In the essay "Autobiography as De-facement" Paul de Man takes a critical position against the very consideration of Autobiography as a literary genre. He writes,

By making autobiography into a genre, one elevates it above the literary status of mere reportage, chronicle, memoir and gives it a place, albeit a modest one, among the canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres (919).

Paul de Man went on to conclude autobiography as "slightly disreputable" and "self-indulgent" and therefore incompatible with what he calls "monumental dignity of aesthetic values" that is accredited to the well-established literary genres. If autobiography is perceived, as Paul de Man argued, what are some of the factors that led to its inverse proliferation and production in modern times? More pertinently then, how should art and creativity be appraised in self-life narratives? What are some of the explicit or implicit variations in different autobiographies, if there are any, in terms of race, class or gendered expression?

De Man is right when he points out that, "the study of autobiography repeats an inherent instability that undoes the model as soon as it is established" (Man 922). As theorists have justifiably categorized the genre as an "evolving" one and not a well-established/finished product. Dalit autobiographies, queer and other marginalized life-narratives for instance, have shaken the conventional norms and subjects of autobiography. By choosing to lay bare a life full of pain, injustice and sufferings, they successfully destabilized the otherwise conventional perception of autobiography as reminiscences of past glory and achievements.

Dalit literature in general and dalit autobiographies in particular have challenged traditional literary aesthetics. G. N. Devy in the introduction to *The Outcaste* writes, "A blend of pathos and protest has by now become the defining feature of Dalit literature...combines the rebellion against social injustice with dreams of a life of dignity for the oppressed" (Limbale xx). The view that Dalit literature tends to become the expression of a community rather than the individual holds true for Dalit autobiographies. For instance, in Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*, the life narrative is as much about his mother Masamai and grandmother Santamai as it is about him in particular and the community in general.

In an interview with Mahuya Bhaumik, Sharankumar Limbale asserts, "Truly speaking, it is the autobiography of the entire Dalit community...The word 'I' is insignificant in Dalit literature. It is 'we' that matters" (Bhaumik 3). The exploitation of his mother sexually by the upper caste men and the agony of life lived at the margin of

the society is powerfully narrated by Limbale. Hunger and discrimination followed at every stage and aspect of their life. “We were like discarded bus tickets” Sharankumar notes (42). Elsewhere he narrated about his sister eating the banana skins on the street. When Limbale objected to Vani eating the uneatable skin, his mother reprimanded him by saying, ‘Let her eat worms and live. Why make it a matter of prestige?’ (Limbale 22) In this, the mother is more keenly aware of the plight and struggle than the boy Limbale. She seemed to have understood that the question of resistance for people of her community was survival itself. Matter such as prestige or integrity is a luxury that can be afforded only by the upper caste/privileged.

In another seminal autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble discusses the plight of Dalit women who were marginalized at multiple levels. Caste, class and gender precariously pushes them to such a periphery where there is no difference between their lives and animals. Again, the usage of the first-person plural “we” becomes significant in that the text subverts the singular pronoun “I” in autobiographical writings. “We were just like animals, but without tails.” Kamble writes, “We could be human only because we had two legs instead of four” (49). The level of inhumane degradation that the community is forced to undergo by default of belonging to a particular caste, class and gender is lucidly and profoundly captured in Kamble’s autobiography. She described the vivid and painful situations powerfully, how they were given only “left overs” and their existence was at the margins both physically and metaphorically in the “garbage pits”. When life is lived at such a threshold and fringes, the very art of getting by, of surviving and not losing one’s mind is commendable.

To the voices that has termed Dalit literature as “reactive” and “propagandistic” and refused to accept it as “creative” art. Dalit writers have refuted by arguing that all literature is propagandistic because all writers follow a certain philosophy while writing something. The difference between non-Dalit and Dalit writings as Raj Kumar aptly emphasized, “is that one insists on the so-called literary values and the other, on values of life itself” (148). One can then, reasonably conclude that insistence on conventional/established value or definition is another form of “hegemonic” discourse. Moreover, in the case of self-life writing, the very generic purview legitimizes subjective truth and experience.

Likewise marginal narratives, such as that of A. Revathi’s *Truth About Me*, successfully interrogated and critiqued the conventional generic limitations. Revathi as a person whose sex and gender are at odds with her sexuality destabilizes the normative discourse of the genre in ways more than one. Queer and dalit life writings offer versions of ‘truth’ that has often been silenced hegemonically in the past. A. Revathi in the preface to *The Truth About Me*, writes

I hope this book of mine will make people see that hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work. I do not seek sympathy from society or the government. I seek to show that we hijras do have the right to live in this society (Revathi v)

Thus, queer identities and dalit writings, expressed in terms of a community, challenges the very nomenclature and etymology of the term autobiography, which presupposes that the narrative is about an individual or an act of the privileged celebrating rare feat and achievements.

Autobiographies have become a rich and vital textual/cultural resource for women and gender studies, offering ‘authentic’ account of experience. Life writings have become a preferred medium of communication of disabled, disaffected and disenfranchised groups. Individuals from marginalized background such as caste, race, class and gender have successfully subverted the age old social hegemonic system and paradigmatic literary structure itself through their subtle and yet powerful interrogation in the form of subjective confessions and assertions. They have, “not only written autobiographies but have also through their writings, challenged the boundaries and conventions of the genre” (Malhotra 311)

Autobiography is believed to be a product of the discourse of the discourse of modernism.² The ‘newly democratized access to print culture’ is perceived to be one of the reasons for its proliferation after the seventeenth century³. The conventional mode of writing underwent certain important changes in Europe and grew more reflective once Christianity became an established religion. Over time, autobiographical writings developed into a unique and autonomous genre detailing lives. “The period between 1750 and 1800”, Peter France writes, “was marked in Western European literature by an extraordinary shift of emphasis from the work

²Robert Elbaz, *Continental Philosophy since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self*, 21 (as quoted in Raj Kumar, 19)

³ Delaney, as quoted in Anderson 27.

of art as aesthetic creation to the work of art as expression of the writer's inner being."⁴ Thus the emergence of capitalism and its prioritization of the individual and the overall socio-economic progress of the society, provided the time and space for many to pen down their life.

VI. WHAT IS ART IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

Amy Hungerford in a lecture on Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, discusses on how part of the art of autobiography is in choosing; What do you choose out of your life? Where do you begin? Where do you end? What do you put next to what? Why a writer chooses a particular scene and not others? Picking scenes from the *Black Boy*, she elaborated on how the very structuring and ordering of the text, the placement of one dramatic scene next to another, reflects the creative bend and imagination of the author's mind. She also quotes, B. Du Bois who have thrown significant insight into the relationship of fact, fiction, and creative writing within autobiography. In the review of *Black Boy* B. Du Bois writes,

This book tells a harsh and forbidding story and makes one wonder just exactly what its relation to truth is. The title, 'A Record of Childhood and Youth', he emphasized makes one first think that the story is autobiographical. "But mainly it is probably intended to be fiction or fictionalized biography. At any rate, the reader must regard it as creative writing rather than simply a record of life (Hungerford)

In a panel discussion on the topic, *From Margin to Centre: Translating 'Dalit Literature'*, Prof. Maya M Pandit Narkar, the translator of Baby Kamble's autobiography aptly argued, "the notion of aesthetic itself is what needs to be problematized." Because the criteria and the ideology that goes into the standardization of what constitute aesthetics and art is 'hegemonic' in nature. A lot of time, it is at the cost and suppression of the weak and voiceless by the dominant/elitist group. Similarly, then, the argument that autobiography has no literary value is what needs to be interrogated. The emergence of the genre as one of the meta-narratives, one can maintain, is a reflection of such successful questioning and refusal to bow to certain 'ideological state apparatuses.'

Life itself is an art, one can argue and autobiography in a way is the leveller of people from different background. T.S. Eliot's thought regarding poetry, the "impersonal" quality that is essentialized in poetry by the genre is nullified in autobiography by default of the subject being the investigator. Because each life is unique and every life is a product of unique socio-cultural and economic background. The form/genre is less hierarchical compared to other well-established genres such as epic, drama or poetry where adherence and understanding of the tradition is mandated. In other word, well established conventional genre necessitates hierarchical relations amongst writers and readers alike.

CONCLUSION

Autobiography, no doubt, has its own limitations and drawbacks. The sceptical lens and baggage that entails popular literature or 'genre fiction' is one of the challenges that autobiography need to brace itself against. Mass readership and the perusal by the 'unsophisticated audience' is considered as one of its drawbacks. However, unlike popular fiction which has 'saleability' as one of its primary objectives, autobiography isn't necessarily driven by commercialization and capitalism. The tailoring of the art/writing to the popular taste and trend also does not hold true for self-life writing in general.

Though autobiographies are believed to be factual account of a person's life; it is not essentially devoid of imagination, innovation or truth. The heavy reliance on memory, necessitate the auto-biographer to constantly engage in invention and reconstruction. The self is thus, not just "recalling" but also "reflecting" and "reconstructing" at the same time. The simultaneous filtering and (re)ordering of the past, the choice of language expression of a life intimately lived is an art in itself, just as the emergence of a "self" is the making of the author. Thus, writing an autobiography, as Raj Kumar pointed out, "is a political act because there is always an assertion of the narrative self" (3). In the process of doing so, it also illuminates the society through its celebration of fresh and diverse perspectives. Autobiography also appears to be able to function as what Alexander Pope once judiciously said, "Men should be taught as if you taught them not, And things unknown propos'd as things forgot."⁵

Autobiography is one of the sources of truth and knowledge which is able to fulfil that precept. Under the guise of subjectivity and its uniqueness, it is able to serve as a rich repository of worldview and history itself. In an era

⁴ As quoted in Raj Kumar, 26

⁵ *An Essay on Criticism*, part III

of postmodernity where absolute 'everything' particularly 'absolute truth' is critiqued fiercely, autobiography has emerged as one of the acceptable and convenient form of writing where creativity and truth is juxtaposed successfully. Life narrative and autobiography has been able to critique and subvert what has been privileged without inviting too much opposition. The truth and the ideological position, it represents under the semblance of subjectivity appears to have been well received.

Subjectivity does not automatically negate or annihilate objective facts and events. It has served as insightful complement and supplement to the historical sources and evidences. Autobiography may have fared poorly within the paradigm of existing literary standards, but in ways more than one, it has found a niche of its own. It has served and is serving as the mediator amongst incompatible subjects and spaces, and has successfully bridge the gap between conflicting dichotomies across genres, disciplines and discourses on truth itself. Autobiography as a literary form is being added continuously and has come to stay for a long haul. It has gained its foothold in the literary circle and may outdo even the currently well-established genres in time, for every individual is a potential auto-biographer.

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