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## A STUDY OF RED SCARF GIRL AND THE NARRATOLOGY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF THE MARGINALISED

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### Abstract

*The works that largely recount the experiences of people are biographies. The different types of biographies- hagiographies, autobiographies, memoirs, journals etc. are all written with the common aim of recounting a particular person's life and their experiences. The work that this paper chooses to work on is an autobiography. Most early autobiographies were confessional in nature like the autobiographies of St. Augustine and Rousseau. A marked deviation from this confessional mode of narration in autobiographies can be seen in the self- narratives of the marginalised sections in a society like Blacks, women, Dalits etc., where they recount their lived experiences as a story of victimhood rather than as a confession or revelation.*

*In the essay 'On Confession' by Rita Felski in the work Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader, the writer says that while mostly the autobiographical narratives are written in such a way as to project the subject as someone who has lead an extraordinary life or as someone who has had experiences that distance or mark him as unique from the rest, autobiographical sketches of victimhood, especially women narratives, are written in such a way that they give the impression that they are ordinary people and much relatable to the readers. This paper intends to elaborate this aspect by taking the example of Ji- Li Jiang's Red Scarf Girl, an English translation of the Chinese work by the author who recounts her harsh and discriminatory experiences during one of the tumultuous times in Chinese history under the Mao regime.*

**Keywords:** *Autobiographical narratives, story of victimhood, confessional autobiographies, discriminatory experiences, women narratives, Blacks, Dalit.*

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### Introduction

The work that this paper chooses to work on is an autobiography. As it is known, autobiographies are biographies that the subject writes about himself or herself. By writing an autobiography the author engages himself or herself in a review of his or her life. Autobiographies and memoirs are written from a particular moment in life, when the author has achieved certain maturity and understanding and is able to look back at his or her past life with objectivity. The autobiography that this paper has chosen to work upon is a Chinese translation titled *Red Scarf Girl* and penned by Ji-li Jiang. What this paper is trying to propose is how this work is different from other conventional autobiographical writings. *Red Scarf Girl* is the life portrait of a girl victimised under the

Mao regime in China during the Cultural Revolution. Hence this paper proposes to draw a parallel between this work and other such autobiographies which recount similar stories of victimhood under such strict regimes like for instance, the self- portraits of marginalised sections like Dalits and Blacks. Autobiographies written during the earlier times were included in the confessional literature. Early autobiographies, also known as spiritual autobiographies, like *Confessions* by St. Augustine written in 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. and the autobiographical work of Rousseau by the same name, were all confessional by nature.

### **Early Confessional Autobiographies as Writer- Centric**

In Augustine's *Confessions*, he talks about his childhood experiences. He does not just recount them but also does a deep analysis of the rights and wrongs of his decisions. The whole work is centred on one individual that is Augustine himself. In this work, he talks about his transformation from a man who has gone astray to someone who has found his way back to a decent mode of living after converting to Catholic belief system. In a way it is a work written to promote conversion and Catholicism. The intention behind writing such an autobiography is to project oneself as someone different from the common herd, having gone through some extraordinary experiences, and hence an example for others to follow. Rousseau's *Confessions*, similarly is a work that projects and centres on the life of a single individual.

Both Rousseau and St. Augustine reveal certain dark moments that occurred in their lives where they indulged in activities that led to debauchery and corruption of their innocence. By penning such an autobiography they are performing an act of confession and repentance and are in a way elevated to the position of idealists whose lives become an example to be followed by the readers. Many such autobiographies followed after its publication, like Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and other non- spiritual autobiographies like Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Wordsworth's *The Prelude* or Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, and they are all centred on the writer's spiritual crisis resolved by the his self- discovery of his identity or vocation.

### **Self- Narratives of the various Marginalised Voices as Community- Centred**

A marked deviation from this style of self- narratives can be seen in the autobiographical writings that are written by victims who face oppression under different hegemonies. As mentioned before, *Red Scarf Girl* is a historical memoir written about the harsh experiences of the author during the Cultural Revolution of China Ji-li, the protagonist, was born to a 'Black family'. From 1966 to 1976 in China, Mao Zedong, the chairman of Communist Party of China launched the Cultural Revolution, a socio-political movement which aimed at imposing Maoist ideology in the country by destroying every other traditional elements that existed in the pre-communist era. The

prime victims of the Mao regime were the families of the erstwhile class of the landed gentry. Ji-li Jiang's grandfather was a landlord and her father a 'rightist'. This created a lot of problems for her especially during her schooldays. She had had to hide her family background from her friends for fear of being ignored. She narrates the different atrocities meted out to the people belonging to the 'Black' background. For instance, she is not allowed to be a Red Guard, (a mass student paramilitary movement meant as propaganda to destroy China's anti-communist past) owing to her 'Black' status. All the Black families lived under the constant fear of arrest- a condition not much different from those of the Jews under Nazi rule. She says how one day the students of her class were asked to write posters insulting their teachers belonging to 'Black' families. She also witnesses Red Guards destroying her favourite bookstore; raid the houses of 'Black' families to confiscate and destroy heirlooms and other such valuables, her father being detained and her mother's salary reduced. Her family is finally pushed into poverty. Later, Ji-li Jiang along with her classmates are sent to the countryside to do hard labour. She is promised of a secure future if she criticized her rightist father. However, she chooses to be with her family and hold on to her principles without betraying them.

All these experiences that she recounts are actual happenings and historical facts. She is taking incidents that are taken from the collective memory of the Chinese people who lived under the oppressive regime during that time. Hence, her story of victimhood is not just her story alone but the story of all the people who suffered like her. Unlike the spiritual autobiographies that were discussed earlier, this memoir does not try to project any single individual or try to portray the protagonist as someone extraordinary, whose example everyone should follow. Instead, what the author is trying to do is to show how her story is something that is relatable to many like her. The incidents and experiences that she shares is something that has happened to every 'Black' Chinese family that lived under the Mao regime and hence relatable.

Another important insight one can form is that, her act of writing this autobiography is actually an act of resistance. Memory is in itself an act of passive resistance. Documenting one's harsh experiences under a cruel regime helps in keeping its memories afresh without being destroyed by the onslaught of time. This is what makes the work of Ji-li Jiang relatable to autobiographies of the marginalised like the Dalits, Blacks and Jews during the Nazi rule who have all tried to document their lived experiences as diaries and memoirs to tell the world not to forget the cruelties they suffered. Some examples are Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Dalit autobiographies like Bama's *Karukku* and *Vanmam*, Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* etc. They are all embedded with their personal experiences of neglect and torture that they had had to face under their masters.

Viral Manojbhai Thakor, in his paper, 'challenging the Power Structure: A Study of Dalit Women's Self Narratives', talks about the significance of Dalit autobiographies.

The literary genre of autobiographies has enabled Dalit writers to share their personal experiences of exploitation and oppression. Thakor writes how usually autobiographies are written to explicate the author's uniqueness or their achievements. However, the author's experiences in Dalit autobiographies are not unique and represent the experiences of the entire community. They do not aim at projecting the life of one single individual and try to prove how far the protagonist is different or unique when compared to the rest of the common people. Instead, they become the collective voice of a whole suppressed community. Their aim is the recognition of not a single individual who is penning the memoir but their whole community, by the reading public.

This is the case with Black autobiographies too. Meta Y. Harris in her work, 'Black Women Writing Autobiography: Autobiography in Multicultural Education', writes about the different aspects of Blacks writing autobiographies. Historically, they were written by Blacks in order to tell their stories and appeal to the White society for acceptance. But for the writer, writing her autobiography was an opportunity to explore her Black history. It also provides a means to share one's history and culture with others. These autobiographical writings were also a mode of protest against the stereotypical images that the Whites propagated earlier, when the Blacks were not equipped enough to read or write, through their writings on Blacks. Blacks, especially Black women, were depicted in a very negative manner in their works. They were portrayed as seductive temptresses or as submissive and ugly women. Black women autobiographies, hence, were an attempt at breaking such stereotypical images. It is clear from this that these autobiographies are aimed at projecting the concerns of the community as a whole that the author belongs to, rather than that of the author alone.

## Conclusion

What these works do is open our eyes to the kind of narrow-minded and regressive world that we live in. The narratives are structured in such a way as to prick our moral conscience and incite feelings of empathy and despondency at the kind of treatment that we as a society have meted out to certain communities due to our crude feelings of supremacy and pretence. Hence one can say that Dalit Black autobiographies, are not mere pieces of literature but works that serve a social purpose- of voicing resistance against the erstwhile (and still continuing) hegemonic powers and also of keeping the moral conscience of the people intact.

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