

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



**THE STORY OF MAHATMA: M. K. GANDHI'S EXPERIMENTS WITH
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE**

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to discover the narrative techniques used by M. K. Gandhi in his autobiographical narrative entitled "An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth". Gandhi's life-story was first written by himself in his mother-tongue viz. Gujarati and published in the serialized form in *Navajivan* and *Young India* from the end of 1925 to February 1929. The series appeared in book form in English in two volumes, the first in 1927 and the second in 1929. Ever since its publication, Gandhi's autobiography has been one of the most popular books across the world. It has been translated into more than fifty languages. More interestingly, multiple translations of this book have appeared in the same language. In view of this, the present paper tries to account for the exceptional popularity of this book as well as the tremendous effect it has on the reader. The present researcher is of the view that autobiography was one of the important literary forms that was used in the early phase of the development of Indian English Literature and as a literary narrative Gandhi's autobiography has contributed greatly to the Indian English literature. Moreover, even in the age of multimedia biographies and autobiographies, Gandhi's story stands out due to its unique narrative techniques.

KEYWORDS: Autobiography, Literary Narrative, Narrative Techniques etc.

INTRODUCTION :

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's life-story was first written by himself in his mother-tongue viz. Gujarati and published in the serialized form in *Navajivan* and *Young India* from the end of 1925 to February 1929. Then, the series appeared in book form in English in two volumes, the first in 1927 and the second in 1929. Prima-facie, it appears to be the self-narrated story of Gandhi from his birth and early childhood to the year

1920. It is remarkable to note here that ever since its publication, Gandhi's autobiography has been one of the most popular books across the world. It has been translated into more than fifty languages. More interestingly, multiple translations of this book have appeared in the same languages. In view of this, the present paper tries to account for the exceptional popularity of this book as well as the tremendous effect it has on the reader.

ORIGINAL STORY AND THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION - THE TWINS:

It must be noted, at the outset, that Gandhi's Gujarati story with the short title *Satyana Prayogo* was translated into English by his most trusted secretary Mahadev Desai. Gopalkrishna Gandhi has rightly underscored the authenticity of the translated text thus:

It is also important to bear in mind the fact that the English version had the benefit of Gandhiji's own reading of the text and, we can presume, his active participation in the translation exercise itself. Like the original exercise of writing it, this translation exercise also took place in times when Gandhiji, lacking leisure, had to make some time from 'no time'. And when Desai, in addition to his exacting schedule as Gandhiji's secretary, devoted himself to this literary responsibility.

The English *Autobiography* therefore stands beside the original work not just as an outstanding and authorized translation but as its first recension prepared under the author's direct guidance by one who was his *alter ego*, whose mother-tongue was the same as his, and who was, like him, perfectly at home in English (2-3).

Given this, the English version of Gandhi's story can legitimately be used as a base for the present undertaking.

GANDHI'S STORY AS A LITERARY NARRATIVE:

The present paper treats Gandhi's autobiography as a literary narrative rather than as a socio-political or religious - spiritual treatise and attempts to discover the narrative techniques used by M. K. Gandhi in his autobiography entitled in English *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*. There is no denying the fact that Gandhi's life story is also the story of an eventful episode in the life of pre-independent India. If it is read as an autobiography of a man who was later to be known as Mahatma and the father of the nation, it is bound to be the story of a person's socio-political experiences in India and abroad. Alternatively, however, if one analyses it as an objective documentation of a man's 'experiments with truth', then it has little scope for the 'story' in it. The coordinating conjunction 'or' in the title is very suggestive here. Most probably, Gandhi wants to direct his readers to look at his life from two parallel perspectives. He seems to suggest that his book is both a story of his life as well as an account of his personal experiments with the objective reality. Hence, it needs to be interpreted as a personal story as well as objective documentation of a 'lived life'. GUSDORF supports this view thus:

The significance of autobiography should therefore be sought beyond truth and falsity, as those are conceived by simple common sense. It is unquestionably a document about a life, and the historian has a perfect right to check out its testimony and verify its accuracy. But it is also a work of art, and the literary devotee, for his part, will be aware of its stylistic harmony and the beauty of its images. (1980: 43)

The first step to the exploration of the story-world created by M. K. Gandhi in his autobiography would be to treat it as a narrative discourse. Gerald Prince gives a very general definition of narrative thus:

Narrative is “the recounting [...] of one or more real or fictitious EVENTS communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) NARRATORS to one, two, or several (more or less overt) NARRATEES (2003:58).

From this point of view, we shall have to look at the narrative situation that is created in Gandhi’s recounting of ‘real events’. To use Genette’s term, Gandhi’s life-story is unfolded through the “homodiegetic” narrative situation. Genette defines the homodiegetic narrative thus:

In a homodiegetic narrative, the story is told by a (homodiegetic) narrator who is also one of story’s acting characters. The prefix ‘homo-’ points to the fact that the individual who acts as a narrator is also a character on the level of action (qtd.in Jahn: N1.10.).

This kind of narrative situation is typical of the genre of autobiography. It means it is a story of personal experiences.

TRUTH - ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE:

Given his exceptional integrity, one may not doubt the truth-value of Gandhi’s experiences and experiments. Nevertheless, as an autobiography or, more precisely, as a narrative discourse, his life- story inevitably gains some degree of fictionality in that it is a story which is recollected, reconstructed and also controlled through the verbal medium by way of subsequent narration. No doubt, it is a ‘truthful’ account of his experiments with truth. But the ‘truth’ here is not absolute but only relative. At the same time, ‘the experimented truth’ is reduced to the verbal expression by way of an autobiography. As Weintraub rightly points out:

The essential subject matter of all autobiographic writing is concretely *experienced reality* and not the realm of brute external fact. External reality is embedded in experience, but it is viewed from within the modification of inward life forming our experience; external fact attains a degree of symptomatic value derived from inward absorption and reflection. . . . Autobiography [therefore] presupposes writer intent upon reflection on this inward realm of experience, someone for whom this inner world of experience is important. (1975: 822–823)

What is peculiar about the narrative in question is that the narrator of the story is both highly ‘overt’ and ‘reliable’. One can easily find certain ‘voice markers’ in the story. The distance between the narrating self and narrated self is clear. One can easily recognize even as one reads the beginning of the story that, it is a calm and composed

narrative voice of a middle-aged man who wants to uncover the bygone days of his life with some serious purpose. And the purpose may be that of helping the reader/narratee to attain to self-realization by way of sharing his own experiences and experiments.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS AN ACT OF DEPERSONALIZATION:

In fact, the very act of writing and publishing an autobiography is indicative of a privileged individuality. In his paper entitled "Autobiographical Understanding and Narrative Inquiry" Mark Freeman (2006:120-145) points out that although the autobiographical writing dates back to Plato's times, autobiography proper is in fact the outcome of western consciousness of individuality. To quote Gusdorf once again:

The man who takes delight in thus drawing his own image believes worthy of a special interest... I count, my existence is significant to the world, and my death will have the world incomplete. In narrating my life I give witness of myself even from beyond my death and so can preserve this precious capital that ought not disappear (1980:29)

It is a well-known fact that Gandhi, despite being worshiped as Mahatma, always regarded himself as an ordinary man. But then, why did he venture to write his autobiography? Gandhi himself puts forth the clarification in the introduction of his autobiography:

... a God-fearing friend has his doubts, which he shared with me on my day of silence. 'What has set you on this adventure?' he asked. 'Writing an autobiography is a practice peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the East having written, except amongst those who have come under the western influence.... But it is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, It is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography (Gandhi: 1927: IX).

What we gather from this is that Gandhi wants to use the form autobiography not for self-glorification but for objective introspection. This in itself is an experiment with the very form of autobiography for this genre is basically meant for recording an individual's past with an ulterior motive of preserving one's fleeting moments in a verbal museum. However, for Gandhi, this was not at all the purpose. Hence, he can claim a moral right to share his life. Paradoxically, therefore, Gandhi's attempt at writing an autobiography is an act of depersonalization.

GANDHI'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE:

The present researcher is of the view that autobiography was one of the important literary forms that were used in the early phase of the development of Indian English Literature and, as a literary narrative; Gandhi's autobiography has contributed greatly to the Indian English literature. It has demonstrated how the western form of autobiography can be used in an indigenous way. Hence, even in the age of multimedia biographies and autobiographies, Gandhi's story stands out due to its unique narrative techniques.

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