

# Reclaiming Identity : A Study of *A Life Less Ordinary* by Baby Halder

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### **Abstract**

The issue of representation of gender has been one of the thought provoking discourses. Female selfhood and subjectivity have always been marginalised and ignored in the dominant discourse. The predetermined roles assigned by patriarchy to women have always placed them at the receiving end, therefore, miniaturising their roles in the making national histories. This has naturalised oppression of women and sustained their stereotypical images as care takers and objects of pleasure, eros and glamour. This typecasting has stripped them off their real identity and self, stifling the female voice, role and representation. This has created a need for an alternate expression. Women's writing has questioned the nexus between history and patriarchy. It has given a new meaning to their experiences and understanding of their lives. The art of story telling by women has emerged as a protest against social order and cultural perversion.

The way women have been represented in the social, cultural, historical, political and literary discourses need a revisionist lens to recover the real stories. The image of a passive, powerless, meek, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and pure-obedient woman needed to be killed so that she could come out of the cocoon and tell her own stories.

In this context life narratives have emerged as a popular platform to reclaiming identities against social order and perversion.

**Keywords:** Dominant, Oppression, Representation, Patriarchy, Life Narrative.

### **Introduction**

The struggle to dismantle the power structures does not only aim at achieving social, economic and political equality but in the first place to question the sub-human condition of women in the context of the life narrative under discussion. This life narrative is by almost an illiterate woman, a school dropout who coheres her story of oppression, resistance and empowerment in her autobiography. In order to have a broader perspective of these works, it would be apt to define life narrative.

Life narrative as a genre combines the personal with the social, cultural and political contexts to establish alternate voices to understand female identity, selfhood and sexuality. The present research paper proposes to study an Indian Life narrative as a marginalised voice. The construction of micro-narratives is indispensable to deconstruct the history of grand narratives to understand life histories in their proper contexts. The genre of life narrative has created a new literary space for ghettoised women to document their experiences, to speak for themselves and to explore their sensibilities through these micro-narratives making them active subjects in the making of their own histories by disrupting the dominance of single stories as they perpetuate stereotypes.

Life narrative includes autobiographies, diaries, memoirs, travel accounts, oral histories, collaborative narrative etc. that discuss different situations in the female quest for identity and individuality.

(Watson & Smith, 2001) define " life narrative as a historically situated practice of self- representation. In such texts narrators selectively engage their lived experience through personal storytelling. Located in specific times and places, they are at the same time in dialogue with the personal processes and archives of memory." They further write that the contemporary practices blend various genres making life narrative a moving target of ever changing practices without absolute rules. Autobiography is a general term used for life narrative.

The life narrator engages with the social, historical and political forces that impact his/her work. The narrator also engages with self-consciousness and combines the personal with the political, social and historical contexts and, therefore, situates the story at different levels. It leads to reconstruction of the past by recuperating memory and remembering the experience to understand how it created the identity of the writer. Life narratives have departed from the canon in the sense that even illiterate women can document their experiences and make them authentic production of knowledge practices.

#### **Aim and Scope of the Study**

Writing about the self provides one the chance to tell the story. It becomes more important for the marginalized people as they can unmask the challenges of oppression. When women narrate their life stories, it means that they can control their own lives and argue about themselves as independent beings. They can claim their identity and question it as being labelled as other.

This paper explores the possibilities of construction of the self by, Baby Halder, who defies women's oppression in the male dominated society. She follows the rules framed by her awakened consciousness to enlighten her life. She becomes a role model for many women as her voice emerges as a collective voice of women. In spite of the mess and tumult in her life, she learns to make meaning of her life. Her life narrative is an assertion of power, which she exercises herself and the construction of the same is a battle against social and psychological oppressions. Baby empowers her self by making choices and taking decisions about her life.

#### **Review of Literature**

Baby Halder's story is both traumatic and inspiring. Her childhood is devoid of mother's love. Her mother leaves her husband and children because of the abusive behavior of her husband. She is shocked when she hears that her brother-in-law has murdered her sister. At 13, she is married, when she thinks, marriage to be an occasion of fun and laughter. Her uncaring husband fails to love and respect her. He also fails in his family responsibilities. Instead he beats Baby mercilessly and does not even bother to care about her ill health. She dispossesses his power by taking control of her own life. She tells her own story to break the stereotypes and, therefore, creates a discourse of empowerment by creating opportunities and making choices in one's life.

#### **Analysis of *A Life Less Ordinary* by Baby Halder**

Born in Kashmir, Baby is an unlucky child. Like Kashmir she suffers pain. However, she learns to resist and survive. Baby's mother leaves her when she is just four. The remarriage of his father and his behaviour traumatizes her. At 13 when she thinks marriage to be an occasion of fun and dance, she is married to a man twice of her age. At 14, this unlucky child of destiny becomes a mother. And by 18 she shoulders the responsibility of her children almost single-handedly. At a tender age of 18 she gets crushed under patriarchal oppression as her husband refuses to accept the responsibilities of his family. Baby, already victimized by the system does not want

her children to meet the same end. She musters courage to leave her husband's home with the spirit to educate her children and bring them up with love and care.

Baby suffers oppression on multiple fronts. The burden of her womanhood is compounded by her poverty and caste. Her being a single mother is another big challenge to her survival. Being a subaltern makes her suffering amplified as she suffers marginalization on many fronts. Though she writes as a marginalized voice, her voice emerges as a voice of women suffering like her. She critiques the sub-human aspect of casteism and patriarchy within her community as she engages with the questions of caste, poverty, family responsibilities and gendered subalternity. Her autobiography originally written in Bengali and translated in English by Urvashi Butalia, foregrounds that the personal is political. She combines the personal, the cultural and the political to tell her story of resilience and freedom. Her narrative reflects how she disturbs the patriarchal practices to carve a niche of her own, to make a tryst with life according to her own terms and conditions. Like every normal woman, she weaves dreams of her home full of love and care but what she gets is a dose of beatings. She is beaten like an animal. Her husband is not ashamed to beat her with a sturdy piece of wood. He makes show of his masculinity by mercilessly beating his wife. "He picked up a sturdy piece of wood and began hitting me on my back. A short while later, I felt a piercing pain in my stomach. By the evening it was unbearable and I lay whimpering and crying for my father and mother. The pain was so severe that I could not sit or stand or do anything. I howled in agony all through the night while my husband slept on without a care in the world." (88). The ironic part is that the doctor tells her that she is pregnant and her child may not survive because of the beating. But her husband seems to be unapologetic about it.

Baby interrogates her womanhood deeply rooted in patriarchal institutions as her narrative provides a picture of changes in societal structures as regards gender by foregrounding the trajectories that create jolts within patriarchy and make way for the emancipation of society. Baby Halder in *A Life Less Ordinary negotiates* her identity at many levels. She is a woman, a workingwoman, a subaltern and a mother. Baby walks out of the marriage and leaves her husband in search of a job. Literally penniless she takes a bold move. "But how will you pay the rent?" Baba asked me. I thought, He's right, how will I pay? I had not a paisa with me at the time. (122)

Baby's life is not easy. She does not follow a short cut path. She walks on the road less travelled. She understands it is not easy but she takes a stand and positions herself at difficult junctions— physically, emotionally and psychologically. "Why are you crying, child? You can go back to him even now. So what if I lose the money for the ticket? Just go." (124)

She moves to Delhi in pursuit of a better life. She ventures into an unknown city and negotiates displacement and exploitation in search of a bright future for her children. She works as a domestic help

in Delhi. It is not easy for her to work as a domestic help. It is extremely stressing and humiliating. Her private space is shrunk and she lives like a slave. "I was required to wait at the gate for her bus to arrive and as soon as she got down, I'd take her bag and anything else she had and walk her into the house. Some days, if I was late, I would get a shouting. I also had to keep some fruit ready for her to eat, and as soon as she sat down I'd offer her tea, water, sherbet, whatever she wanted. Then, if she wanted, I had to massage her head or her feet or whatever: the work was never-ending." (141)

She switches her jobs until she finds Tatush, her new employer, the grandson of Munshi Prem Chand who encourages her to read and write and inspires her to write her autobiography, which was translated in 21 languages. Baby finds an agency to register her protest and becomes an ambassador of social change. She recapitulates her memory and experience which narrate her childhood distress, her longing pain and her silent struggle in life, which finally reveal her selfhood, individuality, strength and resilience of a woman who really becomes a woman of substance.

Being motherless herself, she understands the role of mother in a child's life. She wanted to be a good and responsible mother. Her decision to live a life of her own and exercise her will is in lieu with the feminist thought of equality and justice. She negotiates freedom and responsibility in such a way that does not efface her self as a woman and as a mother. Baby breaks the walls of private sphere by dismantling the romanticized image of a mother. This image is an offshoot of the patriarchal forces, which presents a monolithic definition of motherhood. According to Rich, 1986 mothers are indoctrinated to gain gratification through incessant care of their children. It has been even presumed that while doing so, women enjoy every moment of it. This "mother" identity is used to limit women's full potential. It becomes restrictive of her other identities as motherhood is one part of female process; it is not an identity for all time. However, patriarchy has projected it as a dominating reality of a woman's life. Rich recognizes the possibility for mothering to be empowering to women. They are the experiences that empowers mothers. They do not call for the effacement of the mother's self. Instead they recognize the selfhood of a woman and proclaims the identity of a woman as a woman and as a mother.

Baby recognizes family as an institution and is, therefore, fully aware of her responsibilities.

Baby's experience of motherhood gradually turns into mothering. As a domestic worker at the house of Prabodh Kumar, she learns to discover herself and write about the experiences of her womanhood. She also articulates the experiences of a domestic worker and lends dignity to this unorganized profession. Baby proves her self to be capable and articulate.

#### **Conclusion**

Baby Halder documents her experiences in her autobiography. Her story tries to shake the roots of patriarchy entrenched so deep in the society. When she defies the norms, she empowers herself by making choices in her life. She willingly and consciously leaves her husband in search of a better life and future. She refuses to internalize the norms set by the power structures. She is single- a woman and a mother. Her marginalized voice is the collective voice of many women and her autobiography is a protest against the social order dictated by power structures. She represents herself through her narrative which is a reflection of her oppressed as well as free life that she chooses to live. Baby reclaims her life and voice and constructs a self through her narrative, which overpowers her otherness perpetuated by patriarchy.

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