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Reviewing Autobiography as a Travelogue: A Study of Romancing with Life

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Autobiography has been defined and studied in many ways, from different perspectives. Right from its emergence on the literary horizon, autobiography has been looked upon as a powerful mode of self-realisation, self-construction, self-expression and self-transcendence. Autobiography offers a priceless opportunity to peep into the self of the author and to glimpse at the society from his/her perspective. An in-depth study of any autobiography reveals that it is a spontaneous exercise on the writer's free will, with its prime focus necessarily on the author. It is a journey into the unexplored avenues of the autobiographer's inner self. The present paper proposes an altogether different viewpoint: every autobiography is a sort of travelogue. It upholds an opinion that an individual's identity is shaped by his/ her stay in various places where s/he encounters innumerable unexpected situations and confronts with persons of all types. Some of these places and people cast an indelible mark on his/ her personality. There are glimpses of majority of them in his/ her making. An autobiographer being an individual engaged constantly in self-search, consciously or unconsciously shows off this diverse impact in his writing. Romancing with Life is a unique case in itself, mainly because it is both a covert and overt travelogue. Thus it is an autobiographical text matched by few. It is a telling account of how culture, context and climate play a vital role in shaping a person's identity.

Autobiography has been defined and studied in many ways, from different perspectives. Right from its emergence on the literary horizon, autobiography has been looked upon as a powerful mode of self-realisation, self-construction, self-expression and self-transcendence. It is regarded as "a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition" which attempts to build "a metaphoric bridge from subjective sub-consciousness to objective reality" (Olney 121). Autobiography offers a priceless opportunity to peep into the self of the author and to glimpse at the society from his/her perspective. In fact, it is perhaps the only form of expression that requires perfect identity between "the author, the narrator and the protagonist" (Lejeune 27).

'Dev Anand' is as if the name synonymous to Indian film industry. His "evergreen", ever young image has been embossed on the minds of millions of his fans all around the world. Born in 1923 in Gurdaspur in the pre-partition India, this symbol of eternal energy had been an integral part of the Bollywood for more than six decades, till he breathed his last on 3 December, 2011. A person who "lived life on his own terms" (Shabana Azami as qtd. in Hindustan Times, dated 4 Dec. 2011), Dev Anand always remained a much talked about personality, earlier with reverence and later on with ridicule. He was known to the filmgoers as a debonair romantic hero of the 1950s and 1960s, an intuitive script writer with novel

ideas, a daring director with a different approach, and a courageous but self-complacent producer. Unfortunately he afterwards miserably failed to tune himself with the succeeding generations and spot their true taste. Though he won immense popularity, he neither changed nor challenged himself with the moving times. This severely marred his magnetism and magic.

Dev Anand was a charismatic personality with an aura around him. His phenomenal contribution to the Hindi cinema was duly acknowledged in India and abroad. He was conferred upon with the prestigious ‘Film fare’ and ‘Screen Lifetime Achievement’ awards, the reputed ‘Dadasaheb Phalke Puraskar’ and the much-coveted ‘Padma Bhushan’. At global level, he received the rare honour of being a ‘Cultural Ambassador’ to the USSR and a ‘Grand Marshall’ to the USA. Thus he attained a unique identity for himself, which was trans-national and trans-cultural. Two representative reactions registered on Dev Anand’s demise, one by the star of the millennium, Amitabh Bachchan, and the other by the ruling King of the world of glamour, Shahrukh Khan, are sufficient to convey his greatness. As Amitabh laments, “An Era has come to an end... Dev Anand leaves a void never perhaps to be filled again”, while Shahrukh Khan exclaims that “...the film industry is incomplete (without him) and has lost its magical energy” (*Ibid*).

Romancing with Life, an aptly titled autobiography by Dev Anand conforms to his epicurean philosophy of living. No wonder, Anand candidly dedicates this book to nobody else but “to life as it is lived by people the world over and to that special ray of sunshine that makes life worth living”. The word ‘romance’ has a special significance in Anand’s life. He views it as “the most endearing feeling in every heart, young and old, the one feeling that gives meaning to the humdrum monotony of people’s lives” (278). Throughout his career, he lived up to the image of ‘the ultimate romantic’ through whom thousands of filmgoers accomplished the pseudo pleasure of wish fulfilment. Released in 2007, Romancing is historically important as the first-ever full-fledged account by a renowned Bollywood star who happened to be the witness of its genesis and evolution. Gifted with eloquent writing style and knack of presentation, Dev Anand leaves a lasting impression on the reader’s mind through this tome. Indeed, it is an “unputdownable book chock-full of bittersweet reminiscences” (as mentioned on the jacket) which not only tells Anand’s dramatic life story but also records some of the most notable moments at the national as well as global level, in the field of art, culture and politics. Moreover, the paper reader thinks, this is one of the well-timed autobiographies in Indian English literature, written at the juncture when the author is properly positioned to analyse various events in his life.

Right from the beginning, Dev Anand seems to be fully aware of his role as a writer and he strives to give justice to it throughout the book, sincerely and seriously. Thus, at the outset, he contends:

I wonder, as you start to read this book, how well you know me. If you do know me well, you will certainly come to know me better as you read on; if not, through these pages you will come to know me for who I am,

and why I am what I am...This is my story, a story that has never been told before (1).

Candidly yet succinctly, he shares the universal challenges faced by any author of an autobiography:

Writing about your own life, for the whole world to read, can be easy as well as difficult. On the one hand it is quite easy, because unlike fiction, in which you have to invent characters, create situations and incidents, and concoct a believable narrative, the story of your life has already been played out in front of your eyes, and you are intimate with its every detail. All you have to do is open the window of your memory, and let the story run fast, spool after spool- spicing it up a bit here and there, deleting bits that are unnecessary, and making it play to a rhythm that grips the reader, absorbs and inspire him throughout its unfolding.

On the other hand, writing about yourself can be extremely difficult, because you have to be honest and truthful both to yourself and to the events and personalities you are describing, even if the truth is sometimes not pleasant, and you have to lay yourself open, with all your strengths and weaknesses, before the reader, baring your soul to them as they read your book (vi).

Adherence to truth is the outstanding feature of Dev Anand's persona, as revealed through Romancing with Life. Though it is undiplomatic to accept everything he states in toto, there is a substantial amount of honesty and reality in his words. In the Preface to the book, echoing Mahatma Gandhi, Anand proclaims that his life "has been an open book" (vi) to his fans and wishes that "they must not feel that I am hiding something or glossing over some unsavoury bumps now that I have set out to write my autobiography" (vi). He further adds that "the untarnished truth and complete honesty are the first pre-requisites of my writing about myself" despite "the danger of annoying or angering a few people, who have rubbed shoulders with me on my journey along the path of life" (viii). A careful examination of his book bears a testimony to his commitment. He maintains unusual transparency and Gandhian frankness while delineating his love life including all its sexual experiences without fearing its consequences—his first sexual intercourse with a seductive lady in a railway berth (66), his sensual relationship with a married woman in a guest house (68-69), his doomed romance with the then super-actress Suraiya (99-100), the ups and downs in his married life with his former co-star Kalpana Kartik, his short-lived courtships in India and extramarital affairs abroad strewn throughout the narrative, his infatuation with his "prized possession" Zeenat Aman in his fifties (243-244), his secret attraction for his finds like Tina Munim, Tabu (286), Ananya (296) and his dreamy fascination with a nurse while lying in hospital at the age of eighty one (351)!

The rapport or 'chemistry' with fans comprises a significant segment of the artistic entity of any celebrity. An actor gets identity because of the multitude of fans he has, while

the fans search their individual identities in their favourite stars. It is a well-acknowledged fact that fans attribute stardom to an actor and provide him/her a much needed mental support in this celluloid world full of uncertainty. History affirms that they can go to any extent to protect, glorify and even deify their idols. Naturally, most of the film icons take conscious efforts to maintain and multiply their fan following. In these days of internet and social networking, it has become quite easier. However, the situation was quite different few decades back when letter was the only medium of communication between a fan and his/her favourite star. In such circumstances, it was truly tough to find time to duly respond to their genuine gestures of admiration. Dev Anand surpasses many of his contemporaries in this otherwise tedious task.

Despite his hectic and busy schedule, Anand fairly succeeded in keeping himself close to his fans. With gratitude, he thus acknowledges their contribution in his success: "my fans...are the ones who have made me what I am; without them Dev Anand would not be what he is, and this book would not have been written" (viii). He never allowed his stardom to create a barrier between him and his fans. The following passage illustrates his down-to-earth approach and his genuine love for his fans:

I answer my telephone myself. I am accessible to all those who want to call me. There is no secret code or undisclosed number. Anyone who wants to speak to me can do so... I don't ignore any calls and I am indifferent to no one. This approachability makes me happy, since I get to know everyone who calls, and also know what they call for... The callers include men and women of all ages and professions... I like listening to them, whether they love me, hate me or try to make fun of me. It gives me a great insight into the human mind (299).

No wonder, he optimistically affirms in the Preface, "This book finally gives me the chance to speak to each and every one of my beloved fans, one-to-one, like never before" (*Ibid*).

The rise and fall of a film star is often a popular topic of debate and discussion among the movie lovers. The world of cinema is full of uncertainties. Today's megastar falls into absolute oblivion tomorrow when the trend changes; and this goes on generation after generation. It is the fans who make or break the fate of every star. Dev deliberates on this phenomenon at length as follows:

It all happens in the dark. In cinema halls there is a strange, inexplicable chemistry that works on the minds of the audience when images of lifelike yet fairy-tale characters flickers on the screen, as reel after reel unfolds itself, imprinting its images on the viewers. That sudden, spontaneous, magical reaction to a face or a personality and his or her behaviour on screen is what stardom is all about (112).

He adds further, “Stardom cannot be earned or bought at a price” (212). A man who consciously spoke of physical pleasure is equally aware of philosophical underpinnings of life and these words flow down effortlessly from his crystal-clear conscience:

- “Culture is a great traveller, and one habit rubs on to another” (134).
- “Fame, power and money are the three factors that make you great in the eyes of the world. The moment these desert you, you are like a particle of dust under one’s feet” (177).
- “When you are going into a territory hitherto unknown and obscure, away from the beaten path, the world often laughs at you and ridicules you. But the moment you meet with success on the same offbeat path, the same world hails and cheers you” (206).
- “...while you can carry the burden of your own conscience, you cannot carry the burden of somebody else’s conscience with you” (309).

Though being an ardent admirer of Indian culture and tradition, Anand was an advocate of freedom of thought and expression. His views on Indian society reflect his frankness and straightforwardness:

India is a strong nation, and instead of getting bogged down by orthodox, conventional stereotypes, our nation must keep pace with the fast-moving times... Indian society must open up too. While retaining its own identity and culture, it has to imbibe the best of the outside world for its growth and progress, describing some of its hypocritical, irrelevant norms and sentiments that sometimes (go) in the name of culture and heritage (348).

He disliked any sort of restraint on artistic creation and openly articulated his disapproval on it. Therefore, he looked upon the Censor Board as an enemy, as a pseudo protector of morality that imposes ruthless restrictions on creativity. Calling it “very high-handed, autocratic and authoritarian” (341), he objects to its mode of operation. Retaining this stance, Anand outrightly rejected the lucrative offer to chair this prestigious board.

Surprisingly yet truly, *Romancing with Life* can also be read as a travelogue. It is enriched with pictorial depiction of a number of destinations in India and abroad—from Paris to Pune—which Dev Anand happened to see on account of film shooting. A thorough tourist by heart and “a student forever” with insatiable “hunger for knowledge and learning” (134), Anand liked to visit various countries in the world in search of unique, unexplored sites. He travelled extensively in India, from extreme North East to the South, in order to capture its diversity in his camera. As a seasoned director, he had the talent to pick out the specialty of every spot he hunted, and immortalize it on the silver screen. In this autobiography, he relives the moments he spent on those beautiful locations.

Anand’s first tour to Europe was related to the screening of his film *Aandhiyan* at the Venice Film Festival. In this trip, he visited many places universally acclaimed for their extraordinary beauty and exclusive identity, including Rome, Venice, Paris, Geneva, Zurich, Madrid, London, Oxford and Cambridge. With exceptional economy of expression, he jots

down his impressions of those places, without missing a single detail. For instance, he summarizes his short stay in Rome thus:

I drank deeply of the beautiful city of Rome and adored every inch of it. The Italian style, the Italian fashion, the pretty Italian girls, the sidewalk cafes, especially Via Veneto, where classy Italian wine flowed from table to table, with sensational-looking Italian hostesses serving you with glints in their eyes more intoxicating than the glasses of wine they served (129).

Venice, to him, was “a city floating in water, full of gondolas and extremely expensive and sleek hotels, and of beaches where attractive young European women lay with their bare backs... in the mounds of sparkling sands in the afternoon Mediterranean sun” (130). As for Paris, he has a special advice to his readers:

To be able to enjoy the enchanting ‘Parisian way’ one has to be alone, especially for the first time. You have to give yourself a chance to get lost in its breath-taking beauty; and you cannot get lost in the way you must with another person sharing your time and experiences and at times imposing his or her preferences of likes and dislikes according to his or her temperament...

You can stop wherever you want to, pause and look at where and what your eyes feast on, buy at leisure what pleases you, lazily seek whatever fancies you... (132)

Dev “felt more at home” in London, “for language was neither a problem nor a barrier” there (134). In this connection, he makes a quite meaningful observation that reflects his stupendous scholarship:

There is so much we have adopted from the British, including our Constitution and our judicial system, and the way our administration works, and so much of theirs we have adapted ourselves to, especially where manners and etiquette among the top echelons of our social strata are concerned. And there is no shame in that, for, after all, aren’t societies the world over an outcome of some adoption and adaption from some source or the other? Culture is a great traveller, and one habit rubs on to another. Aren’t we also similarly influenced by the Mughals, the Persians, the Arabs, and the Mongols? (Ibid)

Dev gave priority to visit Oxford and Cambridge, “the great seats of Western education from where, for centuries, some of the best brains have sharpened and embellished their thinking, and contributed towards the growth and progress of mankind” (Ibid). He adds, “At every nook and corner of the cobbled streets of the two university towns that we roamed, there was

a new thought to be discovered, a new wave of thinking weaving its way into my inquisitive mind” (135).

Switzerland, undoubtedly one of the most attractive countries on the globe, was Dev’s favourite. He was emotionally attached to this country because Mona, his wife loved it too, and both of his children were intentionally conceived in Switzerland! It was because both he and Mona had “nursed a feeling that (their) children should have the blessings of the Swiss Alps at the time of signalling their arrival into the world” (167).

As a part of a special delegation to travel to the USSR for cultural exchange, Dev learnt a lot about “the working of Soviet society and the people who lived under that system” (147). He visited America many a time; initially as a Cultural Ambassador from India, and afterwards as a producer-director, to shoot its grandeur. He remarks, “American people are very friendly and outgoing and I enjoyed myself meeting all kinds of people, from common men in the streets with their hail-fellow-well-met attitude to highbrows in their plush offices, smoking cigars over cups of coffee served by young attractive secretaries” (191). He frankly admits further, “It is very difficult to see and absorb a great and vast country like America in a short span of time” (395). He comments on two well-known cities in America—New York and San Francisco. According to him, “New York is the city of all cities. Every time you go there, there is something new to explore, to learn; a new fashion, a new fad. Everything is mega-sized in New York, from limousines to hamburgers. You walk along an avenue, rubbing shoulders with millionaires or intellectuals at every step” (*Ibid*). He describes San Francisco as “a kaleidoscope of the universe” with its “mingling of Spanish, Mexican and Chinese cultures” (396). He feels, “The intermingling of races and the spirit of togetherness paint an absorbing picture of humanity” (*Ibid*).

Dev also had a rare opportunity to visit the famous Scandinavian countries like Denmark, Sweden and Norway. During this tour, he saw Copenhagen, Christiana, Stockholm and Oslo. He has a word or two on each of them, with a hint at its strengths and lacunas. He also had occasional visits to Sri Lanka, South Africa, Belgium and Canada, the countries he liked and respected.

Shooting at Scotland, Nepal and Bhutan—all hilly countries—were treasured as unforgettable experiences by Dev. He chose the former as the setting of his film *Main Solah Baras Ki*. He fondly remembers travelling by train through the “meadows and hills and dales” of Scotland and “strolling around the thick woods smelling of pine, inhaling fresh air” (333). In the following manner, he sums up the account of his stay in Scotland:

The Scottish people were very thrilled and happy that their country was being captured on film for an Indian audience for the first time. After I finished filming there, leaders of a Scottish Council held a special dinner for me and my unit. After mutual thanksgiving, a Scottish silver cup, with the emblem of their council embossed on it, was presented to me as a gift from the Scottish people. I kissed it, as I kissed the Scots in my

mind for their wonderful help and cooperation extended to me. We had formed a great bond of friendship with each other (336).

Dev's affinity with Nepal is quite perspicuous in his description of the shooting of *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* and *Ishq Ishqin* that country. He was very much impressed by the "exemplary" hospitality of the Nepalese people and the "moral as well as emotional" (231) support of the king of Nepal. He recollects, "Indeed, the entire filming was like one huge celebration" (*Ibid*). On his second visit, he "travelled by helicopter all over Nepal, to look for the best locations in the country. Each trip was the experience of a lifetime". (240)

The "mystery" kingdom of Bhutan, adjacent to India, had been an attraction to Dev for long. He visited Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan, which he addresses to as "a dreamland" (237). The Paro valley, his next destination, "was so picturesque and breath-taking that Switzerland, the country I love the most for its beauty, paled into insignificance in comparison, so overwhelming was its otherworldly quality" (*Ibid*).

To the core, Anand remained a great fan of India. In his entire lifespan, he travelled the length and breadth of India, tracing its multifarious identity. His journey from Delhi to Mumbai as a part of shooting of *Nau Do Gyarah* made him acquainted with rural and urban India in the 1960 s. He states:

We went over the highways and through shrubby pebbly muddy pathways, over bridges and through tunnels, through tunnels, through forests of eye-pleasing gulmohar trees and dangerous-looking dacoit-infested ravines, through sunshine... and through cloudy weather... our caravan marched on, singing and dancing its way into the hearts of our countrymen, villagers and townsfolk alike... It was a long-drawn-out picnic of great joy and creative satisfaction (157).

Jewel Thief was shot in Sikkim, a sensitive boarder state touching China. He travelled from Darjeeling to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. As he describes:

The clouds hung low like white cotton sheets, almost touching the windows of our car. Suddenly a clutch of them swept across the road and blocked our front view... Gangtok emerged like a small decorative pearl on that breath-taking landscape, its beautiful palace nestling amongst tall green trees bedecked with pink and white flowers, bordered by lush-green valleys on both sides, and up ahead, a road winding into a thick forest, where yaks grazes, with cute Sikkimese children playing with them, basking in the afternoon sun (208-9).

Though Anand mentions Mahabaleshwar and Panchagani, the famous hill stations in Maharashtra, he does not seem to be enticed by their natural beauty. Of course, he always

preferred to stay in Mahabaleshwar during the process of script writing. However, Pune had a special place in his heart. He unfolds his strong attachment with Pune thus:

Pune... had given birth to my career. Pune was my fortress, my citadel. Its lanes and by-lanes on which I tramped while I smelt the fragrance of success, its main street on which I had cycled for hours and hours together buying books and magazines so to satisfy my hunger for knowledge, its rocky hill behind the Prabhat Studios ... which I climbed almost every evening, walking through its tall overgrown wild grass and looking down at the village of Khadakvasla ... its residents who always had a smile for me whether I was travelling by tonga or walking into a restaurant for an omelette and a few pieces of baked bread or buying deliciously ripe bananas from a cart after dinner at the Lucky Irani restaurant, to gobble up at least half a dozen in one go – all these memories were forever fresh and sweet in my mind (335-36).

Besides, Anand refers to his visits to different metropolitan cities in India like Chennai, Lucknow, Indore, Bhopal and Kolkata, which were carved on his psyche.

An in-depth study of Romancing with Life reveals that an autobiography is to be viewed as a spontaneous exercise on the writer's free will, with its prime focus necessarily on the author. It is a journey into the unexplored avenues of the autobiographer's inner self. Moreover—the present paper reader contends—every autobiography is a sort of travelogue. In fact, an individual's identity is shaped by his/ her stay in various places where s/he encounters innumerable unexpected situations and confronts with persons of all types. Some of these places and people cast an indelible mark on his/ her personality. There are glimpses of majority of them in his/ her making. An autobiographer being an individual engaged constantly in self-search, consciously or unconsciously shows off this diverse impact in his writing. Romancing with Life is a unique case in itself, mainly because it is both a covert and overt travelogue. Thus it is an autobiographical text matched by few. Examined as a journey of the eventful life lead by an influential film star, and also as an unsparing of account of the Hindi film industry, the worth of this book is undeniable. It is a telling account of how culture, context and climate play a vital role in shaping a person's identity.

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