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Topic of Research: Selfhood and Women with Disability: A Study of Select Autobiographies

Findings

- The life writings by disabled women demonstrate the possibility of a fulfilling and satisfying life despite their anomalous bodies
- The representation of their lives with disability not only gives them the recognition as authors of their own text, but also assert their agency and voice
- The women with disability offer their difference not only in terms of their disabled bodies, but also in terms of dealing with the day to day discriminatory practices
- They also make a point that their disability alters the understanding of the idea of embodiment and identity
- The life with disability, thus, becomes a peculiar mix of trials, tribulations, pain and pleasure

Summary of Abstract: “Self and Women with Disability: A Study of Select Autobiographies”

Disability and illness form an integral part of human existence. Viewed as an individual tragedy or a personal misfortune, disability is considered as a medical as well as a pathological issue, leading towards discrimination, isolation and objectification of the persons with disability. The emergent field of *Disability Studies* poses challenge to the conventional idea of disability as personal misfortune, locating it in the political and socio-cultural domain. It posits that the idea of disability, rather arises out of faulty and exclusionary built environment as well as biased attitudes towards the disabled persons. Moreover, it suggests that person's disability should be looked at keeping in mind not only the socio-cultural factors, but also the cultural identity markers like gender, sex, class, race, caste and so on. These identity

markers intersect with the disability identity, giving rise to a unique selfhood, studying which provides new epistemological perspective.

The Feminist Disability scholars expand the field of Disability Studies further, by calling attention to the important aspect of gender which intersects with experiences of the disabled persons, in turn giving rise to a specific selfhood, by incorporating the lived reality of women with disability into the theoretical framework of feminism. The feminist disability scholars enrich both Feminist as well as Disability Studies, using the Feminist Disability theory as a basis of analysis. This study modestly attempts to understand the ways in which the disabled women conceive and carve out their disabled selfhoods in the context of the disability rights movement in the USA and India. It makes a point that the disabled selfhoods of the women life writers in this study shape and are shaped by not only the disability rights movement in their respective countries, but also socio-cultural context. This study follows the framework of Rosemarie Garland Thomson's article "*Feminist Disability Studies*" (2005) to analyze the disabled women life writers in terms of their representation, embodiment, and identity.

The genre of autobiography is as ancient as the Western Civilization. However, the word 'autobiography' has come into use from the eighteenth century. '*Confessions*' of Jean Jack Rousseau is considered to be one of the first autobiographies in its strict sense. This genre of autobiography is marked by the deep sense of individual autonomy. As a result the Idea of Self depicted in the autobiographies in the Eighteenth Century is strictly masculine, organizing the individual life of the autobiographer as an organic whole. However, in the last four decades the concept of an autonomous individual has been highly critiqued and rejected, as the idea of self is now being considered to be the result of intersection of the socio-cultural, economic and political context. For instance, the autobiographies by women and other disempowered groups portray the self deeply entrenched into socio-cultural environment. The idea of self, depicted in these autobiographies is far from being an organic whole, but highly flexible and fluid, thereby, establishing the idea of individual identity as unstable entity.

The study of autobiography, despite being an ancient genre, is a fairly recent academic endeavour. In the disciplines like Anthropology, Sociology, History, and Cultural studies, the private life histories are now being considered as crucial in unraveling the constant interaction and inter-relation of the individuals and the societies. The individual contribution to the socio-cultural environment, also the socio-cultural contribution to the making of individual is of great interest to the scholars of these

disciplines. Literary studies and the Critical theory also analyze autobiographies in order to understand the idea of representation both of the self and the other, along with the idea of agency and individual identity.

The autobiographies by people with disability are emerging to be a vast body of popular literature. The publication of a large number of autobiographies by people with various bodily conditions in recent times is often termed as a 'memoir boom'. Therefore, this memoir boom deserves a critical study. The Literature from antiquity abounds with the portrayal of disability. This portrayal is one-sided, objectifying and stereotypical, presenting disability as superhuman or an extremely negative identity. Autobiographies, on the other hand, bring disability in the forefront by allowing the person with disability a subject position and also a voice of their own. Thus, providing the counter narrative to the fast held ideas and beliefs about disability, embodiment, identity and selfhood, which so far have been highly stereotypical.

The life writings or autobiographies of the disabled women have begun to emerge as the tool to render the hitherto warehoused and invisible disabled women a textual as well as authorial visibility, thereby, countering ableism and patriarchy. The critical study of disabled women's autobiographies throws light on distinct selfhood of women shaped by their disabilities, adding to the diverse experiences of what it means to be a 'woman'. The critical study of disabled women's autobiographies brings out female subjectivity by delineating the day to day existence with disability, thereby, calling attention to the larger issue of accommodation, acceptance and integration of persons with bodily variation in the mainstream society. The study analyzes the status of being a disabled woman along with the other axis of identity like race, caste, class, and so on.

The present study is a modest endeavor to critically analyze select autobiographies in order to uncover the self-representation in the context of bodily variation and societal attitudes. This study is interested in looking at formation of disabled identity. As a marginalized group, how the disabled women negotiate on day to day basis, their bodily variation and societal attitude. This study aims at finding out how the authors of the autobiographies portray their own selves in the context of the disability rights movements in their respective cultures as well as their understanding of the idea of womanhood.