



Truth and Narration in
*Gandhiji's Experiment with
Autobiography*
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Abstract:

An autobiography is the self-life-narration in the sense that the person whose life is it, himself or herself is narrating about it, which is so matching to the present selfie-culture, that looked initially like the self-obsessing fashion of youngsters but soon became a very routine and normal part of living. The blend between this worldly popular form of autobiography and our national pride Mahatma Gandhiji with his experiments of truth is actually his narration in the book while he must have been very well aware of how complicated it would be for him to talk about the truth that he lived and experimented with. Finally, one can simplify that all the scholastic efforts to define autobiography in clear terms may seem deceptive or failing in one or the other point. Yet there can be narrators like Mahatma Gandhiji who can rise above and look beyond the personal self and transparently bring out the truth of one's life on personal as well as social planes. So now if you do not talk about yourself, do not take a selfi, or do not write about yourself probably that would look away from the normal.

The most popular example that we sight and proudly study is the story of Mahatma Gandhiji. There are peculiar events in his life that he narrates in his autobiography and probably only he could narrate not merely as the person who lived through those events but also as the thinker and philosopher who could retrospectively evaluate them in the relevant context and as the critic and the

narrator who could scrutinize their worth even in narration. The way he designs the title of his autobiography is a very thoughtful confession and one can see that his comic sense of receiving life as it comes also is conveyed as he dares to call the experiences as experiments.

Moreover, it is only Mahatma Gandhiji's profound sense of perception and conception that he could name it as the story of not simple experiments but his experiments with truth. So originally if autobiography was taken as the self-life-in-written script, with Mahatma Gandhiji's visionary illustration of the same genre it now becomes a kind of self-experiment-with-truth and the truth that replaces life is actually synonymous to the truth that life was spent in seeking.

An ideological jumble indeed in philosophy but it is Mohandas, the barrister who had the brains of Mahatma the father of the nation, may be the would-be father, so to say, at that time, yet he was the one who could combine the life he lived with the truth he identified as his personal truth to be identified in universal view and call it the experiment in the context of rationalizing like an experiment in the laboratory of science.

In fact, the question is not about who is the narrator as far as it is the information of universal experiences but when an individual is narrating his or her own life in the first-person voice...! In the days when Mahatma Gandhiji was writing autobiography it was not only an unpopular or half-popular form of bio-historical account of an individual's life but also was not really seen with such liberated eyes. The bias of interpretation on readers' minds and the hesitation on author's part were two huge blocks in the spread and repute of autobiography as a genre.

Many a people would respect diary more than autobiography since the common perception was you are not in general supposed to publish diary. So for private record anyone may write a diary and that looked like a sacred personal property of the sensitive individuals who were crazy about writing more than crazy about themselves.

After the long and painful struggle of autobiography to get identified as an established genre, finally it could achieve some space and regard due to people

like Augustine known for *Confessions* (397 to 400 A. D.) that happens to be the first autobiography. Though that was classified by some as 'spiritual' or religious for its exploration into the conflict of a thinking mind, on account of conversion. In his book on the *Design of Truth and Autobiography*, Roy Pascal takes a look-back into the earlier history of autobiography, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is the appropriate period for nourishment of the form.

Referring to Franklin, Gibbon and others, he concentrates his discussion on Rousseau, Wordsworth and Goethe. The blend between this worldly popular form of autobiography and our national pride Mahatma Gandhiji with his experiments of truth is actually his narration in the book while he must have been very well aware of how complicated it would be for him to talk about the truth that he lived and experimented with.

Andre Maurois agrees that autobiography is to be singled out as a form with no parallel, as he remarks that Autobiography is... as interesting as novels and as true as the finest life. It has ... fidelity and impartiality in portraiture of a very high quality indeed ...since it has... the direct link of truth from life. One has to relate the generic frame of how the written script of life was traditionally seen as the direct link of truth form life. The two words that actually link Mahatma Gandhiji's vision of life are truth and experiments and why he does not wish to simplify the life story as experience, should be taken as his sense of responsibility for his own life, rather for shaping the life that he lived and not for being shaped by life that he was made to live.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhiji as a person born in the soil of Gurjarat and evolved to become a linking chain in the minds of people from all states not only in India and out of it but across the whole world. He lived by words and ruled people by wordless actions. He created the humility and terrorized the humiliating forces of foreign rulers. He made statements that looked so simple that people found his simplicity unbelievably confusing and complex. How can a man be so honest? How can he be so simple? so straightforward? Is it the truth that he speaks of all the time? Is it the complete truth that he narrates in his autobiography? If yes, why does he call it 'experiments' with truth? If it is all experimental why does he call it autobiography?

Away from the controversial statements about certain elements in autobiography as truth, authenticity etc., the fact remains that it is an attention-capturing form of literature. It happens to be a creation that offers a kind of knowledge enlightening both, its author and readers. Before writing autobiography even the writer does not know himself so well as after having written it.

William C. Spengemann hints this by observing that autobiographies, “despite their fictiveness, grapple with the problems of self-definition”.

So, chronicling one’s life may seem to any thinker as personal space on page of narration and the relativism of truth would naturally narrow down to the narrator’s subjective vision of the truth. How this is not applicable to the story of Gandhii’s life is something interesting to find. This man too had a very ordinary life in the first phase as he was born in Porbandar and spent his childhood in Rajkot in Gurjarat. A man who can retrospectively feel the pain of his first discovery of how he was going through the regretful discovery of his own lying ... and the very journey back in past is not mere nostalgic but cathartic when her recalls every detail with this sense of realization.

“I was convicted of lying! That deeply pained me. How was I to prove my innocence? There was no way. I cried in deep anguish. I saw that a man of truth must also be a man of care. This was the first and last instance of my carelessness in school. I have a faint recollection that I finally succeeded in getting the fine remitted. The exemption from exercise was of course obtained, as my father wrote himself to the headmaster saying that he wanted me at home after school.” (p. 35)

Even the account of meat-eating experience which he calls a tragedy, is recapitulated with lot of regressive sense of realization and consciousness of how a young gullible guy was just carried away by some idiotic idea of becoming stronger to drive away the British from our nation and that can be possible by meat-eating....!

“So the day came. It is difficult fully to describe my condition. There were, on the one hand, the zeal for ‘reform’, and the novelty of making a momentous departure in life. There was, on the other, the shame of hiding like a thief to do this very thing. I

cannot say which of the two swayed me more. We went in search of a lonely spot by the river, and there I saw, for the first time in my life, – meat. There was baker's bread also. I relished neither. The goat's meat was as tough as leather.

I simply could not eat it. I was sick and had to leave off eating. I had a very bad night afterwards. A horrible nightmare haunted me. Every time I dropped off to sleep it would seem as though a live goat were bleating inside me, and I would jump up full of remorse. But then I would remind myself that meat eating was a duty and so become more cheerful.” (p. 44)

The trauma is also narrated while it was occupying the mind of Mohandas in the very tender teen age when first he was married to a girl one year elder to him and he narrates with illustrative routine about that phase of his life when Kasturba was a disobedient and confident wife while he did not like her to be that kind of woman.

Many critics consider autobiography a self-oriented pamphlet of one's ideology or a chronicle of philosophical life. Such a prejudice springs from their undue emphasis on the subjective and the righteous nature of autobiography. In a truthful autobiography the inner self of writer is depicted through the life-narrative. Gusdorf in this reference, suggests that autobiography, “is an effort to recapture the self in Hegel's claim, to know the self through consciousness”. Shari Benstock believes that autobiography is initiated into the ‘act of writing’; is directed towards ‘self’ that is presumed to be knowable. She makes it clear that the form stands between the crossroads of ‘writing’ and ‘selfhood’.

The sense of responsibility in fact makes a boy grow suddenly into a man and that is what happened with Mohandas when he lost his father in his fifteenth year of age and in a short while also lost his first child. The double loss, for a young boy has to be the source of his wisdom dawning on his mind as the incidents that he narrates in the experimental discoveries of truth one by one in the self-narration. But the traumatic teen age also in the narrative flow does not become the source of seeking any sympathy from his readers. It is in this sense that autobiography has no rival in literary creations.

The experience of involvements, dilemmas and conflicts make the writers offer a sort of dramatic monologue of self in autobiography. It may or may not seem logical to others but it holds the pressure of self from within, for the author. Its core is the pre-occupation with self that the cousins of sceptic critics may see as a sort of Narcissism or self-love.

One has to consider that an experience may not be quite a similar thing as a reflective, retrospective or philosophical statement of it. The best quality that Gandhiji had learnt from his childhood life was not being a prey of self-pity. And that helped him rapidly to evolve into the leader of individuals, small groups, large masses in South Africa and finally of the nation in India after his return from the South Africa.

“These views were confirmed during the days of the Satyagraha in South Africa. That magnificent campaign extending over six years was carried on without permanent funds, though lakhs of rupees were necessary for it. I can recollect times when I did not know what would happen the next day if no subscriptions came in. But I shall not anticipate future events. The reader will find the opinion expressed above amply borne out in the coming narrative.” (p.228)

The reader consciousness is referred in the interpretative reading of any autobiography as one of the implicit intents on the mind of the author but very few authors did mention it like Gandhiji with this kind of straight and connecting address. The fighter spirit that he inculcated in people around was contagious because he spent that one crucial year in South Africa when his mind could adopt not only rage and resistance against injustice but also the beginning of Indian Congress and Civil Rights activism discovered his potential leadership and 1915 onward, he could contribute all the important ideological wisdom that looked like revolution in the garb of activism.

Autobiography is no less than what is described by a term ‘Bildungsroman’ in novel. It has a story and the story builds up from a remembered beginning from the narrator’s personal memory and moves on with the phases of growth in life and also perceptions of living through various phases one after the other.

Finally, one can simplify that all the scholastic efforts to define autobiography in clear terms may seem deceptive or failing in one or the other point. Yet there can be narrators like Mahatma Gandhiji who can rise above and look beyond the personal self and transparently bring out the truth of one's life on personal as well as social planes.

So his ideas of Ahimsa, national integration as the essential fruit of Hindu-Muslim and Upperclass-Harijan unity and the non-cooperation movement, the jail life, Dandi yatra, leadership of Quit India movement all the phases that he lived were truly his life in the experimental mode of living. It was his pattern of behavior from initial stages of his being Mohandas and becoming the Mahatma.

He tried the lies and regretted and propagated the truth. Not as the moral responsibility but mainly as the personal source of peaceful existence. He registered his trial of the meat-eating temptation, the stealing and regretted and confessed to finally take an oath of morality not for the sake of morality but for the sake of peace of mind. The religious inclinations were not a rigidity right from the beginning even in his family.

“In Rajkot, however, I got an early grounding in toleration for all branches of Hinduism and sister religions. For my father and mother would visit the Haveli as also Shiva's and Rama's temples, and would take or send us youngsters there. Jain monks also would pay frequent visits to my father, and would even go out of their way to accept food from us – non-Jains. They would have talks with my father on subjects religious and mundane. He had, besides, Musalman and Parsi friends, who would talk to him about their own faiths, and he would listen to them always with respect, and...” (p.55)

He had conflict with his wife Kasturba again and again but he learnt to understand her though very slow pace in it, and finally evolved into a regretful husband but never to repeat the mistake. So much so that in late age he probably was known as an ideal husband too, to some extent.

The experience of moving out of Indian and in various regions in India made him aware of the need that British rulers would easily conquer all states and regions in

their isolated culture and creed so he could like a very wise thinker and visionary could discover some binding ideas like truth and non-violence and the word truth became so significant with him that Satyagraha was the firm stance forever and non-violence the tool to establish that firmness.

At the outbreak of the world war first when Gandhiji arrived in England again, his mind was already prepared with lot of prophetic plans to roll activism in India. The narrator Gandhi was not yet born perhaps he was in making. The personal life of Mohandas was already converted into the social investment for the sake of nation and the national freedom that had started haunting his mind.

A writer would have written the autobiography at this age with lot of stuff and personal trauma to be narrated but that was not the purpose of Mohandas. He was not interested in writing the story of his life as he suffered and learnt his lessons but his idea of using the 'mahatma' figure in his own personality as the narrator to convert people and see how his 'experiment with the truth of his life, the truth that he learnt and the life that he lived becomes the source of inspiration and action for others.

Four or five years ago, at the insistence of some of my nearest co-workers, I agreed to write my autobiography. I made the start, but scarcely had I turned over the first sheet when riots broke out in Bombay... The Swami wanted me to write it separately for publication as a book. But I have no spare time. I could only write a chapter week by week. Something has to be written for Navajivan every week. Why should it not be the autobiography? The Swami agreed to the proposal, and here am I hard at work. But a God-fearing friend had his doubts,... '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 one, except amongst those who have come under Western influence. And what will you write?

Supposing you reject tomorrow the things you hold as principles today, or supposing you revise in the future your plans of today, is it not likely that the men who shape their conduct on the authority of your word, spoken or written, may be misled? Don't you think it would be better not to write anything like an autobiography, at any rate just yet?'(p.17)

One may easily say that it would enrich the analysis of an autobiography if the readers try to define or debate the truth. Is it that easy to offer definitions of truth like people believe? Is it that simple to just debate with the truth only because the author of an autobiography makes a statement that it is this truth that affected his or her future, shaping of his or her personality and so on? In fact one has to remember that truth is neither definable nor debatable entity when it comes to narration of one's own story or written autobiography.

The very approach to put a question mark on the truth narrated by the autobiographer seems like a wrong approach for the sake of pulling and placing the form of autobiography in the same rank as a news or a report that can be questionable in its account. The sanctity of the reader-author connection can be maintained by keeping the element of 'willing suspension of disbelief' on one hand and trying to understand rather than question the truth as defined or described by the autobiographer in his or her narration.

Can a thinker ever imagine that he would write his autobiography in such a way that people should learn from it what he learnt from his life. The philosophy of teaching and preaching people through self was not new but writing the story of one's own life to preach people what is truth and how to live it, and in that sense declaring that it is his experiment with the truth was something very unique even at that time.

The incidents like Amritsar Massacre and his jail life had motivated his mind to follow the path he was dreaming of but not alone. He had known the power of his experimental capacity to use the 'truth' to charge people and to create that energy in the masses to lead as well as follow for the cause of nation.

Despite his prison-life experiences and his desire to avoid politics in the years after 1920, he was largely drawn into the public sphere for Indian National Congress and further the eventual movements of salt march, non-cooperation and Round table conference. The latter phase of his life does not appear in the autobiography as he was now driven by the mission and the father of the nation already called as Bapu by all, was more engrossingly into people discovering the

truth, of the groundlings in India rather than scribbling the truth of his personal experiences labeled as experiments with truth.

My respect and adoration for Mahatma Gandhi, each time I brood about his life and narration of that life, results in one or the other poem in general to console myself that probably I am able to understand this mysterious man to some extent. So here is this one on 2nd October while people were holding meetings and probably programming on Gandhiji with lots of ideas and debates I was only scribbling few lines to comfort myself.

A skeleton man
 With the stick in his hand
 Half-clad like a saint
 Half mad like a vagabond
 Creates history in India
 By his magical words
 By his crowning the labor
 By his path of compassion
 Not only cuts the chains
 Of slavery and dependence
 Not only preaches
 love and persistence
 Not only calms the lost souls
 By singing prayers and ringing alarms
 Not only weaves the dress of nativist identity on the spinning wheel
 But also
 Clarifies the uselessness of violence
 Of discrimination and dominance
 Electrifies the stony minds
 To trigger showers of thinking
 Thinking into normalcy
 Normalising into compassion
 Compassionate in understanding
 Understanding the bondages
 Bonding with truth and living

Truth simplified
Life purified
This one half clad old man
Erases the artificial prickly pros
And cons of conservative society
And becomes a figure
Becomes a diagram
Becomes map of ideas
Map of nationalism
Mapping the minds of millions
He finally becomes
A non-violent image
Of the independent India
Shot by an angry civilian
He dies like an army on the border
To protect the nation
From ideas of violence
The man who fasted
for stopping violence
Becomes the prey
Of violence in the end
Ironically
He dies to be reborn
In the numberless minds
As an idea as an ideology
As an ideological ideal
An ideal idealism
That can survive only in reality
This one old man
The epitome of love and peace
The temple of peace and compassion
The pedestal of sacrifice and martyrdom
Is born on 2nd October
The day unforgettable
For all of us

We celebrate
Not his birthday
But our own
Being born once again
Into Gandhian world.

Note:

All the quotes cited are taken from the version of Gandhiji's autobiography, on the link <https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/An-Autobiography.pdf>



