

Vijay Lakshmi Pandit's Commitment Towards Womanhood: An Insight into The Scope of Happiness: A Personal Memoir

Abstract

Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, daughter of Motilal Nehru and sister of Jawaharlal Nehru was a woman of courage and determination. Her famous autobiography *The Scope of Happiness: A Personal Memoir* reflects her efforts for the sake of Indian women. Present article tries to bring out the hard work she accomplished for the weaker sex.

Keywords: Autobiography, Women, Imprisonment, Reforms

Introduction

Autobiography writing is the widely used mode of self-portraiture that gives a person a chance to leave behind some testimony of his /her existence. It is an account of one's life and one's personal experiences written by the person himself/herself. Autobiography is not only the saga of a life lived so far but by writing one's experiences, one discovers oneself. The best autobiographies are those, which expose the inner journey of the self and depict the inner struggles of the person. Several motives have been found behind the aim of writing autobiography. The autobiographer's urging to let the world peep into his \ her life is one of the foremost reasons behind writing one's life's tale. In this context W. L. Howarth has significantly stated that decision "to write one's autobiography is at least a strategic beginning, whether a part of a master plan or born of frustration and personal anxiety." (Howarth 363)

The turmoil and instability of late seventeenth century compelled introspective people to inquire into the sociological and psychological origins of the beliefs prevalent at the period and into oneself and one's class both as an object and a subject in the social process. In this era some autobiographies were written by those people who abandoned their homes in childhood to find a new role for themselves. At the beginning of 18th century and late renaissance period, many autobiographies, religious and secular memoirs, political, militancy and erotic or scandalous and letters were frequently published. John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) and Richard Baxter's *Rliquiac Baxterance* (1696) are examples of such religious autobiographies. Colby Cibber's *Apology* (170) and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1766) are fine examples of secular autobiographies. *Personal Journal* published by John Boswell and *Johns Evelyn's diaries and journals* are examples of beautiful autobiographic writings. Autobiography as a genre came into its own in the eighteenth century.

Various secular autobiographies were written by women in this age although number of autobiographies written by men was more than that of women. A sense of the propriety of reserve and reticence, which had been deeply ingrained in the culture, was being displaced by a more confessional habit of thought. Lady Mary Pierrepont Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), a friend and later a bitter enemy of Alexander Pope, has left an untitled autobiographical fragment. This document anticipates in many ways *Rivella* by Delariviere Manley, the first full-length secular autobiography of the century. Elizabeth Webb who belonged to eighteenth century and who was a Quaker preacher, has left behind a graceful account of her spiritual life. Autobiographies written by women in the eighteenth century are more varied than those written previously.

Rivella written by Delariviere Manley is an excellent example of secular autobiography. Published in 1714, it marks a complete departure from seventeenth century women's autobiography. Elizabeth Elstob (1756) a genuine female scholar of the eighteenth century has written a brief memoir of her life. She wrote it in 1738 to be published in George



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Ballard's compiling work entitled *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain*, who have been Celebrated for their Writings or Skill in the Learned Languages Arts and Sciences. Another autobiographical piece written in eighteenth which has come down to us is a much more remarkable document. Written by Mary Granville Pendarves Delany (1700-1788), it is actually an epistolary autobiography, written at the request of her intimate friend Margaret Cavendish Harley, Duchess of Portland, in a series of fifteen letters, begun in the year 1740. It is effective amalgamation of autobiography, letter, and epistolary fiction. Sarah Jennings Churchill's (1660-1744) political autobiography *The Memoirs of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough* and Elizabeth Sampson Ashbridge's (1713-1755) *Some Account of the Early Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge* can also be added to the list. The literary renaissance that began with India's contact with the England made a remarkable contribution in so far as it excited and stimulated the autobiographical impulse in Indians. The modern autobiographer especially if he was a literary personality, presented himself not only as an individual, but an entity surrounded by a particular social and cultural edifice:

"The period that began when World War I blasted the past and history into apparent oblivion. As Matthew Arnold sensed half a century earlier ("*Dove Beach*", 1867), the darkling plain was here, in mud and barbed wire, with no joy, love, light, certitude, peace, nor help for pain, where ignorant armies clashed by night." (Frye 295).

Vijayalakshmi Pandit's autobiography *The Scope of Happiness* (1979) is an important work revealing the affluent life style of the Nehru family and their contribution in the freedom struggle. When one discusses emancipation of women, it entails educational, political, social, economic and cultural aspects. For centuries together, through their writings, women writers have voiced the need of translating this into practical life. We can clearly feel a biased attitude prevalent in society against women. Women writers and women readers have always had to work 'against the grain'. Aristotle declared that 'the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities', and St Thomas Aquinas believed that woman is an 'imperfect man' (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 115). To solve all these intricacies and conflicts between the outer and the inner space, many women have written autobiographies and have given vent to their emotions. In the genre of autobiography, the role of women writers cannot be overlooked.

The epoch-making book of Vijay Lakshmi Pandit and stresses on the independent existence of women and challenge all the attempts to exclude them from the centre stage of human existence. In the autobiography *The Scope of Happiness : A Personal Memoir* by Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, instead of a traditional, enduring and self sacrificing woman, we find an unconventional and an awakened woman. Her experiences give insight into the patriarchal society of both pre and post independence India and depicts how she herself and several other women refuses to be acquiescent and submissive and do not accept the stereotype roles assigned to them. Her experiences tell women not to condition themselves to silence and to

diminish their needs. Her life tells that if one has firm conviction in once values, one can achieve every desired goal. She fills new confidence in the hearts of millions- who are hesitant, withdrawn and silent.

Vijay Lakshmi fought the election of Allahabad Municipal Board with a purpose to improve civic life. She was elected the Chairman of the Education Committee and soon realized that it was controlled by the conservative elements that had a vested interest in it. A more narrow-minded and backward group of men she had never met before. Hindu and Muslims alike all belonged to a feudal age whose ideas on education were vague and one and all they disapproved of the education of girls. Immediately after assuming charge, she insisted on visiting all the primary schools. Teachers were ill paid and their looks told the story of their life more vividly than any words could have done. She decided to meet teachers individually and invited them to Anand Bhawan in small groups. Problems of teachers were discussed quietly and the teachers spoke frankly. She tried hard to improve conditions and bring security into the lives of the teachers.

The children who attended the municipal schools were underprivileged - they came in tattered clothes and bloated bellies. The undernourished children were given a cup of diluted milk and many even could not have that much of it. Vijay Lakshmi wanted that every child should be given a cup of milk as tuberculosis was common in the slum localities from which most of the children came and endemic diseases regularly claimed their toll of victims. The reactionaries discussed her proposal threadbare and she faced them courageously:

Sister, you must realize the consequences of this dangerous proposal. Giving these children milk today – perhaps better educational facilities tomorrow- simply means that the day after tomorrow they will demand to sit at our place. Then what?" "You have summed this up correctly. That's exactly my idea," I replied. A hostile silence descended on the meeting (Pandit 124)

Vijay Lakshmi issued an appeal ward wide for one penny from each home every month to build up a milk fund. Little wooden boxes were put in each locality and common people donated generously. She also tried to improve the condition of adult literacy. The Municipal board ran night schools for adults but classes were held irregularly and no effort was made to attract the older people. After experimenting in various ways, she turned the schools into clubs with singing, reading items of interest from newspapers and telling stories from religious scriptures. She also tried to set-up mobile library that could make a round of the city and go to the nearby villages as well. She sought help from the well to do people and set up two mobile libraries. Nayantara Pandit also worked for adult literacy and tried to teach her domestic help in Bombay.

With great intrepidity and audacity, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit worked for the welfare of the prostitutes as well. Several prostitutes called for her attention to the action of the Lucknow Municipal Board in ejecting them from their homes in the red-light area. Her two Parliamentary Secretaries advised her that one of them could look into the matter and there was no need for her

to go. She retorted that as this was a matter pertaining to woman and the appeal had been made to her as a woman, she would look into it herself (Pandit 140). They tried to dissuade by saying that the Chief Minister Mr. Pant would object, and when the time came to start for the area, her chauffeur regretted that he could not drive her to the area. Crusty Mrs. Pandit decided to drive to the place herself accompanied by her very angry Secretary, and the chauffeur got in the back. The apprehensive secretary Mr. A.G. Kher refused the iced drink offered as it might be poisoned. She was then taken on round of that part of the area and was told that by being moved from there, the girls would lose many clients. She promised the madam there to speak to the Chairman of the Municipal Board Chaudhri Khaliqzama, knowing fully well that he, being an archconservative, would not speak to her about prostitution nor would he appreciate her involvement in the situation (Pandit 141). As she was leaving the place, she came to know that one of the girls was very ill and the doctor wanted her in the hospital but, as her case was infectious, the municipal hospital would not admit her. Daring Mrs. Pandit told the doctor and the madam that she would arrange for her treatment. She telephoned the doctor in charge of the Medical College who was horrified and informed her that the infectious diseases ward was not for the likes of this girl. Caring Mrs. Pandit gave order in written to admit the girl in the hospital. Apart from having syphilis, the girl was pregnant.

Mrs. Pandit narrates that when she looks back on her life, there are a few incidents that give her satisfaction, and above mentioned was one such. The girl was cured, and, because of her, she was able to start, with stiff opposition from her Chief Minister and officialdom, the first clinic for pregnant women suffering from venereal diseases. Sympathetic Mrs. Pandit continued her care for such cases. A year later, on her birthday, Mrs. Pandit received a charming letter of gratitude for her help and a Banaras handkerchief from the girl and it continued for several years. Years later the girl got married and went Pakistan. Bypassing the orthodox mindset of people, Mrs. Pandit worked endlessly for the downtrodden women of society.

Vijay Lakshmi Pandit worked as the President of the All India Women's Conference for many years. The constructive programme of the Congress gave great scope to women to involve themselves in the social and economic aspects of the national movement. The nineteenth century had seen some reforms and there were demands for many more. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others had championed the need to end the seclusion of women, to create opportunity for their higher education, and bring about other social changes. Now, in the wake of political consciousness, there were women's organizations, the most important of these being the All India Women's Conference. It was started by a group of educated women from all parts of the country under the leadership of women like Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, Maharani Chinabai Gaekwad of Baroda, Rani Rajwade, Begum Hamid Ali and others. It sought equality of rights, the ending of legal disabilities for Hindu women, adult franchise, education for girls, and other related matters (Pandit 171).

Vijay Lakshmi Pandit successfully gives a message to her readers that if every woman has the courage to protest against injustice, then there would be no injustice in this country. She points out that women are particularly vulnerable to inequity and exploitation because they are too timid and submissive and lay greater emphasis on compromise, rather than confrontation. She demands equality with men in matters of education, employment and marriage. She wants to have the same strategies of change for women that menfolk have had over the centuries.

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