

Whose Self is it Anyway? Derrida and the Paradigm of Autobiography in Decolonization

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The article aims to deliberate on autobiography—a subject that received significant prominence in Derrida's oeuvre. While autobiography is the story of the 'autos' or the self¹, it is the auto's other that constitutes the autos or, in other words, autobiography comes into existence with the trace of its other. If autobiography is about subjective non-closure and infiniteness and a discourse haunted by Derridean *differance*², then what happens to the empirical being whose self is under narration? If it is the border between life and the work, then when exactly is the autobiographical moment? The article critically interrogates this problematic genre and puts under scrutiny autobiography's *other*; a non-specific and non-singular category that gets subsumed in the discourse of the autos. Taking the inevitable dimension of autobiography's 'other' into account the article attempts to situate the practice of writing autobiography in decolonization and recalls the Indian experience with autobiography as a genre, as it reflects on some important writings such as M.K. Gandhi's autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* and Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography vis-à-vis the Derridean paradigm of autobiography*.

Thematically and structurally, autobiography remains a discourse haunted by a sense of uncertainty³. When all theoretical formulations on 'author', 'author function', and authorial intention⁴ intent to keep biography at bay, this indeterminate field of literary genre pulsates with life's history. The tendency to dispossess a text from the father's affiliation or the figural assassination of the author is germane to the poststructuralist aesthetics of text and textuality. When Roland Barthes declares 'the death of the author' ending the subjective privileging of the author, it poses serious question concerning the future of the genre

of autobiography. In his eponymous essay Barthes writes: "Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral composite, oblique space where all our subject slips away, the negative where all our identity is lost, starting with the very identity of body writing"⁵. Michel Foucault, intervening in the debate, argues that writing creates "a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears"⁶. Foucault speaks of the author as a function rather than as an origin of discourse, reducing him to a mere secondary effect within the text. He wants to dispense with the idea of the author by emancipating the text from the appropriation of authorship. With such a notion of writing with an indifference to the function and identity of the author the questions that haunt us: Has autobiography come to an end? If the author "slips away" and "disappears" in the abyss of writing, how are we to retrieve the writing self whose signature guarantees the 'truth' of his/her life? Or does the 'death' of autobiography leave spaces for any ghostly returns?

Paul de Man's "Autobiography as Defacement" remains a significant intervention in signalling the end of autobiography. Reducing autobiography to a tropological system, de Man denies it the status of a genre or a mode, but 'a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts'.⁷ Reacting sharply to Lejeune's⁸ thesis of autobiographical contract that equates epistemological authority of the subject with the mere signature, de Man demonstrates the mutation of the textual self from the epistemological in the process of *disfigurement* of the writing subject in the act of self narration. The autobiographical subject seeks self-knowledge by creating fictions and figures, and de Man believes, all our knowledges including our self-knowledge derive from the figurative language or tropes. The author of the autobiography endows writing with all the attributes of a face in order to conceal their own fictionalization or displacement by writing. Thus attributing a face to a fictitious figure through tropes

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leads to the *defacement* of the autobiographical subject. Cancellation of the writing self, which in turn cancels the author, disengages the life from the work—the system and the subject of the system. de Man's thesis of purposive self-effacement or displacement of the self propels us to locate the traces of the hidings, thereby invoking the return of the author. However, it cannot be denied that beneath such apparent motive of defacing the self lies the politics of writing and the complex ramifications of 'publicizing' a private self. Notwithstanding the theoretical resistance towards autobiography or de-defining of autobiography or the poststructuralist dismantling of the author as well as the metaphysics of subjectivity, the metaphysical self manifests in alternative autobiographical practices such as those reflected in postcolonial, feminist, multicultural non-canonical modes of life-writings. Julia Watson, in her essay "Toward an Anti-metaphysics of Autobiography", observes that these critical standpoints of narrating the autobiographical self "contest not just the legitimacy of the canon but the definition of what constitutes a "life" in autobiography"⁹. Instead of continuing the deconstruction of the canonical writers, she explores what she calls "the problematic of metaphysical selfhood" in the writers who are seen as violating the generic norms of autobiography despite their concern for self-representation.

The death and return of the author which makes, remakes, and unmakes the autobiographical, is crucial to Jacques Derrida's polemics on autobiography. The autobiography motif, for Derrida, is an unwitting one that continuously goes on in a text without the autobiographer ever mastering it consciously. Borrowing the famous scene of *fort-da* from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in his essay "To Speculate—on 'Freud'", Derrida explains that the process of writing autobiography involves the similar *fort-da* game that Freud's grandson plays with the reel and Freud himself playing the same in the text by recalling himself through a substitution which can never be completely mastered. As Derrida comments¹⁰:

"He (Freud) writes himself this scene, which is descriptive or theoretical but also very profoundly autobiographical and performative to the degree that it concerns him in his relation to his heirs: there is in other words, an immense autobiographical scene invested in this apparently theoretical writing, and it is doing *fort/da*".

What appears in Derrida's statement is the pervasiveness of autobiography as a genre across his oeuvre. Derrida's stance of autobiography traversing an author's entire oeuvre has been pronounced in a similar fashion by James Olney in "A Theory of Autobiography" where Olney in place of 'autobiography' uses the word 'lifework'—a final product of the author that might comprise of "history or poetry, psychology or theology,

political economy or natural science" or it might take the form of "personal essay or controversial tract, lyric poem or scientific treatise"¹¹. For Olney, a man's life work is the complete autobiography or in other words, autobiography is "precisely an attempt to describe a life-work, in matter and content as well"¹². However, Derrida spells out the problematic borderline between the 'life' and the 'work': while the author's work is ostensibly skewed towards the autobiographical; the autobiographical subject, as in Rousseau's *Confessions* for example, goes beyond other discourses defying the generic norms. Eschewing the familiar convention and form of autobiography, Derrida opens up a new space where autobiography operates according to its own rules. The question of autobiographical has to be 'redistributed' or 'reconstructed' in a new form as the borderline between the life and the work, i.e. author's life and the corpus becomes porous. Hence autobiography, according to Derrida, still exists, "but its meaning will not be the same"¹³.

In "Roundtable on Autobiography", Derrida claims that autobiography is not to be confused with the so-called life of the author. The biographical in so far as it is autobiographical cuts across both the body of the work and the body of the real subject. It is the border line between the "work" and "life"—the system and the subject of the system on which the texts are generated. Such a claim posits the differential relation between the life and the text complicating the equation between the text that purports to be about a life—the life of the one writing and one whose life(s) gets silently written in the process self narration. It is important to mention the deliberate slippage in Derrida's *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation* as the passage from autobiography to otobiography is suffused with significant implications. 'Oto' in Greek means 'ear' and Derrida's use of auscultation in the autobiographical discourse points to the labyrinthine passage involved in the act of inscribing the biography of the self. As Derrida says, "the ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the autos of my autobiography"¹⁴. Hence the *otobiographies* is written in the plural in the circuitous passage from ear to mouth and is affected by the 'ear of the other'. In other words, generating a demand to listen with the 'ear of the other' the discourse of autobiography opens up the possibility of accommodating the other and resists any attempt to write the self with singular subject. Derrida's postulation of autobiography extends beyond the question of the auto or the subject of the autobiography in its incorporation of the 'bio' or the life in its relation to death. In the "Roundtable on Autobiography", when Derrida remarks, "there is a *differance* of autobiography, an allo-and thantography,"¹⁵ he hints at the deferral or

the detour the self has to take in an autobiographical narrative with the bearer's death inscribed within it. For Derrida, the self comes to terms with someone, with someone *other*. In *Points...Interviews*, when asked about his texts that are indexed to important references such as Husserl, Plato, Heidegger, Hegel, Rousseau, Jabes and Celan, Derrida answers in favour of the inevitable other:

"There is always someone else, you know. The most private autobiography comes to terms with great transferential figures, who are themselves *plus* someone else, for example, Plato, Socrates, and a few others in *The Post Card*, Genet, Hegel, Saint Augustine, and many others in *Glas* or *Circumfession*, and so forth."¹⁶

The other is always already present before the self claims its presence, hence being a transferential figure where many voices can traverse the self. Autobiography becomes a compulsion to respond to a non specific and non singular other, or in J. M. Coetzee's¹⁷ words autobiography is an *autre*-biography, i.e., the account of another self. Such a claim dovetails with the autobiographies written in the period of decolonization when writing an autobiography becomes an alibi to write the nation and its history in the name of the other. The traces of the other are hard to pin down to any singular entity, as in writing life in the post colony, the autobiographical 'I' slips away in its attempt to encompass the other and the traces of which are realized in the forms of place, history, collective identity that however can be subsumed under the discourse of the *nation*. The rhetorics of nation, nation-ness and nationality are central to these postcolonial life narratives where nation remains a spectral presence, or in other words, it becomes the self's other.

Autobiography in the decolonizing era is mostly a mode of resistance writing with national consciousness as the defining phenomenon, where nation becomes a trope for representing the self, as the nomenclature of the genre harks back to nation and its narration. National consciousness remains a national history as autobiography becomes the most common mode of life-writing in India in the decolonizing period. Surendranath Banerjee,¹⁸ an early nationalist, titles his autobiography as *A Nation in Making* where national imagination travels vis-à-vis his native province of Bengal. In writing the story of his self which, however, remains marginal to the narrative, a detailed narrative of political activities forming the biography of the modern India comes to the fore. Two things are involved here: the substitution of the narrative of the self with that of the nation and the *making* of the nation that comes closer to Anderson's¹⁹ formulation of a nation. The autobiographies of Gandhi and Nehru are inseparable from the larger discourse of nation as well the from the dominant historiography. The existence of

a complex historiography of nationalism, especially in India, can suggest alternative ways of conceptualising the nation. Some autobiographies in decolonisation often makes the attempt to write the nation, if not in abstract terms, but in a seemingly concretized form under the rubric of history.

The postcolonial writers' engagement with history forming a subtext in their narrative is tenable as history becomes a source of nationhood. They employ history as alternative ways of nation writing where history becomes the site for an ideological encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. Historian Ranajit Guha²⁰ encapsulates the urgency to write "an Indian historiography of India' in the 19th century that can claim for the nation a past not distorted by any alien narrative. It was a call to return to the indigenous traditions, rituals, and ethnic histories as a way of combating the injured psyche in the wake of colonialism. Such an historical consciousness is voiced by Bankimchandra Chatterjee: "National pride comes mainly from *creating* and *developing* people's history. ... A nation without history is foredoomed" and his note of desperation is clear as he exhorts in 1880 — "Bengal must have a history, or else there is no hope for it"²¹. He links the historiographic practice with the national pride and uses the words 'creating' and 'developing' rather than mere objective recapitulation while constructing such a history. However, writing the indigenous history involves ambivalences, as there is a constant urge to retrieve the ancient past and also to break away from it. Behind the idea of writing, creating or developing colonial history is to build up agency for the Indians, and also to "liberate 'history' from the meta-narrative of the nation state"²². The reflection of an exclusive Indian history distinct from the European enterprise is discerned in Tagore's *Bharatbarsher Itihas*,²³ roughly translated as 'India's History', although 'bharatbarsha' has a much wider implication in history than India. The model of colonial historiography consisted in the knowledge of the Indian past which in turn became an agenda for the nationalist thought. In different ways, Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru appropriated the superiority of the moral, spiritual, cultural, secular politics to emphasize on the idealized existence of India's glorious past. Guha, however, offers a critique of this practice, as the presence of the alternative colonial historiography in the 19th-century India was resultant of a 'nostalgia' which, nonetheless, cannot create historiography for the nation:

"Although the nineteenth century agenda for an alternative historiography was ineluctably and necessarily charged with a longing for the past, the latter was not all that this agenda had for its content. Indeed, nostalgia, working on its own, does not produce historiography for a nation any more than it produces autobiography for an individual"²⁴.

Therefore, Guha's claim that colonial historiography, which invariably produces the autobiography of the individual, remains very much relevant in the autobiographies written in decolonization that inversely produce the historiography of the nation. Historiography as the dominant theme preoccupies the life-writers in the Indian post colony. The meld of history and autobiography informs Nirad Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. The first quarter of the text is, therefore, aptly described as "more an exercise in descriptive ethnology than autobiography".²⁵ Chaudhuri's text, which cites master historian Edward Gibbon, forms a different form of historiography as he undertakes to write history of his class and society with the 'thematic of decline'. In Nirad Chaudhuri's autobiography, the ostensible account of the self veered onto the details of the social environment in which the author's first 12 years have passed by. The autobiography closes not with any kind of self-realization of the narrator, but with a lengthy chapter, entitled "An Essay on the Course of Indian History". However, writing history for Chaudhuri does not rely on the colonial archive but draws its well from the indigenous resources like the oral narratives, individual memory and family history, thereby producing a nativist version of historiography.

The postcolonial life-narratives in their attempt to accommodate the 'other' trouble the borderline between autobiography, historiography, ethnography, etc. However, a distinction is to be made between the non specific 'other' and the non-singular 'others' with whom the self shares an existential relation in Heideggerian sense of term.²⁶ Nehru's *Autobiography*²⁷ for example, is skewed towards ethnography and historical reflection with the singular account of the self being suspended in the narrative. Philip Holden in "Nehru and the National Sublime" comments: "Nehru's text is troubled by tensions between state and nation, individual and community, embodiment and disembodiment, masculinity and femininity, rationality and affect: the personal narrative bleeds into, contaminates, but can never run parallel to the grand project of the nation's—and ultimately modernity's—story."²⁸ Nehru's *Autobiography* remains committed to its working title *In and Out of Prison* in capturing the narrative's trajectory punctuated by the long periods of his imprisonment with the quest for Indian independence being the dominant account. Nehru's personal story merges with the grand narrative of the Indian nation overshadowing his personal life so that the intense emotional exchanges with his father, the long sickness of his wife recede into the background. However, nation/nationalism remains the main individuating factor in the subject formation for Nehru and the prison a platform to perform the self in a disciplinary regime.

For Gandhi, politics and the ontology of the personal life are deeply enmeshed with one another, hence fashioning the individual body and the nation's 'body' inhabits a continuous space in his *Autobiography*.²⁹ In conducting numerous "experiments with truth" in the "science of Satyagraha", Gandhi establishes a crucial link between his individual body and the wider "Body Politic", which is implied in Gandhi's acknowledgement that his experiment with the body has given him "such power that I possess for working in the political field"³⁰. In Gandhi's autobiography, nation vis-à-vis the self is *performed* in heterogeneous carnivalesque ways, i.e. in protest march, non-cooperation, satyagraha, etc. The performative aspect of nationalism forms a crucial significance in Gandhi's political philosophy along with the numerous 'experiments' that have direct bearing on the nation and its body politic.

The discourse of the other(s) in the self's narrative in the post colony however does not form an exclusive category like 'otherwise than Being'³¹, to use the phrase from Levinas. The tendency is sometimes to merge with the other(s) as the protagonists metonymize self for the nation or the nation for the self in their life writings and also to comprehend it other than the self, i.e. in a gendered term by frequent evocation of a feminized nation. As Nehru in his *Autobiography* registers Gandhi's metonymic identification with the nation: "Almost he (Gandhi) was India and his very failings were Indian failings. A slight to him was hardly a personal matter; it was an insult to the nation."³² It may be mentioned here that Nehru's *Discovery of India*³³, which is a continuation of his *Autobiography*, considers diverse ideas of national imagining along with the problematic of such imagination. However, nation with its complex imaginings escapes any tangible form in these life narratives, hence being elusive as ever. It would not be impertinent to evoke Stathis Gourgouris while reading autobiographies in decolonization with nation being the guiding metaphor in shaping a self. In *Dream Nation*, Gourgouris observes: "[Any nation] *cannot* be reduced to or contained in its history. It is something more, something else. Or, simultaneously with its being there (*in* history, *in* geography—*in* a narrative), it is elsewhere."³⁴

The self, with which Gandhi and Nehru were concerned, was demographically, geographically and culturally defined as "India" as well as biologically, psychologically and spiritually rooted in the concept of a whole individual. Hence "the self-respect of the individual or the nation"³⁵ becomes interchangeable. In accommodating the polyphonous nation, Gandhi makes his self accessible to the public, thereby closing his autobiography as early as in 1921: "My life from this point onward has been so public that there is hardly

anything about it people do not know.”³⁶ While such a statement foregrounds the self’s propensity to transcend the borders of private and public, it deconstructs writing “the text of life, and life as-text”.

Indecolonizing and postcolonial context, autobiography is marked by generic hybridity as the subject traverses history through colonial encounter. Referring to the haunting presence of the autobiographical, Gayatri C Spivak contends that postcolonial writers conceive their narratives as “withheld autobiography”³⁷ in her discussion of Assia Djebar’s novel *Fantasia*. If postcolonial life-writing follows the Western autobiographical narrative mode, it constantly challenges the very process of writing itself. Instead of being considered as a self-authenticated narrative, the self-narrative is haunted by many other voices and dislocation of the colonized self is reflected in the narrative’s centrifugal tendencies that resists any singular narrative of the self. To sum up, the article underlines the double bind in the process of writing autobiography and its underpinning in decolonisation: to claim one’s own life narrative under the nomenclature of autobiography and at the same resistance to it, and this is manifest in Gandhi’s autobiography as he says, “I never really wrote an autobiography. What I did write was a series of articles narrating my experiments with truth which were later published in book form.”³⁸ Gandhi voices such ambiguity about whether the text should be called autobiography in the preface of the book. Such ambiguities hint at the Derridean problematic of inscribing the “I” that is “both part of the spectacle and part of the audience, an ‘I’ that, a bit like ‘you’, attends (undergoes) its own incessant, violent reinscription within the arithmetical machinery; an ‘I’ that, functioning as a pure passageway for operations of substitution, is not some singular and irreplaceable existence, some subject or ‘life’, but only, moving between life and death, reality and fiction, etc., a mere function or phantom.”³⁹ The self always in its asymmetrical relation with the other and its unconditional ethical responsibility towards the other that is non totalisable in any writing form keeps its borders perennially open with possible interaction/dialogue with writings that is autobiographical and non-autobiographical at its simultaneity.

Notes

1. The word autobiography is composite of three Greek words: ‘autos’ (self), ‘bio’ (life), and ‘graphy’ (writing). The three words in English ‘self-life-writing’ combined together reflects the genre of autobiography.
2. In Derridean parlance *differance* denotes both difference as well as deferment.
3. As a genre autobiography has been relegated to a ‘paraliterary’ field within the discipline of literary studies

and its marginality lies in its comparison with the literary-aesthetic value of other major genres like epic, drama, poetry, and the like. Its relegation to a ‘paraliterary’ genre derives from the very nature of the genre that always resists any circumscribed form.

4. The debates pertaining to ‘author’, ‘author function’ and ‘authorial intention’ in the poststructuralist theories have rendered a complex understanding of autobiography as a genre.
5. Barthes, Roland. “Death of the Author”. *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. and Ed. Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday, 1978, p.142.
6. Foucault, Michel. “What is an Author?” *Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, p.102.
7. De Man, Paul. “Autobiography as Defacement”. *Modern Language Notes*. 94 (1979) pp 919-30
8. Philip Lejeune uses a legal terminology “autobiographical contract” in explicating the complexity of the autobiographical self and argues that the author of an autobiography must be identical to narrator or the main character of the work. For details see Lejeune’s “The Autobiographical Pact”, *On Autobiography*. Ed. Philip Lejeune, with a foreword by Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
9. Watson, Julia. “Toward an Anti-Metaphysics of Autobiography”. *The Culture of Autobiography: Construction of Self Representation*. Ed. Robert Folkenflik. California: Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 57.
10. Derrida, Jacques. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*. Ed. Christie V McDonald. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Schocken Books, 1985, p 70.
11. Olney, James. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972, p 3.
12. Ibid.
13. Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography*: London & New York: Routledge, 2007, p 80.
14. Derrida, Jacques. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*. Ed. Christie V McDonald. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Schocken Books, 1985, p.51.
15. Derrida, Jacques. “Roundtable on Autobiography”. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*. p. 28 (italics mine).
16. Derrida, Jacques. “‘A Madness’ Must watch Over Thinking”. *Points... Interviews, 1974-94* Ed. Elisabeth Weber. Trans. Peggy Kamuf and others. New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 353.
17. In *Selves in Question: Interviews on South African Auto/biography*, (Coullie, L. Judith et al. Ed. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006) J M Coetzee argues that despite singular narrative identity created by the author in autobiography, the account of the self is always in a significant way an *autre* biography—an account of the other.
18. Banerjee, Surendranath. *A Nation in Making: Being the Reminiscences of Fifty Years of Public Life*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1925.

19. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) Benedict Anderson theorizes nation as an imagined community, imagined by people who perceive themselves to be part of that community.
20. Guha, Ranajit. *An Indian Historiography in India: A Nineteenth Century Agenda and Its Implications*. Calcutta: K.P Bagchi, 1988.
21. Chatterjee, Bankimchandra. "Banglar Itihasa" (The History of Bengal). *Vividha Prabandha*. Ed. Brajendranath Bandopadhyay and Sri Sajanikanta Das. Calcutta: Sahitya Parishad, 1959, pp 288-9.
22. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p.41.
23. In his essay "Bharatbarsher Ithihas" Tagore has criticised Indian history written by foreigners. For details see "The Message of Indian History" (1902), *Viva-Bharati Quarterly*, vol.22, no.2, 1956.
24. Guha, Ranajit. *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 154.
25. Chaudhuri, Nirad. *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. London: Picador, 1951, p.129.
26. Heidegger conceives 'others' as embodied in the self in which self does not stand against the 'others' but form an existential relation with the 'others' that is not distinguished from the self.
27. Nehru, Jawaharlal. *An Autobiography*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1936.
28. Holden, Philip. *Autobiography and Decolonisation: Modernity, Masculinity and the Nation-State*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008, p.89.
29. Gandhi, M.K. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments With Truth*. Trans. Mahadev Desai. Intro. Sunil Khilnani. London: Penguin, 1927-29.
30. Ibid. p.14
31. In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974) Levinas approaches self and other, interiority and exteriority not as opposed terms, but dimensions of intersubjectivity in which the self comes into being through its alterity.
32. Nehru, *An Autobiography*, p.525.
33. Nehru, Jawaharlal. *The Discovery of India*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1946.
34. Gourgouris, Stathis. *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization and the Institution of Modern Greece*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, p31.
35. Nehru, *An Autobiography*, p. 80.
36. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 452.
37. "Three Women's Texts and Circumfession". *Postcolonialism and Autobiography: Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, Opal Palmer Adisa*. Ed. Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998, p10.
38. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p 39.
39. Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Translated with an Introduction with additional notes by Barbara Johnson. Continuum: London & New York, 1981, p 361