
UNIT 1 CORPOREALITY

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

In Block 2, Units 1 and 3 of this course, you have already been introduced to “Women and Lifewriting” and “Reading and Writing Biographies”. In this unit, you will come to know further about the evolution of autobiography or life-narrative through different stages, its identity as a separate genre and its difference from memoirs/private diaries/journals, and different types of autobiography as well as some notable examples of life narratives.

This unit is slightly different from the earlier units because it lays greater emphasis on the female body in its attempt to overcome sexual exploitation and physical disability to attain freedom of expression through sexual liberation and victory over physical pain towards self-assertion. We will also examine some masculine assumptions about female stereotypes that emerged especially during the 19th century, especially those which assumed that all biographies were penned by great men, and ignored the role of women. You will also study the problematics of truth and fiction that make almost all great autobiographies of the world controversial. You will also come to

know why women's autobiographies are different from that of men's with special reference to Kamala Das' and Hellen Keller's life narratives. As you read this unit, you are encouraged to draw your own connections and inferences about some of the issues discussed here.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the nature and purpose of autobiographies/life narratives;
- Classify life narratives and name some famous autobiographies;
- Analyse the problematics of truth and fiction in life narratives;
- Discuss women's autobiographies in terms of social and personal marginalization and tools of subversion;
- Describe Sidonie Smith and Elaine Scarry's interpretation of life narratives;
- Analyse Hellen Keller's inspiring life-narrative about transcending physical disability; and
- Analyse Kamala Das' experiences of gender-discrimination and self-discovery.

1.3 THE NATURE AND TRADITION OF LIFE NARRATIVES

Let us first ask ourselves: what is an autobiography or life-narrative and what are its origins? The form of autobiography goes back to antiquity. Biographers generally rely on a wide variety of documents and viewpoints; an autobiography, however, may be based entirely on the writer's memory. In antiquity, such works were typically entitled *apologia*, purporting to be self-justification rather than self-documentation. John Henry Newman's autobiography (first published in 1864) is entitled *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* in reference to this tradition. Augustine (354-430) applied the title *Confessions* to his autobiographical work, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau used the same title in the 18th century, initiating the chain of confessional and sometimes racy and highly self-critical, autobiographies of the Romantic era and beyond.

In this section, we will begin by looking at the nature of autobiographies and what sets them apart from other forms of life narratives such as diaries and memoirs. We will then examine the tradition of writing autobiographies in order to understand the impetus behind the writing of such narratives.

1.3.1 Nature of Autobiographies, Memoirs, Diaries and Journals

We have already discussed the differences between different forms of life narratives, such as autobiographies, diaries, memoirs and journals in the first two units of this course (Block 1, Units 1 & 2). You have to remember that an autobiography is slightly different in character from a memoir.

While an autobiography typically focuses on the ‘life and times’ of the writer, a memoir has a narrower, more intimate focus on his or her own memories, feelings and emotions. One early example is that of Leonor López de Córdoba (1362-1420) who wrote what is supposed to be the first autobiography in Spanish. Notable 18th-century autobiographies in English include those of Edward Gibbon and Benjamin Franklin.

By the nineteenth-century there was a definite hierarchy of values in relation to self-representation with memoirs occupying a lower order since they involved a lesser degree of ‘seriousness’ than autobiography. As Laura Marcus puts it: “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 not” (Marcus, 1994, p. 21). Moreover, autobiography came to be equated with a developmental narrative which orders both time and the personality according to a purpose or goal; thus the looser, more chronological structure of the journal or diary could no longer fulfill this ‘higher’ function of autobiography.

1.3.2 The Tradition of Writing Life Narratives

We can now ask ourselves - what were the reasons behind the growth of life narratives? With the rise of education, cheap newspapers and cheap printing, modern concepts of fame and celebrity began to develop, and the beneficiaries of this were not slow to cash in on this by producing autobiographies. It became the expectation—rather than the exception—that those in the public eye should write about themselves—not only writers such as Charles Dickens (who also incorporated autobiographical elements in his novels) and Anthony Trollope, but also politicians (e.g. Henry Brooks Adams), philosophers (e.g. John Stuart Mill), churchmen such as Cardinal Newman.

About Autobiographies

What was the aim of the autobiographers? Since as students of literature you are already aware that almost all works of literature are written with some aim in mind, it is therefore natural to think that autobiographies could be written with a definite agenda viz. - as critiques of totalitarianism, as sensationalist by supposed libertines and ghostwriters. Fictional autobiographies revolved round a fictional character written as though the character was writing his/her own biography, of which Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, is an early example. Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* is another such classic, and J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* is a well-known modern example of fictional autobiography. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* is yet another example of fictional autobiography, as noted on the front page of the original version. In the box below, you will find listed some important autobiographies for your information and further reading.

Box No. 1.1: Some Early Autobiographies and Eminent Autobiographies

Some Early Autobiographies:

These include the 15th century *Memorias* by the Spanish noblewoman Leonor López de Córdoba), Bâbur's journal *Bâburnâma* (*Book of Babur* or *Letters of Babur*) which was written between 1493 and 1529. The earliest known autobiography in English is the early 15th-century *Booke of Margery Kempe*, describing among other things her pilgrimage to the Holy Land and visit to Rome. Notable English autobiographies of the seventeenth century include those of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1643, published 1764) and John Bunyan (*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 1666).

Eminent Autobiographies:

You can also use as reference for your study the autobiographical accounts of Benjamin Franklin, J.S. Mill, Anthony Trollope, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anne Frank, Fay Weldon, Sarojini Naidu, Mahatma Gandhi, Maitreyee Devi, Ashapurna Devi, Ruskin Bond, Amartya Sen, Nabaneeta Dev Sen and others.

1.3.3 The Problematics of Truth and Fiction in Life Narratives

'Autobiography is indeed everywhere one cares to find it', Candace Lang wrote in 1982, thus acknowledging a major problem for anyone who studies this topic: if the writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, any writing may be judged to be autobiographical, depending on how one reads it. However, autobiography has also been recognized as a distinct literary genre and, as such, an important testing ground for critical controversies about a range of ideas including authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction. The very pervasiveness and slipperiness of autobiography has made the need to contain and control it within disciplinary boundaries all the more urgent, and many literary critics have turned to definitions as a way of stamping their academic authority on an unruly and even slightly disreputable field. In 1982, Philippe Lejeune produced the following judicious and 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.

(Lejeune, 1982, p. 193)

However, Lejeune himself remained dissatisfied with this since it did not seem to provide a sufficient boundary between autobiography and the adjacent genres of biography and fiction. But one condition for autobiography

was absolute: there must be “identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*” (Lejeune, 1982, p. 193).

In his introduction to Kamala Das’ *My Story*, K. Satchidanandan writes, “The writer, ever mischievously enigmatic, kept [the readers] tantalized by dropping contradictory hints, first confessing it was nothing but truth and then declaring it was just a wish-fulfilling fantasy, an alter-life she had created for herself” (Satchidanandan, 2009, p. vii). Herein lies the problematics of truth and fiction not only in Kamala Das’ life-narrative but also in the autobiographies of many eminent people who have failed to candidly confess ‘everything’. Indeed, even Mahatma Gandhi had stated while embarking upon his own autobiography that few people are honest when it came to writing autobiographies.

However, what is interesting for you to know is that the lack of authenticity does not entail that autobiographies are of little value to serious readers. Rather it is their very ambiguity that makes the reader delve into the complexities inherent in character and the constrictions that may have motivated the narrator to simultaneously hide and expose facts.

As a recent critic of autobiography, Laura Marcus has noted that the concept of ‘intention’ has persistently threaded its way through discussions of autobiography. Within critical discussions of autobiography, ‘intention’ has had a necessary and often unquestioned role in providing the crucial link between author, narrator and protagonist. Intention, however, is further defined as a particular kind of ‘honest’ intention which then guarantees the ‘truth’ of the writing. Trust the author, this rather circular argument goes, if s/he seems to be trustworthy.

Check Your Progress:

Do you think that truth and authenticity are absolutely essential in the writing of autobiographies? What is the relation between truth and intention, in this context?

1.3.4 Carlyle, the Great Man Theory and its Critics

Another fact that has to be noted by you is how the 'act' of writing autobiographies or life narratives had been taken solely as men's domain. One theory to corroborate this masculinist theory was the **Great Man Theory**. The **Great Man Theory** was a popular 19th century idea according to which history can be largely explained by the impact of 'great men', or heroes: highly influential individuals who, due to either their personal charisma, intelligence, wisdom, or Machiavellianism utilized their power in a way that had a decisive historical impact. The theory was popularized in the 1840s by Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle.

But the **Great Man Theory** did have its critics. One of the most vitriolic critics of Carlyle's formulation of the **Great Man Theory** was Herbert Spencer. In 1860 Herbert Spencer formulated a decisive counter-argument that remained influential throughout the 20th century. He believed that attributing historical events to the decisions of individuals was a hopelessly primitive, childish, and unscientific position as the men Carlyle called 'great men' were merely products of their social environment whose actions would have been impossible without the social conditions built before their lifetime.

1.4 WRITING THE BODY

Now that we have located life narratives within a historical context, and examined some of the masculinist assumptions about the writing of life narratives, let us focus more closely on the issue of corporeality for the purposes of this unit. In order to do so, we will begin with a discussion of 19th century women's life narratives.

1.4.1 19th Century Women's Life Narratives

Nineteenth-century England was the period which saw the growth of literature by women. It is notable that, due to the impact of mass industrialization in England, relationships increasingly became mercantile and mechanistic. The position of the male breadwinner of the family acquired greater prominence while women had to conform to a role, a set pattern of female stereotypes devised by men. The 'perfect Victorian lady' was to function solely as daughter, wife or mother, an ideal which had little connection with any functional and responsible role in society.

On the other hand, in spite of masculine predominance in the field of literature, the age saw the emergence of a vast number of women writers writing from the depths of their own experiences as females. The issue of what a woman's 'place' ought to be in a proper society had begun to obsess a startling range of thinkers and writers as George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emile Bronte, Charlotte Bronte and others who, in their own

ways, tried to find a solution to the Woman Question by revising the male ideologies in order to recognize female power.

During the Victorian age however, one became more aware of what was being said in the 'silences and exclusions of the female experience' and of what female stereotypes (such as, 'The Angel in the House', 'The Fallen Woman', 'The Madwoman', 'The Siren') revealed about the needs and uncertainties of the Victorian male who were mainly preoccupied with women's physical and mental inferiority. Early medical writers believed that the delicacy of the female reproductive system gave rise to physical and mental disturbance thus making a woman highly vulnerable to physical and mental derangement. There was now a double 'politics of gender' at work: an outer struggle for women's legal and political rights and the inner struggle of both men and women to cope with the demands of powerful but failing cultural stereotypes.

One of the most formidable writers of the late Victorian period, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was critically engaged all her life in the problem of writing lives and, in particular, the problem of writing women's lives. An important modernist writer of fiction, she also questioned, from a feminist perspective, traditional accounts of the subject and prefigured and even helped to influence present-day debates about writing and sexual difference. Woolf took her bearings from her father Leslie Stephen's work as biographer, but found herself intrigued by what she called 'the lives of the obscure', the forgotten lives, mostly of women, who had been marginalized by Stephen's selection of 'great men' in his *The Dictionary of National Biography*.

1.4.2 Biases and Stereotypes

As you can see, women writers faced severe discrimination which negatively impacted women's writings (in this case, life narratives). Indeed, the autobiography genre has received serious scholarly attention only in the last fifty years and much of this work has focused on the writings of men rather than women. Early scholars focused almost exclusively on the lifestyle and the perceived moral state of the author and not on the form and style of the genre itself. However, recent scholarship suggests that women possessed a unique mode of self-representation and set of justifications for their self-histories and that these perceptions have evolved from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century.

According to P. Lejeune, the author of an autobiography implicitly declares that he is the person he says he is and that the author and the protagonist are the same (Lejeune, 1982, p. 202). But have we necessarily believed all subjects in the same way? Have all signatures had the same legal status? Does not sincerity itself, as Nancy Miller suggests, already imply a masculine subject, since women are less likely to be believed simply on account of who they are? (Miller, 1988, p. 52).

Miller's argument demonstrates the extent to which the genre of autobiography has been implicitly bound up with gender. Insofar as autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of masculine - and, we may add, Western and middle-class - modes of subjectivity.

Other scholars have focused on what nineteenth century women's autobiographies reveal about how women perceived themselves, their self defined gender ideology, the issues of particular concern in their lives, and factual information about their accomplishments and lifestyles. Few women published autobiographies until the end of the nineteenth century; among the most famous are Margaret Oliphant, Harriet Martineau, Annie Besant, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

1.4.3 Marginalization and Identity

In what way then can we claim women's autobiography as counter-traditional? Feminist critics writing about autobiography in the 1980s encountered an obvious gap: the absence of women's texts from an accepted canon of autobiographical writing, a canon which placed the 'confessional' texts of Saint Augustine and Rousseau at its centre. As with other genres, it was not that women did not produce autobiographical writing but that it was deemed to be unimportant, crude or illegitimate, thus failing to live up to the necessary test of 'great writing'. If male critics had too easily conflated the description of a genre with a narrative of the masculine subject, feminist critics sought validation for women's experience in a not dissimilar way, by using autobiographical texts as reference for life. The notion of a pre-existing self underlying the text and accessed by it bypasses the problem of who the subject is and how she is constituted.

Since language is 'phallogentric', that is, it subsumes the feminine into a masculine 'universal', women's difference is produced in terms of an absence or gap within language, which can also be used as a subversive space. Autobiography has been one of the most important sites of feminist debate precisely because it demonstrates that there are many different ways of writing the subject.

In her book *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the 20th century* (1993), Sidonie Smith discusses the way in which nineteenth century women created a 'self' within their writings and the way in which Victorian ideology limited women's conceptualization of themselves. Smith makes three main points: that women autobiographers see themselves as enmeshed in the lives of others, rather than as the unencumbered, imperial, self-sufficient ego of masculinist autobiographies; that women of colour use their autobiographies to contest the negative stereotypes applied to them by whites, presumably men; and that women

write from their experiences as female people embedded in a hostile (male) culture. For Smith, identity is postmodern: constantly shifting, ambiguous, fragmented, and segmented. Her own words explain her conclusions like this:

The autobiographer's specific body is ... the site of heterogeneous axes of signification that become constitutive of the subject of autobiography. Bearing multiple marks of location, bodies position the autobiographical subject at the nexus of culturally specific experiences, of gender, race, sexual orientation, and health among them, and at the nexus of 'micropolitical practices' that derive from the cultural meaning of those points of identification.

(Smith & Watson, 1992, p.130)

Critics agree that women's autobiographical writing differed from men's in several regards. First, women authors felt that they had to defend their decision to write about themselves. Particularly in the early nineteenth century, society believed that women should not call attention to themselves, in their lives or deeds. Women autobiographers often attempted to assure readers of their ordinary lives, filled with domestic duties and service to their families. The authors justified their writing as a moral obligation, either to educate others or to entertain other women.

Women autobiographers differ from men in their focus, often de-emphasizing the role of men in their lives and writing mostly about themselves and other women. In addition, women writers reflect the cultural ideologies and assumptions of their period. Often, they emphasize the aspects of life that were considered to be within the women's sphere in the nineteenth century: childcare, housekeeping, nursing, marriage and family. Critics note that these women's autobiographies provide information about the private family sphere which is often unavailable in other official sources.

Virginia Woolf has been a key figure for critics of autobiography who, drawing on the psychoanalytic writings of both Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, have seen her writing as opening up the question of the feminine as a challenge to the phallic or masculine position of the subject. By conceiving of the subject as subject to dissolution and by exploring those fragmented, inchoate and repressed psychic realms, also coded with the symbolic as feminine, Woolf is seen as undermining the unity and confidence of that universal 'I' claimed by the masculine subject.

1.4.4 Anxieties and Self-Justification

What, then, we might ask, do women autobiographers feel about themselves? Are they happy with their counter-traditional roles? Elizabeth Winston states that nineteenth-century women's autobiographies were conciliatory, and

the authors' 'need to assure readers of their womanliness results in apologies, disclaimers, and words of self-depreciation.' Genaro Padilla gives rise to another question of form, that is, whether autobiographical accounts that were collected by a scholar rather than recorded solely by the source are valid. But Julia Swindells has argued that, the autobiographical self is not invented but constructed by 'calling on' the representations that are historically available and which may include fictional ones. Thus, nineteenth-century working-class women, according to Swindells, turned to the novel, the melodrama or romance as models when they came to represent their own lives, as places where women were at least visible, albeit in a 'reified' or 'idealised' form. That politicizing or 'rematerializing' of difference which autobiography has been seen as undertaking is therefore always a complex matter involving both the subject's discursive position, and material/historical location. As cultural critic Stuart Hall has argued, discursive practices 'always implicate' the positions from which we speak and therefore 'though we speak, so to say 'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place' (Hall, 1990, p. 222). Thus women's writings (including autobiographies) subvert the all pervasive masculine assumptions about paternity, succession and hierarchy that have resulted in cultural imperialism. Woolf however, compares this transgression as 'hymeneal rupture' and in her feminist polemic *A Room of One's Own*, implies that women who did not apologize for their literary efforts were defined by patriarchy as mad and monstrous: freakish because 'unsexed' or freakish because sexually 'fallen'. Moreover, literary and social conventions dictate that women writers should concern themselves with 'women's world', 'women's interests', 'women's tastes', 'women's brains'. In the above discussion, we have focused on issues relating to the marginalization of women writers. In the next section, let us turn specifically to the role of the body in women's life narratives in examining the latter from a gender perspective.

Check Your Progress:

- i) *Why have women autobiographers had to struggle against biases and stereotypes?*

ii) *Can you think of an Indian woman writer who has succeeded in overcoming such biases? Describe her work.*

1.5 THE BODY, DISABILITY AND PAIN IN WOMEN'S LIFE NARRATIVES

Problematically for feminists, the opposition between mind and body has often been correlated with an opposition between male and female, with the female regarded as trapped within her bodily existence in a way that makes attainment of rationality questionable. In developing philosophical frameworks for making sense of sexual difference, feminist philosophers have provided accounts of the relationship between subjectivity, corporeality and identity which are applicable to other aspects of our corporeal existence. Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price comment that 'What is required, and what has emerged over subsequent years, is a theory of embodiment that could take account not simply of sexual difference but of racial difference, class difference and differences due to disability; in short the specific contextual materiality of the body' (Price and Shildrick, 1999, p. 5). Now, let us examine some of the above issues related to the body and corporeality in the context of the works of three women autobiographers: Elaine Scarry, Helen Keller and Kamala Das.

1.5.1 Scarry's Unique Study of the Body and Pain

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* is known as a definitive study of pain and the infliction of pain. She argues that physical pain leads to destruction and the unmaking of the human world, whereas human creation at the opposite end of the spectrum leads to the making of the world.

The language of pain is necessarily a language of absence; the person testifying to pain, through visual or verbal representation, attempts to give proof of an event that resists expression. Herein lies the polarity of Scarry's work; she opposes the destructive quality of pain to the body and language with modes of creativity that seek to express what language resists. While the first section theorizes the inexpressibility of physical pain and its lack of referent, the second named 'Making' claims that it is this inexpressibility that serves as the impetus to create (an argument that you can use to interpret Helen Keller's life-narrative about which you will come to know in the following section). Once the body is turned inside-out i.e. the body is no longer considered an amalgamation of mere parts or objects, shapes and mechanisms, the body is now seen in terms of subjectivity, in terms of requirements and needs. Therefore mere survival mechanism will now be converted into a sense of 'aliveness' or 'awareness of aliveness'. In this way physical debilitation can become a constructive factor behind self-awareness. Scarry's work may also be used to interpret the concept of gender and sex (in female writers) as causes of mental and physical disability.

In this context, it would be useful for you to refer to the work *Dis)embodied Form: Issues of Disabled Women* (2003), of polio survivor Anita Ghai, who is an activist fighting for the rights of disabled women. Both Ghai and Keller have not only overcome their physical impairment but become pioneers in their own rights: the impairment has become the impetus for something bigger and loftier. Women's bodies are regarded from time immemorial as commodities to be preened and maintained to enable them to entice men into matrimony so that they would have the material means to live. Women's attention to their bodies therefore took the form of producing them as objects for others' appraisal. By regimes of dieting, makeup, exercise, dress, cosmetic surgery, women try to sculpt their bodies into shapes which reflect the dominant societal norms. In such a milieu the very concept of survival for women with physical disabilities seems threatened let alone their marrying or living their lives with dignity. The trajectory of Keller and others like her has become an inspiration for women who may be either hindered mentally or physically and allow for options other than (dishonourable) marriages.

1.5.2 Mental and Physical Disability in Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*

Above, we read about Scarry's claim of inexpressibility as the impetus to creativity. In this context, our point of focus here is Hellen Keller's *The Story of My Life*. What is Keller's narrative about? The story of **Helen Keller** is the story of a child who, at the age of 19 months, suddenly loses her hearing and vision, and who, against overwhelming odds and with a great deal of persistence, grows into a very intelligent, sensitive woman and a social activist.

The illness that struck the infant Helen Keller, and left her deaf and blind before she learned to speak, was diagnosed as brain fever at the time (perhaps it was scarlet fever). As Helen grew from infancy into childhood she was wild and unruly, and had little real understanding of the world around her. However, the turning point in her life came on a March day in 1887 when she was a few months short of seven years old. On that day, which Helen Keller was always to refer to as "the most important day I can remember in my life," Anne Mansfield Sullivan came to Tuscumbia to be her teacher. Miss Sullivan, a 20-year-old graduate of the Perkins School for the Blind, who had regained useful sight through a series of operations, had come to the Kellers through the sympathetic interest of Alexander Graham Bell. From that fateful day, the two—teacher and pupil—were inseparable until the death of the former in 1936.

Miss Anne Sullivan not only succeeded in turning the uncontrolled child into a responsible human being but also succeeded in awakening and stimulating her marvelous mind - a story that is today familiar to millions, most notably through William Gibson's play and film, *The Miracle Worker*, Miss Keller's autobiography of her early years, *The Story of My Life*, and Joseph Lash's *Helen and Teacher*.

Miss Sullivan began her task with a doll that the children at Perkins had made for her to take to Helen. By spelling 'd-o-l-l' into the child's hand, she hoped to teach her to connect objects with letters. Helen quickly learned to form the letters correctly and in the correct order, but did not know she was spelling a word, or even that words existed. In the days that followed she learned to spell a great many more words in this uncomprehending way.

One day she and 'Teacher'—as Helen always called her—went to the outdoor pump. Miss Sullivan started to draw water and put Helen's hand under the spout. As the cool water gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other hand the word 'w-a-t-e-r' first slowly, then rapidly. Suddenly, the signals had meaning in Helen's mind. She knew that 'water' meant the wonderful cool liquid flowing over her hand. Quickly, she stopped and touched the

earth and demanded its letter name and by nightfall she had learned 30 words.

Thus began Helen Keller's education. She proceeded quickly to master the alphabet, both manual and in raised print for blind readers, and gained facility in reading and writing. In 1890, when she was just 10, she expressed a desire to learn to speak. Somehow she had found out that a little deaf-blind girl in Norway had acquired that ability. Miss Sarah Fuller of the Horace Mann School was her first speech teacher.

Even when she was a little girl, Helen Keller had a desire to go to college and in 1898 she did enter the Cambridge School for Young Ladies to prepare for Radcliffe College. She entered Radcliffe in the fall of 1900 and received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1904. Throughout these years and until her own death in 1936, Anne Sullivan was always by Helen's side, laboriously spelling book after book and lecture after lecture, into her pupil's hand.

Helen Keller's formal schooling ended when she received her B.A. degree, but throughout her life she continued to study and stay informed on all matters of importance to modern people. In recognition of her wide knowledge and many scholarly achievements, she received honorary doctoral degrees from Temple University and Harvard University and from the Universities of Glasgow, Scotland; Berlin, Germany; Delhi, India; and Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. She was also an Honorary Fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland. Anne Sullivan's marriage, in 1905, to John Macy, an eminent critic and prominent socialist, caused no change in the teacher-pupil relationship. Helen went to live with the Macys and both husband and wife unstintingly gave their time to help her with her studies and other activities.

While still at Radcliffe, Helen Keller began a writing career that was to continue on and off for 50 years. In 1903, *The Story of My Life*, which had first appeared in serial form in the *Ladies Home Journal*, appeared in book form. This was always to be the most popular of her works and today is available in more than 50 languages. Miss Keller's other published works include *Optimism*, an essay; *The World I Live In*; *The Song of the Stone Wall*; *Out of the Dark*; *My Religion*; *Midstream—My Later Life*; *Peace at Eventide*; *Helen Keller in Scotland*; *Helen Keller's Journal*; *Let Us Have Faith*; *Teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy*; and *The Open Door*. She was also a frequent contributor to magazines and newspapers, writing mostly on blindness, deafness, socialism, social issues, and women's rights. She used a braille typewriter to prepare her manuscripts and then copied them on a regular typewriter.

Keller went on to become a world-famous speaker and author. She is remembered as an advocate for people with disabilities, amid numerous

other causes. She was a suffragist, a pacifist, an opponent of Woodrow Wilson, a radical socialist and a birth control supporter. In 1915 she and George Kessler founded the Helen Keller International (HKI) organization. This organization is devoted to research in vision, health and nutrition. In 1920 she helped to found the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Keller traveled to 40 some-odd countries with Sullivan, making several trips to Japan and becoming a favorite of the Japanese people. Keller met every U.S. President from Grover Cleveland to Lyndon B. Johnson and was friends with many famous figures, including Alexander Graham Bell, Charlie Chaplin and Mark Twain. Keller and Mark Twain were both considered radicals at the beginning of the 20th century, and as a consequence, their political views have been forgotten or glossed over in popular perception.

Keller was a member of the Socialist Party and actively campaigned and wrote in support of the working class from 1909 to 1921. She supported Socialist Party candidate Eugene V. Debs in each of his campaigns for the presidency. Newspaper columnists who had praised her courage and intelligence before she expressed her socialist views now called attention to her disabilities.

However, we must also keep in mind that recognition did not come to Keller easily. Despite her hard-earned accomplishments, Helen was at first regarded with pity due to her blindness and people underestimated her abilities more so for she was a woman - prejudices that the intelligent and sensitive Keller was quick to detect. Keller experienced a double sense of oppression for being a woman who was also visually impaired. Before Keller there was no standard Braille system. It was Keller who modified the existing Braille that used 12 dots (a system that was initially invented by a French soldier in order to send coded messages), to one that required only 6 dots which could create 63 characters. Moreover, with the new Braille system, one can read almost every European language. It would be interesting here, for you to look at the Bollywood film *Black* which was inspired by Keller's story. We also have many other inspiring stories of eminent people who have overcome physical/mental disabilities which can be taken into account viz. Sudha Chandran (orthopaedically handicapped), singers Ravindra Jain and Krishna Chandra Dey (visual impairment), Stephen Hawking (motor neurone disease), and Whoopi Goldberg (learning disability).

1.5.3 Kamala Das' Triply Marginalized Self Narrative

You may have noted that so far, our study has been dominated by 'white' female authors. How can we then fit in Kamala Das' self-narrative into this study? Or to put it more succinctly, from what perspective can we regard Kamala Das' autobiography as a documentation of the marginalization of the Indian middle-class woman?

It is true that while in the west, women's studies began with literature and history, in India especially, its inspiration as a formal inquiry sprang from a more direct concern with the low status of women in society. Originally it was seen as arising out of particular social evils (*sati*, *purdah*, child marriage, child widows, ban on widow remarriage, and so on), which afflicted sections of Hindu society. Though after the independence of India in 1947, the Hindu Code, passed as separate Acts between 1950 and 1955, rewrote for Hindus the laws of marriage and divorce, adoption and inheritance, and adult suffrage added women to the electoral roles, the growing women's movement around issues of dowry, rape, prostitution, domestic violence, birth control and health led to research on these subjects as well as on the nature of women's struggles. Culture and ideology came gradually to be added to the list.

In this context, the mere emphasis on 'sexual difference' when it came to interpreting self-narratives has elided other forms of difference. There has been the proliferation of 'new social movements' following the early 1980s, each with a specific focus or theme such as sexuality, race, ethnicity or class. So far as life narratives are concerned, their deconstruction as a genre which privileged a white, masculine subject gave way, as part of this same moment of diversification, to a sense of their potential or use as political strategy by these new social groups. Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith have argued that the marginalized subject, by "deploying autobiographical practices that go against the grain" can constitute "an 'I' that becomes a place of creative and, by implication, political intervention" (Smith and Watson, 1992, p. xix). Julia Swindells has provided a more wide-ranging but similarly optimistic account of the new radical uses of autobiography:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness - women, black people, working-class people - have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself.

(Swindells, 1995, p. 7)

The idea that autobiography can become 'the text of the oppressed' articulating through one person's experience, experiences which may be representative of a particular marginalized group, is an important one: autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition.

Thus, women's writing in India at present has a relevance and a validity for more reasons than one. Not only does it project the observations, situations,

responses and struggles of women within the ambit of kinship, marriage and procreation, it also questions values and structures hitherto considered axiomatic, and in turn focuses attention on the definition of freedom and creativity while throwing up queries related to oppression and colonization. Therefore, one finds most of the post-colonial feminist critics in India and the Third World detect and decry a 'colonialist move' in Western feminist criticism. In the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, it "celebrates the heroines of the First World in a singular and individualist, and the collective presence of women elsewhere in a pluralized and inchoate fashion" (Spivak cited in Dey, 2011, p. 24).

Let us now consider Kamala Das' 'story' or life narrative.

Though **Kamala Das** is one of the greatest poets of the century, it is her autobiographical sketches in *My Story* that shot her into the limelight in the literary arena. Its outspokenness and frank portrayal of extra-marital relations led on to the book becoming a cult classic. Since then this book has been known widely and often read for all the wrong reasons.

Kamala Das is believed to have portrayed her own life in *My Story*. The story is about a young woman writer who is forced into an arranged marriage with a much older, lustful, man. Though she is not much educated formally, she has such a literary background that formal education ceases to matter. Fed-up with a boring, loveless domestic life, the protagonist begins to look for very physical affairs with men outside marriage but is soon disillusioned with the male gender in general. This is the first book in India which speaks so openly of the sexual desires of the average Indian woman, the subject which is always hastily swept under the carpet even now.

The novel also predominates with the metaphor of disease and sickness that the narrator herself undergoes, along with her eldest son who seem to be a chronic patient, falling prey to the tentacles of grave diseases fearing impending death but miraculously surviving with care and treatment. The symbols of illness form a portrayal of aberration in her life – a life that is devoid of peace and tranquility, a life that is forever rocking in the sea of turbulence, seeking an anchor but finding none, strives to stay afloat in those disturbed waters of turmoil and trepidation.

In this context, we can acknowledge Catherine Belsey's perspective of how a woman while submitting to "the authority of the social formation represented in ideology as the Absolute Subject (God, the king, boss, Man, conscience)" (Belsey, 1991, p. 596), also at times finds agency and the ability to resist received roles and definitions. As suggested by Julia Kristeva, she focuses on 'process' and possibilities for change therein: "The subject is ... the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change" (Belsey, 1991, p. 597).

Belsey notes, “Women as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses. Very broadly, we participate both in the liberal-humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition” (Belsey, 1991, p. 597-98). Belsey thus pinpoints the central contradiction that is subjectivity, as it simultaneously enables and inhibits. But perhaps the most effective explanation for Kamala Das’ ‘story’ would be Gayle Rubin’s powerful argument in her essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” (1984): “The realm of sexuality... has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behavior, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuvering, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political” (Rubin, 1993, p. 4).

Activity:

Read any one of the three works discussed in the above section. Analyse the representation of the body in the light of the above discussion and jot down your observations.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

We may finally conclude our study by asking ourselves - what is the relevance of studying women's life narratives? While taking into account life narratives of Das and Keller, we have to remember that the discrimination women still meet now takes place against a different backdrop. From the political point of view, what is significant about the various attempts to challenge legislation set up to help women is that there is clearly no longer any consensus among the populace that women suffer from structural discrimination and need extra help. Nevertheless, simultaneously male hostility to women is still a significant social fact and this is where Das and Keller remain relevant today. Old sexual attitudes remain highly problematic, especially for vulnerable women and rape, sexual violence and harassment, economic and financial exploitation are all real and not imaginary problems which are unfortunately increasingly on the rise in countries around the world. Also, little has been done to improve working conditions for those who are physically disabled, and marital disputes demand that more often than not it is the woman who must compromise for the sake of family and security. Anita Ghai referring to marriage as a difficult endeavour for disabled women, in one of her interviews, adds that in a patriarchal society, all women are disabled. For gender studies students as yourself therefore, what becomes more challenging in the present scenario is to use women's life narratives as a medium by which to locate and reinterpret women's personal/physical/psychological crises as well as subtle means of gender discrimination that are still continuing in various forms.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you consider self narratives as manifestations of an individual's personality? Discuss.
- 2) Explain how women's autobiographies act as tools of subversion considering the traditional social bias faced by women writers.
- 3) Do you think Kamala Das' *My Story* is simply a saga of 'the disenfranchised Indian housewife' or a notorious incitement to aberration? Justify with examples from the narrative.
- 4) Consider both Kamala Das' and Helen Keller's self narratives as attempts to emancipation and self-discovery.
- 5) Analyse the self narratives of Kamala Das and Helen Keller in the context of Elaine Scarry's portrayal of the relation between the castrating effect of pain and creativity.
- 6) Do you think women's self narratives are essentially feminist in essence? Give reasons for your answer, using specific examples wherever necessary.

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