

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

BI-MONTHLY REFEREED AND INDEXED, OPEN ACCESS E-JOURNAL

The Criterion



October 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-5

5th Year of Open Access



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African American Autobiography

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African American autobiography is motivated by a revisionist attitude toward exploring the issues involving the black people in America and the autobiographer himself. The genre of autobiography is often utilised as a tool to demolish the myths of black inferiority, and to break the chains which have held the African American in bondage to the white man over the generations. Thus, often in its final rendering, African American autobiography is a quest for freedom while opposing and repudiating oppression and discrimination based on colour.

Therefore, a study of African American autobiography proves its uniqueness while it continues to adhere to the autobiographical canon. Attempting a general yet comprehensive definition of autobiography, James Olney writes that it is:

a recollective/narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point in his life – the present - , looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how that past history has led to this present state of being. Exercising memory, in order that he may recollect and narrate, the autobiographer is not a neutral and passive recorder but rather a creative and active shaper (*The Slave's Narrative*: 149).

Ssensalo's list of the elements of general autobiography, similar to Olney's definition, indicates that autobiography has the "first person narrative built around a singular character, [employing the] first person point of view, [with the] narrative covering a broad span of time, and the [presentation of a] retrospective interpretation of experiences recounted from memory by the central character" (*DAI*, 1979: 5495 A).

Paul John Eakin similarly suggests that twentieth century autobiography does not "offer a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past." On the other hand, it is both an "art of memory and an art of imagination" (*Fictions in Autobiography*: 5-6).

Defining autobiography as "a collection of such acts of self-performance unified by shared cultural values and fashionable metaphors of the self," Albert E. Stone also holds the opinion that it is both fictive and factual because autobiography is a recreation of "the self-in-its world, not by literal reproduction of remembered facts - ," but by patterning the past into a present symbolic truth (*The American Autobiography*: 3 and 6-7).

Darrel Mansell, on the contrary, considers that autobiography is neither art, nor literature, not fiction because he feels that it is on the side of biography, history, and the truth-telling sciences." However, like Eakin and Stone, he also insists that there can be no fool-proof distinction between autobiography and fiction because all works of literature are both fact and fiction (*The American Autobiography*: 64, 68 and 71).

In *Black Autobiography in America*, Butterfield bringing out the historical significance of autobiography writes: "In response to a particular historical period, the

autobiographer examines, interprets, and creates the importance of his life. He may also affect history by leaving the work behind as a model for other lives” (1).

Similarly, Robert F. Sayre, describes autobiography as history and literature because they contain and interpret facts from the past while “drawing lessons from it,” and at the same time, as literature, “please, entertain as well as teach” (*The American Autobiography*: 12), Janet Varner Gunn also defines autobiography as “a mode of fictional and historical narrative that delves into time in order to take up the problem of depth” (*Autobiography*: 42). Similar views are expressed by Harpham who defines autobiography as “the conversion of experience into narrative” (*Studies in Autobiography*: 42), and Olney who defines it as “a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition” (*Metaphors of Self*: 35). Barros’ definition of autobiography perhaps comes closest to Olney’s definition. Proposing “a heuristic approach,” to autobiography she defines it as “the literature of transformation” which provides “us with an understanding of how change occurs and how that change once performed, presented or inscribed, finds its ‘place’ or meaning in the discourse” (*Biography*: 4 and 24).

A study of these definitions reveals the following inherent traits of an autobiography: narration of the author’s past through the medium of memory, description and interpretation of the self employing the author’s present point of view. The description and interpretation of experiences are both individual and collective, fictive as well as factual. In short, an autobiography is the story of the author’s life narrated by himself. It is “autos,” “bios,” “graphie” -, “self-life-writing.”

An autobiography presents the chronological events of the autobiographer’s life, but neither are the events always presented in a chronological sequence nor are all the events presented. Instead, an autobiographer often portrays the significant incidents of his life which have had a great influence on his self and which have helped in moulding his personality.

An unconscious and conscious patterning takes place, taking the “I” away from the absolute truth because an autobiographer selects and chooses from his materials. “By the time experience is distilled enough through our minds to set some particular thing down on paper, so much unconscious reordering has gone on that even the naive wish to be wholly ‘truthful’ fades before the intoxication of line, pattern, form” (Olney, *The American Autobiography*: 42-43).

An autobiography is not only a record of an individual’s personal life but is often also a record of the socio-political and economic conditions prevailing during his time. Because of its encompassing nature, and wide scope, autobiography often traverses the fields of history, psychology, sociology, politics, etc., inviting critics to compare it with one or more of these fields.

In short, autobiography is also a treatise on a writer’s contemporary period and his interaction with society often leaves an indelible mark on the writer’s personality. Autobiography’s relationship with various fields of study provides it with an elasticity that offers a prismatic view of the form.

This prismatic quality of autobiography is in keeping with the self: just as the author’s self offers a spectrum of interpretations so can autobiography be interpreted and analysed through a comparative study of these fields. In the amalgam of these fields into one, we are reminded of the various influences and spheres which mould a man’s personality.

Therefore, unlike most other genres in literature such as poetry, drama, novel, etc, the genre of autobiography is not defined by its structural form. However, it is characterised by a thematic form which provides structure to the autobiography. Hence, very often, content gains precedence over form.

The episodic structure of an autobiography not only provides it with a picaresque form but also enables the writer to thread the various incidents of his life and to weave a pattern out of the threads of his life like Whitman's "Noiseless Patient Spider."

An autobiography is also similar to a dramatic monologue in which a single person, the author, speaks at a significant period of his life to a reader-audience. It reveals a dramatic situation – the drama of the protagonist's life is played before the readers and the presence of other characters is felt through the monologue. As Roy Pascal says, an autobiography "offers an almost unlimited opportunity for the exploration of personality - not solely of the author's but also of the people with whom he is intimately involved" (*Design and Truth*: 162).

Most traditional autobiographies are linear in structure, in that they either move from birth to the writer's present stage or from deprivation to success or both, and are often objective in theme, in that they are more factual presentations of events in a writer's public life. African American autobiographies, on the other hand are subjective like most modern autobiographies, and move from alienation to identity, from unconsciousness to awareness, and also from deprivation to success and from birth to the present stage. Therefore, African American autobiography falls within the given framework of an autobiography, and is valid for analysis under the general category, but, at the same time, it is distinct in that it contains the African Americans' problems, agonies, and aspirations, which are unique to the race and have no parallels in the general autobiographer's life.

Bede M. Ssensalo lists the characteristics of African American autobiography which reveal its distinctness. They are:

The tendency on the part of the author to regard his life as representative of the race, the pre-occupation with the violence which Blacks are subjected by whites, the notion that racism is a double-edged sword since it victimizes both Blacks and Whites, and the idea that writing one's life is for the Black author, one of the best ways of establishing meaning out of meaninglessness. One also finds in these words the discovery of Blackness as a central structural element of the narrative, a pattern of escape, flight and recapture and a shift between narrative and interpretation (*DAI*, 1979: 5495 A).

Drawing parallels between the autobiographical form and African American life, Butterfield writes that it is "one of the ways that black Americans have asserted their right to live and grow." For the African Americans the genre of autobiography is also an expression of:

their political awareness, their empathy for suffering, their ability to break down the division of "I" and "you," their knowledge of oppression and discovery of ways to cope with that experience, and their sense of shared life, shared triumph, and communal responsibility (*Black Autobiography*: 3).

Thus, it is not strange that African American autobiographies were being written during the slavery period when the African Americans faced suppression resulting from discrimination. In fact, African American autobiography can be traced back to slave

narratives which were popular both before and during the Abolitionist Movement. According to Costanzo, autobiography appealed to the eighteenth century black man because it enabled the freed slave to narrate his “interesting and remarkable tale” and also provided scope “to scrutinize his life for purpose of self-discovery and identification in the alien world of the west” (*Surprising Narrative*: 8).

A slave narrative, like Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* while presenting the life of an individual slave is an epitome of “black experience” in that it explores the condition of the blacks in America, the exploitation of the blacks by whites, and the racist and materialistic American Society. “They [the slave narratives] give us eyewitness accounts of the furnace of misery in the Old South that supplied raw materials for the Industrial Revolution” (Butterfield, *Black Autobiography*: 11)

Douglass writes about his restlessness, his inability to trace his patriarchal genealogy, his lack of identity, his agonies and his suffering. He describes “the heartless and ghastly form of slavery which rises between mother and child, even at the bed of death” and the pangs of hunger which compelled him to fight with the dog or grab the crumbs “flung out for the cats” (Douglass, *My Bondage*: 57; 75-76).

Butterfield writes that Douglass is great as an autobiographer because “he held up to humanity an image of heroism that is wholly consistent with the idea of ‘manhood’ as conceived in American culture” and because he “blended the ‘life’ with the ‘times’ so well that they are indistinguishable.” (*Black Autobiography*: 87)

The autobiographers in the slave narratives used their geographical flight from South to North metaphorically as a flight from bondage to freedom, from ignorance to enlightenment, from rootlessness to an identity, and to voice their dissent against slavery. As Sidonie Smith writes: “... the slave narratives functioned as an early form of protest literature, whose purpose was to expose the nature of the slave system and to provide moral instruction through the vehicle of autobiography” (*Where I’m Bound*: 8).

In later works such as in Washington’s *Up from Slavery* Smith finds “the flight of the black toward whiteness and away from blackness.” She further writes that Washington’s life depicts “the bleaker vision, which focuses on the self’s inability to achieve a ‘place’ in American society. Hence, his life is characterised by profound loneliness and alienation from society or possibly even from self” (45, 47). However, it may be argued that Washington’s life-story aims at developing the self from the grass-root level in order to enable it to find a place in society. Therefore, acceptance of white norms gains preponderance in this autobiography.

Later autobiographers like Du Bois, Wright and others strongly protested against the presence of racism and its evil effects, and hoped for a better future. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois hopes that:

Some day the Awakening will come, when the pent-up vigor of ten million souls shall sweep irresistibly toward the Goal, out of the valley of the Shadow of Death, where all that makes life worth living - Liberty, Justice, and Right - is marked “For white people only.” (*Souls of Black Folk*: 151)

The African American’s plight in America is vividly and metaphorically brought out in Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy* where he writes: “There was the yearning for

identification loosed in me by the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon a mysterious journey” (14).

The African American during this period led a lonely life _ without finding identification with the whites and not seeking one with the fellow blacks. He was a puny creature who could be trampled upon by the white man as one would an ant. He was carrying the white man’s burden of racism, exploitation, and degradation across his life which was nothing short of a “mysterious journey” because he did not know whence he came, where he was, and whither he was proceeding.

Analyzing the dilemma of alienation in writers from 1901 to 1960, Butterfield writes:

[As] the individual author succeeds in the white world by virtue of his outstanding abilities, he is more and more removed from the black masses; the gulf increases between himself and his own people, and at the same time he can never wholly enter the white American mainstream because of his color. He is doomed to alienation from both worlds. (*Black Autobiography*: 105)

So does *Black Boy* include “identity crisis, the alienation, the restless movement, and the views on education, knowledge, and resistance that were demonstrated to be traditional in black autobiography as a whole” (155).

Cleaver’s autobiography, *Soul on Ice*, is a vindictive treatise repudiating white American society in which “the white man wants to be the *brain* and he wants us to be the muscle, the body” (162). Therefore, Cleaver advocates that the black man “needs” and “seeks” “political and economic power” (117). Thus, as Butterfield says “the focus of Cleaver’s attack is not moral, but political and economic.” (*Black Autobiography*: 271)

Further, Cleaver’s autobiography is different in that it offers only a slight glimpse of the author’s life. “It is no conventional autobiography. He offers no facts about his background, family, youth and so on.” Instead, it offers a social analysis of American racism (Smith, *Where I’m Bound*: 119).

The *Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a retrospective and revisionist narrative dealing with the self-life of a man who progressed from the position of a school drop-out to be world-figure; who fought against oppression; who shattered the myth of black inferiority; who challenged white supremacy, disparity, and exploitation; who unceasingly sought and found self-identity; and who carried forward the message of black pride and self-respect dominant in African American autobiography.

In many ways, Malcolm’s *Autobiography* is reflective of African American autobiography. The hostility, exploitation and double-standards experienced by the slave narrators and later autobiographers find echo in Malcolm’s autobiography. The urge for gaining knowledge portrayed in his autobiography is demonstrative of the thirst for education evinced by other blacks such as Douglass, Washington, Wright, McKey and Baldwin. Like Washington, Malcolm realized the significance of economic self-reliance in the lives of the African Americans. Like Du Bois and others he was optimistic both of the black people shedding inhibition and the end of racism from the American soil. Malcolm’s struggle as manifest in the *Autobiography* is for the black people in particular and for the non-white races in general. Therefore, the book transcends the topicality of the American Sixties to acquire a certain degree of universality.

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