



Childhood and Play: Charting the Significance of the Phase of Childhood in Life-Writing Practices

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Abstract:

Autobiographies chart the growth of an individual from childhood to maturity and thus establish the significance of the phase of childhood in the physical and mental development of a person. While different type of life writing discourses like men, women, and queer life narrative treats the phase of childhood differently, reading these variant life writings together helps us to understand the significance of the phase of childhood and its effects on people belonging to different sects and sections of society. The present paper attempts to read Rousseau's *Confessions*, and Franklin's *Autobiography* in continuation to Binodini Dasi and A. Revathi's life narrative to note the similarities and differences in childhood experiences they had. The study aims to highlight the significance of childhood in the development of an individual while asserting how the socio-political and cultural forces shape an individual perception and psyche.

Keywords: Autobiographies, childhood, growth, and development, women's life writing practices, queer narratives

“To know a character well it is necessary to distinguish that which has been established by nature, to see how he has formed himself, what occasions have developed him, what sequence of secret affections has rendered him thus and how he has modified himself to produce on occasions the most contradictory and most unexpected results.”

-Jean Jacques Rousseau in *Confessions*

Rousseau in the original sketch for the *Confessions* outlines how he ascribes importance to the stage of childhood and views this early formative experience as a complex reciprocal play between natural impulses and the adjoining environment. His autobiography sprang from his longing to understand himself and locate his integral nature as it was before it had been corrupted by the pressures of alienating civilization. He chooses

to give primacy to feeling (I feel therefore I am) rather than indisputable propositions of logical reasoning advocated by Descartes (I think therefore I am). To achieve his aim of presenting his “fellow mortals with a man in all integrity of nature” (134), Rousseau has to present a chronological analysis of shaping his temperament from the very beginning thus breaking from the past doctrine of original sin. By taking intimate childhood experience and pointing out its permanent consequences on the life of an adult, Rousseau not only predated Freud but also established the significance of childhood in the construction of self.

Rousseau recalled his happy childhood in the proximity of nature, spent under the care of his affectionate aunt and loving father with whom he used to read a collection of romances left by his mother. He mentions how this reading exercise free of any doctrinal understanding helped him in feeling an “infinity of sensations” (138) through which he “conceived nothing but felt the whole” (138). He further elucidates how the reading of Plutarch, Aristides, and Brutus produced a love of liberty that rendered him “impatient of any restraint” (138). This ideal course of education of a child learning from nature and for himself through experience (a model he put forward in *Emile*) is interrupted by his father, a watchmaker, ending up in a prison due to a false charge and him being sent to Bossey, to live with the Lambercier. The prescribed study of subjects with strict supervision of actions seems to conform to a child-like Rousseau. He confessed with difficulty how his sharing the same bed with Lady Lambercier marks the conception of his sexual fantasy and expresses adult shame in deriving pleasure from Mademoiselle smacking. This instance highlights how constant surveillance cannot restrict emerging sexual consciousness in growing-up children. With their minds and bodies growing, children need a secure environment that allows them to grow at their own pace while providing opportunities for both mental and social development.

Guillemette Johnston in her essay “Discovering the child’s mind: Rousseau’s Contribution to Education” applauds Rousseau for strategically using the Comb incident (when innocent Rousseau was convicted of stealing Lady Lambercier comb’s teeth) to point out how there is a discrepancy between the ways adults and children communicate, perceive and interpret situations around them (3). The objective description of the incident made readers commit the same mistake, elder Lamberciers committed years ago, of thinking of Rousseau as the culprit without discerning the innocent child’s plea. As we are blinded by the logical testimony of a mischievous kid like Rousseau in the room, adults and readers alike are unable to pay heed to the innocent child’s appeal.

The agony of the child at hands of adults who only use their faculty to judge his movements and actions is foregrounded: “Imagine a character who did not even have the idea of injustice and suffers terribly for the first time from the people he loves and respects the most. What a reversal of ideas! What a disorder of feelings!” (Rousseau 148). Young Rousseau’s belief in the goodness in the world gets further destroyed with his Uncle Lambercier wrecking the aqueduct, Rousseau and his cousin Bernard constructed to water their little Walnut tree. Through chronologically building on the idea of the effect of childhood experiences on

one's psyche, Rousseau outlines how such incidents contributed to his learning to dissemble, lie, rebel, and commit mistakes without being afraid.

According to Rousseau, his present actions stemmed from his early childhood experiences and consequent loss of love and respect for the world that fails to understand him. While Augustine in his *Confessions* wishes to reach God as he is the arbiter of real truth, for Rousseau, there is no higher form of knowledge than feeling that will provide revelations about himself. All teaching and education that attempts to reform and improve the natural faculty of being are simply abhorred by him for the better. Linda Anderson in *Autobiographies: New Critical Idiom* points out a similarity between Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Rousseau's *Confessions* as both "have a common psychological vocabulary of feeling, memory, and imagination" (147) while showing reverence for nature and an attempt to recover childhood experience which is free from worldly responsibilities of proper conduct.

It is important to note how James Onley in his analysis explains how Autobiography has to do with the "achievements of individual men" who are autonomous individuals in a state of isolated uniqueness (21). This definition falls in sync with Franklin's autobiography which marks his journey from 'rags to riches'. While Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) in the context of the French Revolution can be read as a late Enlightenment commitment to sentiments of the inner soul, Franklin's *The Autobiography* (1791) in association with the American Dream can be understood as a late Enlightenment commitment to play of mind.

In both of these tenets of Autobiographical text, it is noteworthy how childhood remained a central stage of concern. Franklin also outlines how his early reading habit helps him to imbibe some crucial ideas about politics, historical discoveries, and human behavior. His art in rhetoric and writing gains its genesis from young Franklin reading *Spectator* and making consequent attempts to arrange his thoughts in a manner leading to solid conclusions. He also lists how his childhood habit of humbly eating anything served on the table helped him to survive during his struggling days. Although family values and childhood proved instrumental in Franklin's life, actual success blooms post his separation from parental lineage. Swati Moitra in her essay "Emergence of Modern Autobiography" adds how his move to Philadelphia from Old Boston signifies his subtraction from home, family, and paternal as well as ideological puritan inheritance, heading towards improvement and growth (45). Theories of ego formation put forward by Lacan are premised upon separation from (m)other and drawing of the boundary between self and other. But what seems worth mentioning is how for women 'I' is formed through identification rather than separation. Their self is formed about the cultural ethos and prescribed norms of being that intermingle self with the community.

In stark contrast to male autobiographies, there is the absence of the phase of blissful childhood in women's life narratives, who were married at a tender age and grow up in a culture of male dominance. Rashsundari Debi in *Amar Jiban* (1876) outlines how she is married to a rich landlord at the age of twelve and gets

burdened with household responsibilities of cooking a meal for a large family, giving birth to twelve children in rapid succession. Her narrative makes evident how her socialization into silence began so early that even as a child she cannot speak about her fears to anyone. Partha Chatterjee in *Nationalists of Twentieth Century* saw in her story a confirmation of the construction of the true essence of Indian womanhood: self-sacrificing, compassionate, and spiritual, the attributes she learns to develop during her early years of life. Reading Binodini Dasi's *Amar Katha (1914)* in succession to Debi's life narrative, one can posit how identities from the very onset are not only constructed socially but a moral sanction also grants them legitimacy. Debi and Dasi represent a dichotomy between respectability and disgrace, giving life to the 'good woman' and 'bad woman' binary. Unlike Franklin whose breaking away from kin paves his path for future improvement, Dasi outlines her pain of being a "social outcaste" in her preface to *My Story*: "There is no one before whom I can lay bare my pain, for the world sees me as a sinner-a fallen woman. I have no society, no kin or kith, no friend whom I call my own". The concept of intersectionality also gets highlighted with Binodini's identity being constituted not only by her gender but also by the economic status and profession she opted for.

Dasi by giving an account of her childhood not only justifies her being a recipient of unjust societal conduct but also presents a true picture of Bengali theatre and society that is previously kept hidden. Through her narrative, readers are introduced to a bleak world of deprivation where her mother and grandmother had to sell their possessions to buy daily necessities, and a few smelly Sandesh given in charity were seen as cherished possessions. Familial responsibility rather than love for acting guided her way to apprentice at the age of nine to singer Ganga Baiji and eventually join the theatre to help her mother financially. Learning to act develops simultaneously with her child's psyche who is beginning to understand society's discrimination and way of being. Playing characters like Hemlata, further, helped her mime social roles whose privileges have been denied to her as a girl with a 'missing' father and a 'poor' mother. Her inquisitive nature in learning about Greek tragedy to the humanism of Dinbandhu Mitra from her mentor-Girish Chandra Ghosh brings to life the social, and moral obligations that restricted perceptible, learned females like Binodini to gaining education and respectability. Even portraying the role of Chaitanya on stage later in her career and procuring blessings from Shri Ramakrishna redeemed her from her status only temporarily. She expresses how men never take her love seriously and her life remained a series of betrayals from society, her protectors even God who took her daughter's life.

While Rimli Bhattacharya in her analysis links her daughter's death with social reality which is incapable of sustaining 'pure aspirations' epitomized in the little girl born to an unfortunate actress-prostitute, Meenakshi Malhotra in her essay "Binodini's narrative of betrayal" points how the duality of response Dasi elicits from the theatre-going public who appreciate her acting skills while harboring a deep suspicion of her being 'abhadra' bearing the tainted body of actress-prostitute, the same body which pours the heart and mind of divine characters on stage (270). This observation highlights how boundaries of normative heterosexuality are morally policed and constantly regulated by normative society.

The way norms of normative sexuality guide one's understanding of self and the world gets further illuminated by reading the life narratives of transgenders. The transgender community often relegated to the margins use the autobiographical space to express their inner feelings and emotions while unveiling the strictures of society that force them to veil their real existence from the world. Revathi's autobiography: *A Truth About Me (2010)* contours how childhood initiates the process of identity formation and proves to be a period of turmoil in the life of a trans-gender (state of one's gender identity not matching one's assigned sex) living under the strict surveillance of heterosexual adults. Revathi expresses how she has to juggle between being Doraisamy in front of her parents while secretly dressing up as a girl, wearing her sister's long skirt and blouse while twisting the towel around her head to let it trail down like a braid. She remembers how when school boys teased him/her for being a girl-boy, he felt gratified thinking that they "conceded I was somehow a woman" (7).

Revathi through her narrative explains no matter how society and her brothers tried (by thrashing her and insulting her) to stop her from being a woman, she could not stop it. Using a beautiful metaphor to express her childish agony, she states just like "I would not stop eating because someone asked me not to eat, I felt I could not stop being a girl, because others told I ought not to be so" (5). A child whose sex, sexuality, and gender remain incongruous and whose hormonal presentation is not synchronized, his/her existence in such a world will only end in misery and confusion. When Revathi gets drawn to boys, he/she was confused and stresses how he/she can talk to nobody about the same. Whenever he/she gets disguised at the Mariamu festival to play a "Kurathi" female gypsy, he/she feels nearer to his/her true self and being. Margarita Sanchez Romero in her essay "Childhood and Construction of Gender Identities through Material Culture" points out how children are used as social actors to sustain gender relations and socio-economic structures (18). They are trained through norms established in daily life to follow categories of gender, class, and caste and thus are supervised in their play and behavior. Revathi when steps down these constructed binaries to play with girls at school or behave and act like a girl in play, he/she was beaten by his/her brothers and school PT teacher.

The childhood Revathi led becomes a period of misery where his/her identity is forged through violence without considering his/her position of being. Revathi adds how she feels a sense of relief being with "men who were more like her female comrades" (14), the sheer happiness she obtained knowing that more people suffer from similar emotions like him/her. The night he/she slept next to his/her guru, not in half pants as at home but as a woman wearing a saree, she feels like living his/her dream. Revathi's reluctance to return to his/her family from her guru's abode highlights how his/her family which is responsible for providing both physical and psychological security has failed in fulfilling its necessary function. It's the 'other family' which understands his/her condition and promises "nirvaanam"-the sex reassignment surgery to fully gain one's lost being. In the course of Revathi's narrative, one can notice how her personal history merges with the history of other members of her community thus forming a strong plea for identity politics and recognition.

Article in *The Hindu* dated September 04, 2010, Revathi expresses how her autobiography helped her and people of her community to connect more with people when all face-to-face conversations have failed due to prejudice or feelings of hurt/pain.

Meenakshi Malhotra in her essay “Voices from the Margins: Queer life writings and Politics” further applauds Revathi’s autobiography for asserting how gender and sexuality have more to do with performative aspects of being, are not fixed but should lie in the realm of desire and choice rather than fixed biological determinacy (305). The inclusion of queer identities within the ambit of feminist discourse further helps to showcase the growth of gendered subjects and how the subject of autobiography is always a subject in the process. The theory of feminism gains praxis of meaning by the genre of life-writings, considered an apt term to describe women's autobiographies that outline a network of subject positions.

Through the course of the number of autobiographies discussed above, one can assert how Autobiography as a genre has proved to enable not only as literary documents but documents of importance, used for purpose of legitimation. Focussing on the stage of childhood as a vital formative and developmental phase in outlining the course of one’s life enables readers to view how childhood marks the way for one’s character development. While Rousseau who is the founder of secular Autobiography assigns great significance to the early years of life that paves way for future development, he reminisces in *Confessions*’ days of his early childhood free from social, and moral conduct and normative, logical paradigms of being. This longing for early childhood experiences as in Rousseau gets contrasted with the reading of women's autobiographies with a lost or deprived childhood. Unlike Franklin’s quest for success, women's identity is forged with many socio-cultural factors and thus gains momentum through identification rather than separation.

Studying women's life narratives like that of Rashundari Debi, one recounts the stage of childhood getting replaced with child marriage and familial responsibilities. Binodini Dasi’s autobiography further adds how identities are not heterogenous but intersectional, dependent on one’s gender, economic status, and social standing. Her deprived childhood with consequent stepping to theatre for the economic sustenance of her family leading to a life of trials and betrayals by a hypocritic society that can appreciate her acting skills but cannot accept Nati Binodini as a member of a respectable society adds a new dimension to the autobiographical study. Inclusion of queer life narrative like that of A. Revathi in this ambit of study proclaims how childhood marks the stage of formation of identity not through wilful choice but by moral policing and violence by heterosexual society. The reader through the course of this discussion has adorned the role of an objective judge and sympathetic collaborator as in the case of Rousseau to an ethnographer or anthropologist in the case of Revathi, coming to a full circle in the study of autobiographies that keep on shifting subject positions. Reading tenets of self-representation in Rousseau’s and Franklin’s autobiographies to fill the gap between absent women and queer life narratives, the centrality of the stage of childhood in character development and formation of identity has been established that not only aware readers to the

significance of this stage but proves as a dynamic area of study that unveils characteristics of society across centuries.

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