



Research Paper

Autobiography as History: A Theoretical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Autobiography has traditionally been considered a literary form grounded in individual subjectivity. However, in recent decades, scholars have begun to explore the genre as a vital historical document that reflects collective experiences, cultural transformations, and socio-political realities. This paper examines the theoretical intersections between autobiography and history, drawing on key thinkers such as Philippe Lejeune, Paul John Eakin, Hayden White, and Sidonie Smith. It argues that autobiographies function as both personal and historical texts—mediating between memory and historiography, self and society, individual experience and collective consciousness. By analysing autobiography through the lenses of poststructuralist theory, feminist critique, and historiography, this paper situates the autobiographical act as an epistemological bridge between lived experience and historical understanding.

KEYWORDS: *autobiography, history, memory, subjectivity.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The autobiography, often defined as a self-narrative that recounts the author's life, has long occupied an ambiguous position between literature and history. While literary critics regard it as a creative expression of selfhood, historians question its factual reliability. However, as postmodern theory has blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction, autobiography has emerged as an indispensable form of historical testimony. As historian Hayden White famously argued, historical narratives are themselves constructed through tropes, emplotment, and rhetoric, not unlike literary texts. This convergence suggests that autobiographical writing, though subjective, can serve as an authentic form of historical representation—one that records the personal dimensions of social and political life.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PACT AND THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

Philippe Lejeune's concept of the "autobiographical pact" provides a foundational theoretical lens through which autobiography can be analysed as history. Lejeune, a French literary theorist, introduced the concept in his influential essay "*Le Pacte autobiographique*" (1975), later translated into English in *On Autobiography* (1989). His theory provides one of the most systematic definitions of autobiography and explains how the genre establishes a relationship of trust between the author and the reader. Lejeune argues that autobiography is not defined by its content alone - a narrative about one's life - but by the contractual understanding between author and reader. The autobiographical pact is this implicit agreement that ensures the reader interprets the text as a truthful account of the author's life. According to Lejeune, autobiography is a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, and in particular, on the development of his personality." The pact rests upon the identity of three entities—author, narrator, and protagonist. In an autobiography, these three must share the same name and refer to the same real-life person. This triple identity distinguishes autobiography from fiction, where the narrator or

protagonist may be a fictional creation. For Lejeune, the pact is a contract between author and reader, wherein the author asserts the truth of the narrative and identifies with the protagonist. This pact grants autobiography a quasi-historical authority- it claims to represent a lived reality. Yet, the act of narration transforms experience into discourse, framing memory through language and ideology.

Paul John Eakin expands on this by asserting that autobiographical truth is not fixed but “relational and performative”. In this view, the self that writes is not a static subject but one constituted through cultural narratives. Thus, autobiographies offer valuable insight into the historical consciousness of their time, revealing how individuals construct meaning within specific socio-historical contexts. Paul John Eakin’s redefinition of autobiographical truth as relational and performative revolutionized the field of life writing studies. He shifted the focus from autobiography as a factual genre to autobiography as a discursive and ethical practice- a process through which selves are narrated, negotiated, and continually remade in relation to others. In Eakin’s view, to tell one’s life is not to recover a fixed truth but to participate in an ongoing act of self-creation. Autobiographical truth, therefore, resides not in what is told, but in the telling itself- in the relational, performative space between memory, identity, and narrative.

III. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE QUESTION OF TRUTH

Historians have traditionally valued documents that provide verifiable evidence, while literary scholars emphasise interpretation and narrative. Autobiography, however, challenges this binary. It embodies both memory and imagination- an interplay that destabilises the notion of historical “truth.” Hayden White contends that all historical writing is narrative, shaped by emplotment and perspective. Similarly, autobiographical writing constructs the self through selective remembrance, omission, and rhetorical strategy.

Michel Foucault’s notion of “technologies of the self” further situates autobiography within historical discourse. He argues that self-writing practices-from ancient confessionals to modern memoirs-are historically contingent modes of self-formation. Michel Foucault’s concept of technologies of the self represents a crucial development in his lifelong inquiry into the relationship between power, knowledge, and subjectivity. By focusing on how individuals shape their own ethical and personal identities through deliberate practices, Foucault redefines the self as an active project rather than a passive product of social forces.

For Foucault, truth and subjectivity are not found within the self but created through practices of self-reflection and transformation. Technologies of the self, therefore, form the foundation of an ethics of self-care and self-fashioning - an ongoing process through which individuals seek to transform their lives into a meaningful and coherent existence. Autobiographies thus reflect the ideological conditions of their time: the norms of subjectivity, power, and identity that shape how individuals perceive and record their lives.

IV. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS CULTURAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY

Beyond individual experience, autobiographies serve as cultural archives. Feminist critics such as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have argued that women’s autobiographies challenge dominant historical narratives by inscribing marginalized voices into history. Smith and Watson argue that women’s autobiographies function as counter-histories that expose the exclusions and silences of official narratives. History, traditionally written by men, has often ignored or misrepresented women’s contributions. Through life writing, women reclaim narrative authority, inscribing their experiences into collective memory. The life writing of figures like Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) or Mahasweta Devi’s *Dust on the Road*, (1997) transcends personal narrative to document systemic oppression, colonialism, and resistance.

Similarly, postcolonial scholars interpret autobiography as a site of decolonial expression. Leela Gandhi and Edward Said suggest that self-narratives from colonised societies reclaim history from imperial discourse. For example, Mohandas K. Gandhi’s *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927) merges the spiritual and the political, turning autobiography into a vehicle of national and ethical history.

V. MEMORY, NARRATIVE, AND HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

The autobiographical act is inseparable from memory, which serves as both source and medium of historical reconstruction. Memory is inherently selective and reconstructive; it orders the past through narrative coherence. As Paul Ricoeur observes in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, the act of recalling the past is both ethical and narrative- it engages the tension between fidelity to experience and the need for interpretive meaning. Paul Ricoeur offers a profound exploration of how human beings engage with the past through memory, historical reconstruction, and the act of forgetting. His hermeneutical approach rejects both naive realism and radical relativism, proposing instead an ethics of interpretation grounded in narrative understanding.

For Ricoeur, to remember, to write history, and to forgive are all interpretive acts that shape human identity and collective life. The pursuit of “just memory” - neither nostalgic nor amnesiac - becomes a moral imperative for both individuals and societies. Through this triad of memory, history, and forgetting, Ricoeur redefines our relationship with the past as one of ethical responsibility, narrative creativity, and hopeful renewal.

Autobiography thus performs a double function: it archives personal memory and reconstructs historical time. This reconstruction is not passive recollection but active interpretation. The author becomes both subject and historian, organising lived experience within the broader matrix of social events. The resulting text is neither purely factual nor purely fictional- it is what historian Carolyn Steedman calls a “document of feeling,” capturing the affective dimension of history often absent from traditional historiography.

VI. POSTMODERN AND POSTCOLONIAL TURNS

The postmodern turn in theory has radically transformed the understanding of autobiography as history. Postmodernism’s skepticism toward grand narratives and objective truth aligns with the autobiographical mode’s inherent subjectivity. As Linda Hutcheon notes, postmodern historiography embraces the “problematisation of reference” - acknowledging that all narratives, historical or autobiographical, are mediated by discourse.

Postcolonial autobiographies, in particular, illustrate how personal narrative becomes a counter-history. Works such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Dreams in a Time of War* (2010) and A. K. Ramanujan’s autobiographical essays intertwine personal memory with national history, revealing how individual lives are shaped by the legacies of empire, migration, and cultural hybridity. These texts resist the erasures of official historiography by offering embodied, lived perspectives on collective trauma and transformation.

VII. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE NORTHEAST

The northeastern region of India- encompassing states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Sikkim- has long been marginalised in national narratives. It is characterised by diversity of languages, tribal communities, border-geographies and a history of colonial intervention, insurgency, migration and identity-politics. In such a context, autobiographical writing has a particularly potent role: it offers personal testimony, cultural inscription, and counter-memory. Indeed, autobiography in Northeast India transcends the boundaries of personal narrative to become a form of historical testimony. It bears witness to colonial encounters, ethnic struggles, insurgency, and cultural transformations that have defined the region’s past and present. Through the interplay of memory and narrative, individual lives become archives of collective experience. Autobiographies and memoirs by Temsula Ao, Patricia Mukhim, Indira Goswami and Hiren Gohain foreground experiences of complex socio-political life of the region.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Autobiography as history represents a vital intersection of literature, memory, and historiography. It demonstrates that history is not only constructed from state documents or institutional archives but also from the lived experiences and self-representations of individuals. The theoretical frameworks of Lejeune, Eakin, White, and Foucault, reveal that autobiographical writing operates within a complex web of truth, fiction, and ideology. As both self-narration and historical documentation, autobiography enables the recovery of marginalised voices and the reconfiguration of historical consciousness. Ultimately, to read autobiography as history is to acknowledge that the story of the self is inseparable from the story of the world. Thus, autobiography paves the way from the individual to the collective often blurring the genre boundary and problematising strict categorical demarcations.

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