



Research Paper

## Attaining Selfhood: An Analysis Of Baby Halder's A Life Less Ordinary

Ritika Agnihotri

Department of English, Govt. College for Girls, Patiala  
Corresponding Author: Ritika Agnihotri

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**ABSTRACT-** *Writing about the self is considered important, specifically for the marginalized sections, as it gives the subject a chance to tell his/her story. Through a self-writing, a person exposes the challenges and manifestations of oppression. Particularly, in case of women narrating their life stories, it is their desire to assert their identity which leads marginalized and oppressed women to construct their narrative. This paper explores the construction of the self by an Indian domestic servant turned author, Baby Halder, who in spite of various kinds of social and psychological oppressions emerged as an independent and victorious self.*

**Key Words** - *autobiographical writing, identity, oppression, resistance, self*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Baby Halder is a Delhi based domestic servant turned author. She was born in Murshidabad in West Bengal in 1973 and her life was full of trials and tribulations since the very beginning. She had a traumatic childhood, as she was abandoned by her mother at the age of four, ill-treated by her father and step-mother, was married off unlawfully at the age of twelve and became a mother at thirteen. Her husband exploited her physically and mentally, beat her up mercilessly, suspected her throughout and did not support her either financially or emotionally. He also shunned responsibility towards his children and made life horrible for Baby. Unable to bear her husband's atrocities any more, she decided to raise her children on her own and showed tremendous courage in leaving her oppressive husband and heading off to Delhi. Alone in a metropolitan city, and three children dependent on her, with little education to her credit, she took to working as domestic help in different households where she faced an oppressive environment. Her life was a long tale of exploitation and suffering until she met Prof. Prabodh Kumar in Gurgaon (now Gurugram), the grandson of the famous Hindi writer, Munshi Premchand, in whose house she got full time employment. Prabodh Kumar was a source of inspiration for her. He gave her a congenial environment for work. As he had a literary bent of mind, he explored her interest in reading and was surprised to hear from her names like Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nasrul Islam, Sharatchandra, Satyendra Nath Dutt and Sukumar Rai. As he discovered her interest in books, he correlated her keenness to talk about her 'self' with her ability to write and encouraged her to speak about her 'self'. He gave her a notebook and pen and asserted, "Write something in this notebook. If you want, you can write your life story in this. Whatever has happened in your life ever since you can remember and you became aware of yourself" (Halder 153). Initially, Baby was reluctant and wondered if she "will be able to write or not" (Halder 153). She started writing in bits and parts progressing a little every night, simultaneously reading Taslima Nasreen's *Amar Maybela*. She wrote in fragments in Bengali, gaining confidence in the process of writing and shared her writing with Prabodh Kumar, who read it, edited it and even translated it into Hindi with the help of other Bengali friends from his literary circle. His Hindi translation of Baby's memoir was first published in Bengal in 2002 under the title *Alo Andhari*. The original writing, *Alo Andhari*, written in Bengali was published in 2004. Soon the English version, *A Life Less Ordinary*, translated by Urvashi Batalia, was published in 2006. This book has been variedly compared by critics to Anne Frank's *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947), Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996) and Taslima Nasreen's *My Girlhood* (1998). Baby Halder's second book, *Eshast Rupantar*, which is a sequel to her first book, *A Life Less Ordinary* was published in Bengali in 2010. It talks about "her journey of battleships, her woes and her survival to ultimately attaining peace of mind" (Ashish). Her third book, *Ghare Ferar Path*, which reflects on how through her writing he has been successful in changing society's perception of her, was also published in Bengali in 2014. The English translations of her second and third book are awaited.

Self narration, in most cases, is closer to truth as it is a narration of the events that have shaped and influenced the life of the subject. Retrospection is the usual technique used for writing a life story and Baby Halder used a similar method as she was deeply connected to her sufferings and could easily relate to her past. Her decision to write about her 'self' did not transform her into a writer all of a sudden. With the help of constant encouragement from Prabodh Kumar, she wrote in the time she spared from her everyday chores. His support is clearly visible and appreciable when he tells her, "Baby, just focus on your reading and writing... For the moment, leave things as they are" (Halder 161). In the deep silence of the night, she could visualize and relive each and every moment that she has penned down in her memoir. In fact, while writing, she struggled to find answers to the questions that have been haunting her for the past many years. She started gaining confidence when she learnt that people from the literary circle who read her manuscripts were comparing her to Ashapura Devi and Anne Frank (Halder 166). She felt the spark within her and continued to write. She finally finds an answer to all her dilemmas after creating an understanding between her latent powers and the experiences of her subdued self. Brubaker et al have also very aptly pointed out that "In constructing relations between who we are, and what we experience, we create the autobiographies that make sense of our own development (Brubaker 106). Baby Halder, in her memoir describes the childhood and prime of her life. She wrote it when she was merely thirty, a period which may be seen as formative of identity about her 'self'. It presents her development from a subordinated personality trying to adjust and cope with the circumstances to a woman who breaks all boundaries and creates space for herself.

An autobiographical writing is directly influenced by the society in which it is created. Halder has also not written in vacuum. Through her sufferings, she has presented the oppression of women in general. She writes about her mother's exploitation by her father and her subsequently abandoning her children. On the very second page of her memoir, she questions the helplessness of her mother for not being able to work for a living. She writes, "Ma thought of taking up a job but that would have meant going out of the house, which she had never done... Another of her worries was, what would people say? But worrying about what people will say does not help to fill an empty stomach, does it?" (Halder 2).

A large part of the memoir describes her disastrous married life and the physical and mental abuse by her husband. At the age of a little above twelve, she was married to a person twice her age. At that time, she did not understand the meaning of marriage and was as merry as a goat right before it is slaughtered. She writes, "Baby wonders how she spent that day of sorrow in such merriment. Little did Baby know that this was the beginning of her days of grief and pain... (Halder 36).

Pramod K. Nayar rightly says, "The first recognition of their [marginalized women's] own marginalized subjectivity comes from the physical pain that their bodies experience" (Nayar 30). Baby suffered marital rape, beatings and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband and became a mother at the tender age of thirteen. She quietly endured all this though there was a latent storm of rebellion feeding inside her. She was shaken when she heard of her sister's murder by her brother-in-law and this incident made her strongly feel that had her sister retaliated against her husband's ill-treatment of her, she would not have met this fate. This made her desire to be independent even stronger. She questions the norms of the society which found fault always with women, be it the case of her mother, who was not supported by her husband, her sister, who was brutally beaten and subsequently strangled to death by her husband, her neighbor, Shashti and her sisters who were looked down upon for having abandoned their husbands because of exploitation. Though she was physically weak, she constantly asked the question to her husband for the constant beatings she received, "What I have done to be beaten like this?" (Halder 88).

Her bold decision to walk out of a horrible marriage with three children, with whom she moved to Delhi and started working as domestic help reveals not only her courage but also her sense of responsibility towards her children. She vividly recollects how at the workplaces, her employers ill-treated her, exploited her for work and she was not allowed to spend enough time with her children and was treated like a beast of burden. Moreover, she suffered attempts of molestation from some of her male employers which she could not tolerate. Having been exploited at the hands of her employers for years, Baby finally chose to resist this social set up where women from lower caste and strata are seen merely as objects on whom patriarchal power can be exercised to any extent. It was only when she got a job in the house of Prof. Prabodh Kumar, who insisted her to start the search of her identity on paper that she tried to explore her past.

Each life is a product of the socio-cultural set-up in which it is bred. According to Wainryb, "cultures involve sets of shared beliefs and assumptions with which individuals enter into negotiation when they construct

themselves and their stories” (Wainryb). In Indian culture, the patriarchal domination over the females has been a regular practice. In the case of marginalized women writing about their selves, socio-cultural oppression is a common denominator. The social framework is so exploitative towards women that most of the time, they give in to their fate for the sake of family or other social reasons. Baby Halder also tried to adjust and reconcile to her fate. She waited for years hanging between her father’s home and her husband’s to gain some space and respect but seemed to have none anywhere. She strived for independence, respect and power. Her mind was fraught with questions about her identity, and she got all the answers in her confrontation with the incidents that had left indelible marks on her mind. It was through these incidents that her new identity was shaped.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the text reveals that Baby Halder decided to exist in society as an individual with her own identity without being dependent on her husband, father or her brothers. She was an ordinary woman- one who would have spent her life like any ordinary woman marginalized in multiple aspects would do, until she recognized her potential to write about herself, interrogating the most critical incidents of her life, taking life-changing decisions and feeding her urge to be independent. Her victory lay in her exploring her ability to read and write which she had always desired. She’s feminist in the sense that she shows courage, takes up responsibility of her children, proves self-worth and is always optimistic. Through the narration of her story, Baby Halder puts forward the problems faced by women domestic servants in India. She raises questions regarding problems of exploitative work environment, economic issues, urgency for sustenance and also the difficulties for a single mother in raising her children.

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