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Autobiographical Elements Shaping Future Personality as found within Oodgeroo Noonuccal's *Stradbroke Dreamtime* and Selected Works of Lila Majumdar

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Abstract:

A very important segment of literature is autography presented through children's literature. This paper tries to focus on the works of two important writers of such stories—Kath Walker or Oodgeroo Noonuccal from Australia and Lila Majumdar from India.

From Kath Walker, this paper takes for discussion her collection of stories, *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, where she makes her readers acquainted with her childhood days. Side by side, this paper places Lila Majumdar's autobiographical stories of her childhood days like 'Tinti Gachh', 'Anand Jagat' and tries to focus on the self-imaging process. We can notice a deep love for the surrounding nature, which has a great impact on their growing-up process in both the writers. Kath Walker, through her stories, expresses great admiration for Australian Aboriginal culture and values to which she belongs. Lila Majumdar, belonging to one of the most creative Bangali families of the nineteenth century, pays a tribute to the initiatives taken by her family to enrich the literature for children of which she was an active part. Both of them cherish strong feelings for animals and so on. This paper, however, tries to find out what these two great writers give emphasis on and what they neglect throughout the process of self-imaging.

Keywords: Autobiography, children's literature, self-imaging, self-identity, Kath Walker or Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Lila Majumdar.

Autobiography is actually the process of creating the image of the self. Among different types of autographical literature, one is telling autobiographical stories of childhood days through children's literature. This paper focuses on the works of two popular writers of stories for children—Kath Walker or Oodgeroo Noonuccal from Australia and Lila Majumdar from India and tries to find out the issues emphasized in the process of self-imaging.

Autobiography has been recognized as a distinct literary genre since the late eighteenth century. The evidence of the first use of the term 'autobiography' has been traced in a review of D'Israeli's *Miscellanies* by William Taylor. Here he considers whether 'autobiography' would be a better term than D'Israeli's 'hybrid' word 'self-biography' or not. However, the coinage of the term 'autobiography' is commonly attributed to Robbert Southey in his appreciation of the Portuguese poet, Francisco Viera.

Philippe Lejeune, in 1982, defines autobiography as: "A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on development of his personality" (193). He asserts one condition must for this particular genre, 'identity between the author, the narrator and the protagonist' (193). For James Olney, autobiography is:

"... of particular interest to us in a consideration of the creative achievements of individual men and the relationship of those achievements to a life lived, on the one hand, and an autobiography of that life on the other is... the isolate uniqueness that nearly everyone agrees to be the primary quality and condition of the individual and his experience." (20-1)

Again, Roy Pascal opines that autobiography depends on 'the seriousness of the author, the seriousness of his personality and his intention in writing' (60). So it seems that these critics make the difference, though apparent, between realizing the self and representing the self.

As Mary Jean Corbett says about Wordsworth and Carlyle, 'writing autobiography becomes a way of attaining both literary legitimacy and a desired subjectivity' (11). Laura Marcus thinks only people of 'lofty reputation' or having something of 'historical importance' to say should be the authors of autobiography. She also says that it is bound up with a topological distinction between people 'capable of self-reflection' and those 'who are not' (27). Laura Anderson thinks it best to begin the discussion about autobiography with Saint Augustine's *Confessions* as it is thought to be the origin of modern western autobiography. Augustine, in *Confessions*, promotes the 'inward turning gaze', as the origin and basis of autobiography. About the reason for writing autobiography, James Boswell's view is that perhaps there was 'more pleasure in reflecting' than living (1950:40): "It is very necessary to have our thoughts and actions preserved in a mode not subject to change, if we would have a fair and distinct view of our character" (1951:330). The desire behind writing autobiography, as Freud shows in his *Study*, is that of becoming one's own progenitor. Derrida observes autobiography as deconstructing its supposed rational or theoretical basis, as operating in a new space in a completely different way. He redefines the genre as 'thenatography' (thenatos Gk. - death), a writing of a dead author, not a living one, since autobiography, not only attempts to live through the name, but also increases its own involvement with death. Virginia Woolf considers Victorian autobiography to be artless

and dull, producing only ‘fossils’ rather than living people. For her, it should create ‘that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow’ (235).

Since the two writers of autobiographical stories this paper takes for discussion are both women, it is relevant to take into account the views of the feminist critics about autobiography. In 1980’s, the feminist critics of these genre faced an obvious problem—within the accepted canon of autobiographical writing, surprisingly works of women were absent. So they believed that diaries were the form of writing where women could express their own stories in private. Another problem for women writers was that the language was phallogentric. Nancy Miller argued in 1985, “The postmodernist decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not, I will argue, necessarily hold for women, and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they had not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogite, etc” (106). Nicole Ward Jouve states about women deconstructing a subject, that ‘you must have a self before you can afford to deconstruct it’ (7). She also raises the question whether it is at all possible for women to take the risk of their removal as authors and not betray the political agenda of feminism. For Liz Stanley, one of the reasons for reading autobiography is the political necessity to recognize the plurality of women’s lives. But Derrida opines that “there is no one woman, no one truth in itself about woman in itself” (372-3).

Gusdorf observes how in the ‘first great’ autobiography, *Confessions*, trivial incidents become representative moments in the growth of a personality. In *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, Kath Walker (or Oodgeroo Noonuccal) makes us acquainted with some such trivial moments of her childhood. Sigmund Freud, the famous psychoanalyst, finds that past creates the neurotic symptoms and the adult’s later affective life is set within the childhood drama of love, hate and jealousy – the Oedipus complex. The foundation for the flaws, diversions and also the normal pattern for individual growth are created by the past incidents. In the process of self-imaging, it is also important that how we remember our lives. As Derrida observes, there is ‘an inclusion and exclusion’ of incidents in the genre of autobiography. Therefore, this paper tries to find while creating the image of the self through the stories of childhood, what aspects do these two writers include and what do they exclude.

Lila Majumdar came from a family well-known in Bengal for the contribution they made in the development of children literature. Her uncle, Upendrakishore Roychowdhury, was famous for the stories he wrote for children. Kuladaranjan, the younger brother of Upendrakishore, translated the Robinhood stories. Her cousins, Sukumar Roy, Subimal Roy, Sukhalata Rao— all were very popular amongst children. Her childhood days were enriched by the stories written by her uncles and cousins and Jule Verne, Dumas, Sherlock Homes and others. When she was only thirteen, she wrote the story ‘*Padipisir Barmibakso*’. In 1913, the

Roychowdhury family published the first volume of *Sandesh*, a periodical magazine for children. *Sandash*, initially edited by Sukumar Roy (father of the renowned film director Satyajit Ray), gradually took a leading role in the sphere of children's literature. When she was only fourteen, Lila Majumdar wrote a story with the title '*Lakhi Chhele*' ('Good Boy'). Later, she became a regular writer for *Sandesh*, and about 1963, she joined *Sandesh* as the co-editor. Most of her short stories and novels appeared in this magazine before being published in the form of books. Though she wrote for the adults too, she herself confessed that she enjoyed more in writing for the children— one reason for this, as she says, might be that the little ones read only for amusement— they won't read anything if they don't get amusement. Another and more significant reason is that those stories came very spontaneously in her mind. She wanted to present her own childhood days before the children— all the enjoyments, misdoings, punishments, observations— everything. She also thinks that those who can't remember their childhood days and the feelings realized at that moment can't write children's stories. She can because her childhood days are still alive within her and she is very much careful about preserving them.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, or Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal is the name the famous Australian writer Kath Walker adopted later) , in the 'Introduction' to the *Stradbroke Dreamtime* says that those stories were written during her staying at Tambourine Mountain, in Queensland, Australia, with Judith Wright, the well-known Australian poet. *Stradbroke Dreamtime* actually consists of two parts—'Stories from Stradbroke' and 'Stories from the Old and New Dreamtime'. In the introduction part she draws a very beautiful picture of the place she lived in, Tambourine Mountain. She talks about the whipbird, the clever butcher bird tapping against the windowpane of the old pheasant, the thin old cow whose ribs could be count, the bandicoots, possums, lizards, snakes and so many. The first part of the book, 'Stories from Stradbroke', contains the stories of her childhood days in Stradbroke Island where she lived with her Aboriginal family. In her first story of this part, entitled as 'Stradbroke', we find Kath Walker as a great lover of nature. She begins with "Stradbroke, an island that was once stocked with natural beauty: the rocks of Point Lookout at the far end of the island, and the sea smashing its boiling foam against the rock base: fern and flowers growing in abundance;..."(13). She talks about her waiting for the nautilus shells at Point Lookout and their shy nature, the watching of brumbies from a safe distance, finding of strange, small-scale outrigger crafts in the sea. She laments over the destruction of the island by cutting down the trees, scattering the garbage on the seashore, the fumes emitted by the motor-cars and the noise of the industries. She concludes by warning the destroyers: "Greedy, thoughtless, stupid, ignorant man continues the assault on nature. But he too will suffer. His ruthless bulldozers are digging his own grave."(14)

Lila Majumdar spent her childhood days in Shilong, a small town in the lap of the mountain Khasia, a place which she herself compares to heaven. There was a stream behind her house which roared and flooded in the time of rain. Behind it were only mountains. There was a

sanctuary where no wild animals were found, except birds, owls and foxes. She lived there till she was twelve. She enjoyed the natural beauty of Shilong at every season, along with all the other animals— bees, caterpillars, butterflies, birds, leeches, snakes, bats and all. She remembers the warnings made by the elders about snakes, snails and the poisonous fungus. The trees were their friends. She writes in the story entitled ‘Tinti Gaach’ about the three peer trees within the precinct of their house. She describes the changes of those trees with the change of season: “When the cold wind of winter began to blow, the leaves became light green, and then yellow, then brick-red, red, and sometimes black and then fell from the branches. The dries leaves made almost a heap under the tree. A peculiar smell coming from them indicated that they were dead.” (translation mine). She feels sad thinking about the suffering of the trees in winter. After completing her M.A. she joined Shantiniketan as a teacher and she was over struck by its natural beauty. In ‘*Santiniketan*’ she talks about the two ‘*chhatim*’ trees and their ‘green welcome’, the river Kopai, the beauty of ‘*khoai*’ and the natural music of ‘*bandarlathi*’ plants. In ‘*Khete Chao*’ she gives an interesting account of the *Poushmela*, along with its variety of tasty foods— *jilipi*, *tilekhaja*, *moya*, *rasagolla*, *singara* and what not?

While reading the works of these two writers, we found that both of them cherish a strong love for the animals— wild or pet. Kath Walker had a pet dog whom she loved very much. It was a constant companion of the Walker brothers and sisters, especially when they went hunting. It helped them much in collecting the hunted birds and small animals. The protagonist of her story ‘Shark’ is this pet dog. It is about hunting a shark by the dog alone and the problems faced by it in carrying it home. The way it ultimately manages the problem flashes the evidence of its wit. In Lila Majumdar’s account, we don’t come across the story of any such pet animal, but she cherished the desire of keeping a cat as pet, which couldn’t be materialize because of the strong objection of her mother. In ‘*Ananda Jagat*’ she tells how she could manage to pet a cat secretly for a few days. But as it began to steal food, it was driven out of the house.

While discussing about autobiography, Carolyn Steedman, in *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) argues that the powerful stories which are told about the family often present their ‘Constituents’ as neutral, while actually using ‘socially specific images’ for the construction. So, in the process of the creation of the self-image, the impact of family takes a very important role. For Kath Walker, her family includes her parents and all the siblings. Her father leaves a deep impression on building up her character, to develop strong love for the land and its people. We are introduced to him in the second story of the collection, ‘Kill to Eat’. Here he is presented as a very strict person to keep the Aboriginal rules and regulations. Then in ‘The Tank’ we come across his striking philosophy, “If you really need something and can’t afford to buy it, then you should take it.”(26) Here we are also introduced to a man struggling very hard to maintain the needs of the family. ‘Carpet Snake’ shows us his deep admiration for the Aboriginal customs. Kath Walker too inherited this strong love for the Aboriginal culture. He taught all his children the Aboriginal ways of hunting—but at the same time he strictly instructed them to hunt

only to get food. As Aborigines, the ration they received from the Govt. was neither of a sufficient quantity nor of good quality. So they had to substantiate their food by hunting birds, fishes and crabs. He was a good hunter, and a good rower, and he wanted all his children to grow self-dependent. He trained them to sail the sea, to understand the mood of the sea. And most of all, he taught them to love the country, which in future inspired Kath to struggle for the rights of the Aborigines.

But for Lila Majumdar, Family includes her uncles, aunts and cousins too, i.e. the greater family. Though up to twelve years of age she lived in Shilong, secluded from her cousins, she always felt a deep attachment to them. She tells about her eldest uncle, '*baro jathamashai*' (elder paternal uncle) Saradaranjan Roy, in '*Baro Jathamashai-er Galpo*'. She starts with a very interesting description of his physical appearance, "Such a tall, heavy figure, which we call well-built body, strong, mighty. A face covered with beards and moustaches, and what a voice! The whole building trembled when he shouted. And his anger too was in accordance to his voice!"(16)3qtr (translation mine). Her grandfather died at an early age, so the responsibility of the family came to the eldest son. In this story, she gives an account of the childhood days of her father when they lived at Masua, a village in Moimonsingha, along with the river Brahmaputra, the jungles and the tigers coming out of it to catch the cattle. She tells about her father in '*Ebe Lakri*'. He was a landscape surveyor possessing all the qualities essential for the job— strong, courageous, painstaking, a good mathematician and able to draw sketches. He liked horse-riding, shooting guns, playing hockey and at the same time he was head-strong and dare-devil. He traveled in Burma for the sake of his job and told those stories to his children. He was a good story-teller, too. But he was a very strict guardian who believed that the only remedy for each and every mischief of the children was a good beating. So the children were much afraid of him. But the maximum portion of her childhood stories is occupied by the account of her own writing and the children's magazine *Sandesh* –how she waited for the issues of *Sandesh* at the beginning of the month, how she gradually became involved to it and how much did they enjoy reading them. Actually, this magazine had a great influence upon her in becoming a writer of children's stories and she too admits the fact.

As postcolonial critics argue, colonial rules were based on the preservation of the 'difference' between the colonizers and the colonized. For Ania Loomba, there is 'no such thing as uncontaminated white or European culture' (176). "Commemoration", for Linda Anderson, "does not refer to some unchanging core of memory but to the continual act of processing and modifying it in the present" (57). 'Prologue to an Autobiography' by V.S. Naipal deals with an imaginative return to the childhood memories. Now Kath Walker and Lila Majumdar— both are the representatives of the colonized people. So, it is obvious that the memories of humiliation and repression would be reflected when they come to write about their past days. But the only memory referring to the experience faced as a representative of the colonized people Lila Majumdar shares is one related to her school days. She studied in the Loreto Convent School in

Shilong for more than seven years where most of the students and all the teachers were Christians. In spite of the fact that she studied there for seven long years she never had a close friend there. And the reason was, as she narrates, the discriminating behavior of the European students. Among the teachers, the nuns behaved well with them, but other European teachers and even the Christian students hated them as they were 'natives', though generally these 'native' girls occupied the first or the second position in each class. But its impact on her mind was reverse, "We learned to love the country and its black people" (6) (translation mine). Though reverse, the impact of the matter was very deep within the tender mind of the writer.

But the suffering of Kath Walker as the colonized people is more intense. She belonged to a poor Aboriginal family— her father worked as a ganger for the Government and received a small wage and he had seven children to feed. Though they received ration too, but 'they were so meagre that even a bandicoot would have had difficulty in existing on them' (15). This led them to catch birds, fishes and crabs in Aboriginal style. In the story 'The Left-hander' she narrates how she received humiliation at school. She was a left-hander and until she went to school, it never seemed to be any problem to her. But as the schools were run by the Christian missionaries, they considered it wrong for a child to write or sew with the left-hand. So this led to many severe punishments including painful beatings. The colonizers tried to impose their own religion and culture upon the colonized people which created a grudge among the Aborigines. Kath Walker, throughout her life, cherished a strong love for her Aboriginal identity. So this assault on her people and their culture enraged her. Almost all the 'Stories from Stradbroke' reveal the glimpses of Aboriginal culture— their food habit, the process and rules of hunting, their myths, the family rules and, of course, a close affinity to nature and its elements.

Though both of these two writers are the representatives of the colonized countries, the readers see that the expression of anger or disgust is not the same within their writings. We find that the agony as the oppressed is not so deep in Lila Majumdar as it is within Kath Walker. One reason for it may be that the Indians didn't have to undergo the severe massacre which the Aborigines had to suffer. The British colonizers in Australia occupied most of the habitats of the Aborigines. The Aborigines became the refugees in their land. Besides, there was the huge cultural gap between the two races. And being more powerful the Europeans tried every bit to impose their cultural baggage upon the Aborigines. So the Aboriginies in Australia faced a severe threat to their existence which the Indians, rather the class of the Indians that Lila Majumdar represents never had to experience. That's why the grown up Kath Walker turned to be an active political personality struggling hard against the colonizers. Or is it because of the difference of their economic condition and family status? Because history says that the victims of the same political situation who belong to different socio-economic backgrounds never face the same consequences. It is always the poorer who suffers more. Lila Majumdar, belonging to a very rich and socially and politically powerful family, never had the worst first-hand experience of the suppression as the colonized whereas Kath walker had to experience every bit of it. That

may be the cause that the signs of struggle are much less in the childhood accounts of Majumdar than those of Kath Walker.

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