

BLOCK: I

Unit 1: Themes in Life Writing-I

Unit 2: Themes in Life Writing-II

Unit 3: Life Writing: Theory and Practice

Unit 4: Introduction to Biography/Autobiography

**Unit 5: Introduction to Other Life Writing Genres
(Letters/Diary/Travelogue)**

UNIT- 1

THEMES IN LIFE-WRITING –I

Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Theme and Its Relevance
- 1.4 Confession
 - 1.4.1 Confession and its Religious Significance
 - 1.4.2 Rousseau's *Confessions*
 - 1.4.3 Confessional Poetry
- 1.5 Oppression and Discrimination
 - 1.5.1 Slave Narratives
 - 1.5.2 Dalit Autobiography
 - 1.5.3 Colonialism
- 1.6 Nature
 - 1.6.1 Romantic Life Writing
 - 1.6.2 Hunting Memoirs
- 1.7 Summing Up
- 1.8 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 Objectives:

The unit will discuss certain themes associated with life-writing. After the completion of this unit, you will be able to—

- *discuss* various thematic issues related to life-writing.
- *discuss* how certain themes evolved over time in this area.
- *explain* the historical relevance of some of the themes in the field of life-writing
- *explain* how certain themes are interconnected with certain forms of life-writing.

1.2 Introduction:

Life-writing is a broad genre of writing which includes different forms of writing such as autobiography, biography, diary, journal, memoirs, letters, eyewitness narratives etc. all of which are connected somehow to the life of a person. This person may also be referred to as the subject of the writing. As this genre of writing constitutes so many forms of writing, we also come to see many types of themes associated with it. Understanding these themes can be useful to us as it could provide a key to understanding the various strands of this varied field of writing as well. So, in this unit and in the next one we are going to discuss some of the important themes associated with the field of life-writing.

In this unit, we shall focus on those themes which have evolved over time in the field of life-writing. We shall also try to understand how certain themes are interrelated with certain historical forms of life-writing.

1.3 Theme and its Relevance:

Before we delve deep and study the individual themes connected with life writing, we should try to understand the relevance of studying themes in literary studies. A theme is a very useful tool in a piece of literary work. It can provide a structure for the author to convey the ideas efficiently to readers. A theme is like a thread which connects the various seemingly unrelated events into a meaningful plot. Themes carry the messages that the writer wants to convey to his readers. Themes can also carry general messages regarding life which can make the work transcend the particular to become universal. These kinds of themes act as literary truths which make the work meaningful and keep it relevant across generations. Overall themes in a text provide a direction to the readers. It tells the reader what kind of work it is and what its intended purpose might be.

The study of some of the themes that we find in life-writing can provide us with certain useful insights. A thematic analysis of a piece of life-writing would allow us to understand the inherent ideas embedded in the work. Like any other literary genre, themes also provide a certain direction to a piece of life-writing. It is through a thematic analysis of works of life-writing that we can categorise certain works which display similar thematic

concerns. For example,holocaust narratives display certain similar thematic concerns like suffering, oppression, violence and trauma. Thus, we can put works of life-writing related to the holocaust under one thematic category. Rather than studying pain and suffering as separate themes, we would take an approach where we would study particular thematic concerns connected with certain forms of life-writing. Thus, in this unit, we will closely study themes which are interconnected with certain historical forms of life writing. In the sections that follow we will be taking an approach where together with the theme we will also concentrate on the diverse forms that the authors choose to write in.

1.4 Confession:

1.4.1 Confession and its Religious Significance:

The idea of confession runs deeper in the field of life-writing. Confession is seen both as a theme and a formal device in this genre. The idea of confession has a close relationship with various forms of life-writing but it is closest with the autobiographical forms. We are trying to understand here how this thematic concern takes different forms across various formats in the field of life-writing. To understand the relevance of confession we should try to learn about its origin. Confession in the Western world comes from the Judeo-Christan notion of confessing one's sin. In this religious ritual, a person confesses his sin before a member of the clergy who then forgives him for those confessed sins. In the Judeo-Christan tradition, confession has been regarded as a very important part of religious ritual. According to this tradition, the acknowledgement of one's sin can allow him to be forgiven in the eyes of God. Thus, the idea of confession is closely connected with the idea of penance. It is through the penance of confession one can receive divine forgiveness which would ultimately allow him to receive redemption.

Confession can be both public and private. In private confession, we have to keep in mind that in this ritualistic confession, that person remains alone with the priest and he willingly confides in the priest in the confidentiality of a confession chamber. Even during the confession, the priest cannot see the face of the person and the person is not under any obligation to reveal his identity to the priest. This provides a certain degree of anonymity to the

process of confession. This anonymity is provided by the church in order to encourage more people to confess their sins, which the religious authority believes will limit the proliferation of sin as the person who confesses tries to retain a certain degree of distance from committing sin.

This religious notion of confession in the field of life-writing is adopted by Saint Augustine. St. Augustine's autobiography which was published as *Confessions* (400 AD) is considered to be one of the earliest autobiographies in the world. This autobiography is revolutionary from many perspectives as it introduced some of the basic concepts that we now generally associate with the genre of autobiography itself. Ideas such as confidentiality, authenticity and factuality all found their origins in this work. St. Augustine derives the principles of his autobiography from the Christian ritual of confession as the autobiography itself describes his journey from a non-believer to his conversion to Christianity. However, he cleverly uses some of the ideas already available in the religious sphere to provide structure to the new genre of autobiography. He uses the notion of confidentiality that the church provides to the person who confesses their sins. However, rather than confiding in a priest inside a chamber, St. Augustine decides to confide in his readers. By calling his autobiography a confession, St. Augustine claims that he is telling his readers his deepest and darkest secrets, the kind of secrets that one would only tell the priest inside a dark chamber under the protection of anonymity.

By doing so, he definitely takes autobiography out of the principle of anonymity that is provided to the person in a church if he decides to confess privately. By removing the notion of anonymity St. Augustine has provided a certain degree of authenticity to his narrative. Now the readers can hold the person accountable if he lies to them because the person claims responsibility for his writing by mentioning his own name in his own life story. This is seen as the birth of modern Western autobiography. This new genre has the principles of factuality, authenticity and confidentiality attached to it. St. Augustine's approach to making the narrative authentic lends a certain degree of reliability to the genre itself. This factual reliability is one key factor which tries to differentiate not only autobiography but life-writing itself from other genres of fictional writing.

1.4.2 Rousseau's *Confessions*:

To understand the evolution of the theme of confession, we would next try to understand Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While St. Augustin's *Confessions* focused mostly on his religious experiences and transformation, Rousseau broadened the scope of the autobiography by extending it to the secular domains of life. In this work, Rousseau traces his life experience from his childhood days when he was about 5 years old. He tries to piece together the first moments of when the sense of a subjective consciousness has risen in that young child. In a way, Rousseau was trying to understand the process of the formation of the self. His *Confessions* can be considered as a musing upon those events that have shaped his personality. Taking a step further from St. Augustine, Rousseau decides to talk about all the embarrassing moments of his life, his first sexual experiences during his years of adolescence, the mischievous things that he committed and other humiliating experiences. All these are presented without any attempt to protect his own reputation. Rousseau wanted to trust his readers completely with secret information and was also probably encouraging others to recognise that all human beings go through similar experiences in their youth which provide them with important experiences and in turn help them to attain maturity.

One of the important characteristics of Rousseau's autobiography is that it was an intensely personal narrative. All through the work he puts himself as the focus of the narrative. Referring to his autobiography Rousseau says "I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself" (Rousseau 17). This sentence makes it clear that the narrative will be decidedly individualistic. This focus on individualism had many followers in the Romantic age. The individualism that found an important place in Rousseau's *Confessions* also inspired many who joined the French Revolution and from there, it also inspired the Romantic movement in the 19th Century. This is how Romantic poets created a kind of poetry which was truly individualistic. In fact, the Romantic poets saw their works as a reflection of their imaginative selves. However, Rousseau's individualism is not limited to Romantic poetry. Wordsworth in fact tried writing his autobiography in a similar fashion to Rousseau's *Confession* in his longer

narrative poem *The Prelude*. The full title of the poem is self-explanatory which is entitled *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* (1850). As suggested by the title, this poem revealed many of Wordsworth's deeply personal and biographical details and thus can be considered an autobiography in blank verse.

Stop to Consider

The idea of confession has its roots in the religious tradition of the Judeo-Christian notion of confessing sin in front of God. The traditional religious idea of confession is related to the idea of repentance and penance. The religious notion of confession is found in St. Augustine's *Confessions*. He highlights his transition from non-believer to his transition to his conversion to Christianity. Likewise, Rousseau's autobiography carries this confessional tone.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the religious aspect of confession?
2. What is the name of Rousseau's autobiography?

1.4.3 Confessional Poetry:

Another use of the theme of confession can be seen in the form of confessional poetry. The first instances of confessional poetry were seen in America. The term 'confessional poetry' was first coined by American critic M.L. Rosenthal in 1959 in a review article entitled "Poetry as Confession". In this article, Rosenthal reviewed Robert Lowell's poetry collection entitled *Life Studies* (1959). Rosenthal found that Robert Lowell's approach in these poems is markedly different from his other poems. In this poem, Lowell discussed certain deeply personal issues which could cause serious embarrassment to the poet without any hesitations. Lowell took a very intimate approach where he made his readers his confidant allowing them

to access some of the deepest secrets from his personal life. This set the stage for the emergence of a new kind of autobiographical poetry. Some of the issues that figure in this kind of poetry are personal trauma, struggles in a personal relationship, mental illness, suicide, issues related to sexual identity etc. Among American poets the names of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and W.D. Snodgrass are prominent.

Sylvia Plath was one of the most prominent exponents of this form of poetry. Sylvia Plath's marriage to the British poet Ted Hughes made them a very popular couple during the time. Her life was always under the microscope of public scrutiny. Their subsequent divorce made her condition even worse. Finally, her suicide created a kind of controversy that refused to die down in the popular imagination. However, it was her confessional poems that provided us with a new perspective on her life. She has used this form of poetry to talk about some of her most intimate personal issues. Most notably, Sylvia Plath mentioned her mental troubles, her fascination with the idea of committing suicide, her marital strife with Hughes and her problems with her family and her father. The posthumous publication of the poetry anthology entitled *Ariel* (1965) has many of the poems written just after she committed suicide and these poems use the theme of confession to talk about the many issues that troubled her life.

Apart from the American poets, many Indian poets like Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das etc. use this form of poetry. Among them, Kamala Das is most famous for not only talking about the personal issues of life but also the kind of discrimination she had to face in society for being a woman. This gives a whole range of meaning to the theme of confession and the idea of confessional poetry.

Self-Assessment Question

As an important element in the study of life-writing should we consider confession as a theme or a form of life-writing? (in 50 words)

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Check Your Progress

1. Write a note on confessional autobiography.
2. What are the different forms of life writing where the theme of confession is more prevalent?

1.5 Oppression and Discrimination:

As a theme of life-writing discrimination has a wide range of manifestations. Across history and around the world we find that the powerful always tries to oppress a section of the society based on certain arbitrary norms. These norms form the basis of discrimination. In America and South Africa, race was the criteria based on which a section of the society was oppressed and discriminated against. In India and many other colonised countries, the colonisers oppressed the natives, took away their land and even discriminated against them in their homeland. Across the world, throughout history, women have been subjected to discrimination by patriarchal norms. So, if the subject of a piece of life-writing is a person who has faced any such discrimination in his/her life then undoubtedly the theme of discrimination will become dominant in this narrative. In this section, we will study how the theme of discrimination manifests across different forms of life-writing.

1.5.1 Slave Narratives:

Slave narrative generally referred to the autobiographical accounts of the African-American people who spent part of their lives under the system of slavery. Historically, people from the African continent were captured and brought through the middle passage to the Americas. Most of these people were taken to the South part of the United States which was known for its fertile land. This land was suitable for agricultural activities. On this land huge plantations of cash crops such as sugar cane, cotton, tobacco etc., were harvested. However, due to a shortage of labour force first the British colonisers and then the American settlers started using the slaves brought from Africa as the primary labour force. These people were kept in harsh inhuman conditions. They were chained together forming what is known as a 'chain gang' so that no individual slaves could run away from the group. They were forced to work like animals and were treated similarly. Thus, there was very little hope for them from escaping such a life.

However, the northern part of the United States was rapidly becoming industrialised. As industry requires a very small amount of labour force, the northern United States did not require the system of slavery to exist. In this part, black people could still lead a free life. Thus, if some slave got the opportunity to escape, they could go to that part. The slave narratives were written by some of these slaves who escaped to the northern part of the United States and attained a free status. We have to remember that not all slaves were literate. Some of these former slaves attained literacy while others could not. In such cases, while some slave narratives were written by the subject himself, sometimes the person would narrate their life story to another person who would then write it down in the form of a narrative or memoir.

In the beginning, slave narratives were published not in America but in England. However, with the rise of the anti-slavery sentiments and abolitionist movements in the northern part of the United States more of these former slaves were encouraged to publish their experience of slavery. In these autobiographical narratives, the harsh conditions of slavery are portrayed with graphic descriptions. Oppression under this inhuman system of slavery becomes one of the primary themes of these narratives as they battle not for equality but for the right to be treated as human beings.

Till the end of the Civil War in America which was also fought on the dispute related to the abolition of slavery almost 100 such narratives were published. Later during the Great Depression of the 1930s Federal Writers' Project collected oral accounts of more than two thousand former slaves. However, from among these, the most popular slave narrative is considered to be the autobiographical account written by a former slave named Frederick Douglass which is entitled *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An America Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). The narrative describes the life of Douglass during his days of slavery, his struggle to escape from it and his subsequent freedom from it. The narrative does not only focus on his individual ambition but looks towards the possibility of the entire race being free from such an oppressive system. The publication of this autobiographical narrative recounting oppression and inhuman treatment of these people fuelled the anti-slavery movement in America. This autobiography also established Douglass as one of the few educated men

of letters from the African-American community at that time. Douglass followed this work with another important work entitled *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) which talks about his struggle in the northern United States against racism and discrimination. Through this autobiographical writing, Douglass proves that in America oppression and discrimination go hand in hand for the black population. Even though he escaped slavery in the South, he still faced racial discrimination in the northern United States.

Another important slave narrative was written by Harriet Jacobs entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* which was published in 1861. The central theme of this book just like Douglass's autobiography is oppression. However, Jacob's account is important because she sheds light on the particularly harsher condition that entails for a slave who is also a female. This puts her in a doubly marginalised and oppressed condition. Jacob in this memoir talks about the sexual advances and assaults by her white master. She describes how being a slave girl puts her in a disadvantageous position to resist such efforts by the master who owns her. The narrative describes how she saves herself from such attempts and ultimately attains freedom giving hope for the woman belonging to this community. Thus, we can see how oppression as a theme is closely connected to this form of life-writing.

Stop to Consider

Discrimination and Oppression are some of the most prominent themes in life writing. The autobiographical narratives of African-American people who were once part of the system of slavery have always been seen as horrific accounts of the experience of slavery. Their personal accounts show the inhuman conditions in which they were left behind. A notable example of a slave narrative is Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*(1861).

Self-Assessment Question

Can you think of a few more thematic concerns connected to the slave narratives other than what we have discussed here?

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1.5.2 Dalit Autobiography:

The themes of oppression and discrimination are also relevant in the context of the autobiography that is written by the Dalit community in India. The Dalit community in India has been facing discrimination under the caste system. The caste system in the Indian society puts the Dalit community at the bottom of the social structure. Under the caste system, the Dalits are treated as untouchables which forms the basis of discrimination against the community. This community has been actively marginalized by the upper castes in many parts of the country. This is a form of discrimination that has been historically set through hundreds of years of exercise which makes it harder to eliminate. Even though after the Independence of India from British rule, the new constitution strictly forbids any kind of discrimination on the basis of caste, the deep-seated prejudice against the Dalit community can still be seen as prevalent in many parts of the country. This makes Dalit autobiography a relevant form of self-expression which offers the individual belonging to this community a medium to express their suffering under a social system that has been oppressing them for ages.

Dalit autobiographies started becoming a preferred form of social resistance years after Indian Independence, particularly in the 1960s and 70s. The Marathi poet Daya Pawar's autobiography *Baluta* (1978) is considered to be one of the first full-length Dalit autobiographies. The title of the work has been taken from the word which suggests the tradition of the upper caste people to throw a morsel of food grains to the Dalit people who have to spend their days working for the upper caste like slaves. This autobiography became a kind of revolution in the sphere of Dalit autobiographies as it took a new bold use of language for its narrative and presented the situations of oppression without any hesitation to the world. Other important Dalit autobiographies include *Joothan* (1997) by Om Prakash Valmiki, *Growing up Untouchable in India* (2001) by Vasant Moon, *Here Comes Super Bus* (1992) by Bama etc. There is a rich stream of Dalit autobiographies in the Indian vernacular languages, particularly Hindi and Marathi.

B.R. Ambedkar still represents the aspiration of the Dalit community. He fought for the social equality of the community by demanding political rights. He made sure that the constitution of the newly independent nation actively discouraged the practice of discrimination against the Dalit community. He

also played a pivotal role in making sure that the Dalit community got the constitutional rights of reservation. This is the reason why the Dalit community got a chance of equal opportunity. The first phase of Dalit autobiographies carries the kind of activism that Ambedkar point towards. These autobiographies had a hard-hitting approach; it would narrate the kind of oppression and discrimination that these people had to endure under the caste system. These autobiographies were full of anger against the upper caste people. This inherent angst gave a kind of sharp edgy tone to the narrative. However, with time Dalit autobiographies have also started changing their approach to some extent. Some writers of contemporary Dalit autobiographies have started focusing on the new challenges that they face in society like having to deal with a certain type of discrimination in the social and religious institutions. At the same time these new writers want to talk about change and hope that they see for themselves and for their future generations.

Stop to Consider

The agony and oppression that Dalit people go through due to the caste system find its expression in literature too, particularly in autobiography. Their resistance and rebelling voices find an outlet in their writing. For example, Daya Pawar's autobiography *Baluta* (1978) is considered to be the first full-length Dalit autobiography. This work is a quintessential example of the sharp narrative style of a Dalit voice that wants to break free of the centuries of old shackles of social injustice meted out to the community in the form of discrimination and oppressive norms.

Check Your Progress

3. What is the name of the first full-length Dalit autobiography?
4. What are the two phases of Dalit autobiography? How does the thematic concerns of these two types differ from each other?

1.5.3 Colonialism:

Colonialism and discrimination run hand in hand. The whole institution of colonialism is built on the ideas of oppression and discrimination. The European powers went to many countries around the world, grabbed land and extracted resources from these countries for their benefit. The most infamous thing about colonisation is that they manage to oppress the people in their own countries. Many of the life stories of the freedom fighters who fought against such colonial rule are filled with the theme of oppression and discrimination amongst others. For an individual living under the system of colonialism, writing is an act of asserting own identity. As postcolonial theory suggests, colonialism takes control of the psyche of the colonised individual to make them see the world through the eyes of the colonisers. Colonialism through a systematic process devaluates the culture of the native population by calling it inferior to the European culture. They systematically destroyed the native knowledge systems and replaced them with European systems of knowledge. Now the colonial subject also started accepting that their traditional knowledge could not compete with the culture of modern European knowledge. We can refer here to what Thomas Babington Macaulay said about the Indian knowledge system- “a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia”. Macaulay’s stance here represents the Eurocentrism that he was trying to impose on the Indian population. Under such systematic erasure of the cultural markers of one’s identity, the colonised individual tends to lose the idea of their identity itself. This is the biggest victory of the colonial ideological apparatus as after colonising the mind of the individual through an ideological narrative, the colonisers do not require much physical force to rule the country.

This is the reason why the writing of an autobiography by a colonised individual is considered to be such a remarkable feat. Writing an autobiography indicates that the person is trying to recover a sense of an independent identity which was lost under the systematic manipulation of the colonial ideology. The assertion of one’s own identity and the recovery of the subjecthood also indicates that the colonised individual is trying to see beyond the colonial ideology and this would finally lead towards the demand for independence from the colonisers completely.

The autobiography of Nelson Mandela is remarkable because it talks about the oppression of the South African black population under the apartheid system which was a colonial legacy. According to this oppressive system the black majority people were ruled by the white minority in South Africa. South African blacks were marginalised in their homeland. They were oppressed, discriminated against and treated as second-class citizens in their own country. Thus, Mandela's autobiography *A Long Walk to Freedom* is not a story about the struggle of a single individual but is about the struggle of the whole nation to find justice. Mandela's effort to regain selfhood is indicative of the efforts of the nation to get its freedom from the oppressive system of apartheid.

Self-Assessment Question

What are the various similarities that we could find among the slave narratives, Dalit autobiographies and works of life-writing written by the colonial subjects? (in 100 words)

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Stop to Consider

The very concept of colonialism is based on oppression and discrimination. Through colonialism, the European powers extracted resources to build their empires. The psyche of the colonised individuals is taken over so that they can see the world through the eyes of the Europeans. In this regard, writing becomes a strong tool to express the oppression and discrimination that the colonised individual goes through. The autobiographies of Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela are suitable examples in this regard. Both their autobiographies offer a kind of resistance to the values imposed by the colonisers.

Check Your Progress

1. What are the thematic concerns of the works of life-writing written by the colonial subjects?
2. What is the name of Nelson Mandela's autobiography?

1.6 Nature:

As a theme, nature has a prominent place in life-writing. Nature has always fascinated human beings with its beautiful landscapes which have calming effects on our minds. Our connection with nature goes back to the beginning of our species. However, with the advent of civilizations, we also distance ourselves from nature. Ecocriticism talks about the problematic relationship that exists between civilization and nature. Although human beings are also part of this planet, in our pursuit of comfort and wealth we tend to destroy nature upon which our biological existence is also dependent. Thus, many individuals have felt the need to go back and reconnect with nature. These people try to understand their selfhood through the perspective of nature. It is an effort to reinvent their own identity where nature also forms part of it. In this section, we are going to discuss how nature as a theme finds manifestation in many forms of life writing.

1.6.1 Romantic Life Writing:

It was during the Romantic period that life-writing became a mature genre. Rousseau's *Confession* which has given the primacy to the individualistic narrative of the autobiography has inspired many followers. Rousseau's ideas later became the inspiration for the Romantic poets of the 19th century. The Romantic poets wrote their poems from the perspective of their selves. These poets were also averse to the modern changes that were happening in the society. So, rather than focusing on human civilization, the Romantics went back to nature. They wanted to revive the bond that exists between humans and nature from time immemorial. The Romantics opened up themselves to the influences of nature and shared their human subjectivity with the subjecthood of nature.

William Wordsworth who pioneered the Romantic movement advocated for a kind of poetry which is inspired by nature. He was one of such poets

who developed a philosophy of poetry where nature figures as ‘friend, philosopher and guide’. Wordsworth brought his ideas of nature to his autobiographical work also. *The Prelude*, a long narrative poem by Wordsworth is generally considered to be his autobiography in verse. This is a work of life-writing which mixes the genres of autobiography and poetry. In this work, Wordsworth talks about his journey from his boyhood days to the time when he became a poet. While talking about the development of his poetic mind, Wordsworth says that it has been developed with a constant connection with nature. He reminisces his boyhood days in the Lake District of England and says that while running around the natural surroundings of that beautiful landscape he also learned the music of nature. Thus, the theme of nature becomes one of the primary themes in this work of life-writing.

Nature as a theme in life-writing is not limited to only poetic works. The Transcendentalist movement in America has produced a lot of prose works which was inspired by nature. Henry David Thoreau was one of the prominent figures related to the American Transcendentalist movement. His autobiographical work *Walden* is considered to be one of the most important works of transcendental philosophy. The full title of this work is *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). This autobiographical work documents the author’s experiment in living amidst nature far away from civilizational influence. The author lived near the Walden Pond in Massachusetts alone in a cabin without any human company. The author created a completely self-sustaining environment where he would grow his food so that he does not need to get in touch with the outside world. In this way, the author explained that he could get too close to elements of nature which has given him a newer perspective into his own life. *Walden* becomes a work of life-writing where nature becomes a primary theme which provides the necessary energy to the work.

Stop to Consider

The theme of nature in literature has always been very popular. The confessional autobiography of Rousseau opens up a path for adopting a nature-orientated theme in the writings of Romantic poetry. Wordsworth’s famous autobiographical poem *The Prelude* talks about

his experiences gained from his interaction with nature that shaped him as a poet. Besides this, the transcendental movement in America also helped in the development of prose work with the theme of nature. *Walden* (1854) by Henry David Thoreau is the author's experiment in living amidst nature.

1.6.2 Hunting Memoirs:

Hunting seems to be an activity which has been with us since time immemorial. Although it is an activity that involves killing in the primitive era this was an important activity that provided sustenance to our species. The activity itself takes us to the surroundings of nature. Many hunters have written their hunting experiences in the form of autobiographical stories or memoirs. One of such famous personalities was Jim Corbett. Jim Corbett, a famous hunter of ferocious man-eaters, actually turned into an extraordinary conservationist once he realised that the space for wild animals was decreasing rapidly in India due to the rapid population explosion. That is why he led the effort to establish protected sanctuaries for wild animals. The Jim Corbett National Park is named after him for his efforts in conservation.

The work *Jungle Lore* (1953) is considered to be Jim Corbett's autobiographical work. Jim Corbett's name is often associated with the act of hunting but people fail to see the other side of him. His association with the rural culture of India, his love for nature, his fascination with the animals and finally his desire to protect them and offer them a sanctuary all goes unnoticed. In this context *Jungle Lore* becomes an important work to understand the actual person behind the persona of the hunter of the man-eating beasts. With an autobiographical tone, Jim Corbett traces his childhood days in India. Jim Corbett presents himself as a man of deep knowledge about different kinds of plants. He also elaborates on the existing relationship between diverse species in the forest and thus explores an ecological faith. In this autobiography, Jim Corbett expresses his love for non-human beings as a part of this wonderful ecological balance. His autobiography does not only serve as the mere documentation of our natural world rather it also shows his repentance and concern for violence. Thus, we can see how nature as a theme is also present in this memoir which describes the life of a hunter who turned into a conservationist of nature.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the significance of studying themes in life-writing?
2. Analyse the various forms of life-writing that use confession as its primary thematic tool.
3. How is discrimination reflected across various forms of life-writing?
4. How does nature play an important role in various forms of life-writing?

1.7 Summing Up:

- The autobiography with a confessional theme has its roots in religion.
- St. Augustine's *Confession* is the first one in this regard to be noted as a confessional autobiography.
- Confessional poetry is usually autobiographical. The personal experiences and issues are dealt with.
- The autobiographical narrative of African American people who were once part of this system has always been seen as a horrific account of slavery.
- The agony and oppression Dalit people go through due to the caste system find their expression in literature too, particularly in autobiography.
- Life-writing became a powerful instrument for many political front fighters to voice against the oppression of the Europeans in the process of colonisation.
- The confessional autobiography of Rousseau opens up a path for adopting a nature-orientated theme in the writings of Romantic poetry. Wordsworth's famous autobiographical poem *The Prelude* talks about his experiences received from nature and which shaped him as a poet.
- The hunting story with an autobiographical tone does not only talk about preying, but it also introduces the readers to the richness of many wild plants.

1.8 References and Suggested Readings:

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UNIT- 2

THEMES IN LIFE-WRITING II

Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Themes and Its Relevance
- 2.4 Anxiety, Fear and Dehumanisation in Holocaust Narratives
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 - 2.4.2 History of the Holocaust
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- 2.5 Nation-Building
 - 2.5.1 Patterns Related to the Theme of Nation-Building
 - 2.5.2 Examples
- 2.6 Sense of Loss
 - 2.6.1 Sense of loss in feminist life writing
 - 2.6.2 Black Autobiography and the Sense of Loss
- 2.7 Recovery of the Self
- 2.8 Spirituality
- 2.9 Summing Up
- 2.10 Reference and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives:

This unit delves deeper into the discussion of life-writing. After completing this unit, you will be able to -

- *discuss* further the various themes connected to life-writing,
- *develop* a better understanding of the relationship between themes and genres of life-writing,
- *develop* a better understanding of the genre of life-writing itself.

2.2 Introduction:

In the last unit, we discussed a few themes and the prevalence of these themes in different genres of life writing. From this discussion, we have come to know that themes can also be an efficient tool to categorise certain types of life-writing into a single category that shares similar concerns. Themes are also useful to shape the writer's chaotic life experience into an organised whole. Themes are threads that connect these seemingly random events in a sequential narrative. So, the study of life-writing themes can provide us with important insight into the various nitty-gritty of this complex field.

In this unit, we are continuing our discussion of themes. Here we shall discuss some more themes that are found prevalent in the field of life-writing.

2.3 Themes and its Relevance:

As we have discussed earlier, themes can have an organising effect on a work of life-writing. If themes become an important tool for the author to provide shape and help organise the material into a neat narrative, then for the readers themes work as guidelines that provide direction to have a better understanding of the work. Thus, the study of themes in life-writing is an endeavour worth undertaking. So, in this section, we shall continue our discussion from the previous unit and discuss some more thematic issues connected with this field of life-writing.

2.4 Anxiety, Fear and Dehumanisation in Holocaust Narratives:

2.4.1 Origin of the Word:

The Holocaust is a great scare in the history of Europe. The mass killings of the Jewish people in the German-occupied countries sent ripples of humanitarian crisis throughout the world. The word 'holocaust' that has gained wider currency in many languages including English comes from two Greek words 'holos' which means completely and 'kaustos' means burnt. The actual meaning of the word suggests 'a completely burnt sacrificial offering to the gods' or 'sacrifice by fire'. The Hebrew word 'Shoah' is equivalent to the English word 'Holocaust'.

Although, the etymology of the word suggests a ritualistic sacrifice, the modern interpretation of the word points towards the meanings such as disaster or destruction. This meaning has probably evolved out of the mass killings of the Jewish community in which the Nazi regime in Germany wanted to achieve a total annihilation of the community.

2.4.2 History of the Holocaust:

The Jewish community has faced discrimination all over Europe throughout history. They have been seen as outsiders in most societies. In some countries, they were even seen as kind of a threat to the majority community. It is not only in Germany but in many parts of Europe, antisemitism was prevalent. Many social scientists also propagated certain pseudo-scientific ideas based on Darwin's concept of the evolution of species which came to be known as social Darwinism. According to these erroneous notions of societal evolution certain races were considered to be superior to others. It also labelled certain races like the Jewish community as a threat to the non-Jews. The goal behind the First World War was to establish and expand a German empire in Europe which failed miserably. After the defeat in World War I Germany faced a lot of humiliation and paid a lot of money to the Allies for the war damages. For the defeat in World War I a narrative was created in Germany which stated that it was not the failure of the German military forces but the backstabbing by the Jewish community in Germany that led to the defeat of Germany in the war.

The defeat of Germany in World War I and the subsequent humiliation and the punishment that the German population had to face consolidated the nationalistic sentiment. The Nazi Party which was founded just after the First World War in 1920 took advantage of this nationalistic sentiment to gain political momentum in Germany. This party represented extreme nationalistic fervour and supported some of the most aggressive and radical ideologies. The Nazi party supported some of the pseudo-scientific theories that talked about the superiority of the German race. It also believed in the idea that the Jewish community is responsible for the downfall of Germany and for a stronger Germany this community needs to be completely wiped out. The leader of the Nazi party, Adolf Hitler publicly denounced the Jews. He accepted the pseudo-scientific theories of the social Darwinist theories

and propagated the ideas of the superior German race who could completely take control of the whole of Europe. In this mission, he saw the Jewish community to be one of the primary hurdles that lived inside Germany. So, he decided to exterminate the Jews not only in Germany but also in every country that Germany came to occupy during the Second World War.

As soon as they acquired political power in Germany, the Nazi party started executing their ideological agenda. They wanted to segregate the Jews from the general population first. So, a process was started to identify the Jews. Anybody who had four generations of Jewish grandparents was identified as a Jew. Traditionally, the Jewish community worked as moneylenders in most of the European nations. Thus, they tend to be wealthier than the general population. Hitler wanted to remove this advantage of the Jewish community. So, he separated the Jews and barred them from engaging in any kind of economic activities. After the segregation of the Jews by the authorities, these people were made to wear white bands on their hands for easy identification. Slowly, these people were removed from the localities where they used to live and put in confined spaces, also known as ghettos. These people lost their properties, their business, wealth, social respectability and even their homes. Thousands of people with kids and elderly were thrown into these ghettos where they were not provided any basic facilities. The comfortable life at home was lost for these people. They were forced to live in cramped spaces sharing small rooms with many families. They lived in those inhumane conditions where many died of contagious diseases. However, this was not the end of their suffering.

After Hitler invaded Poland, Germany occupied a large part of these countries where there lived a large population of the Jewish community. Even before the actual attack, German authorities were blaming the Polish government for mistreating the ethnic German population living in Poland. This narrative was built to justify their subsequent invasion of Poland. Germany invaded Poland on 1st September 1939. Soon after Soviet attack on Poland was followed. These two countries divided the country of Poland into two and shared control of it. Hitler and Nazi Germany had big plans for Poland even before the attack. According to these plans, Poland was to be

turned into a German colony. Nazi government wanted to deport many of the non-Jews from Poland so that these areas can be turned into suitable places for future colonisation. The plan was to Germanise Poland. For this purpose, only a small minority of the Polish population were allowed to stay in their homeland. Nazi party wanted to transplant the ethnic German population into Poland so that they can basically turn Poland into a German colony. While the non-Jews were thrown out of their country, the Jewish population was not given any chance of escape. They were targeted by the military and killed. Almost 3 million Polish Jews were killed in the German occupation of Poland.

Although Germany under Nazi rule build many concentration camps for prisoners, only a minority of Jews were imprisoned there. Instead, ghettos and extermination camps were specifically set up for the Jews. The ghettos were established in much of German occupation areas in Europe. These ghettos were used to put the Jews who were segregated from the general population. These people were rounded up and taken to a separate part of the city where they would not be able to make contact with the outside world and the German authorities could keep strict surveillance on them. They were not provided sufficient food, made to live in crowded spaces and did not have any proper means of sanitation which led to the widespread death within the ghettos.

However, the ghettos were just a measure of punishment for the Jewish population. Later on, in the war when Hitler wanted to completely wipe off the entire population a new kind of camp was designed, specifically for the Jews to be killed. These camps were known as extermination camps or death camps. The Jewish population who was designated to be killed off were brought into these camps. During the war, Germany built six extermination camps across the German-occupied parts of Europe. In these camps, gas chambers were built. The Jews were put inside these chambers where poisonous gas was released on them which killed them instantly. The extermination camps were strategically placed and victims were brought to these places from surrounding areas with the help of the holocaust trains. The camps were meant to be the most efficient means of killing, focusing on

the ultimate efficient use of resources. Gassing was adopted instead of shooting the victims because it tends to leave psychological scars on the individual who shoots the innocent victims. These camps worked like an industrial complex which could eliminate thousands of people in a very limited amount of time. The prisoner was deceived into entering the gas chambers that they were going to be treated for lice. They were asked to remove their clothes and the chamber voluntarily. The unassuming victims would not understand what was happening to them and thus, without any resistance from the victims, these camps could easily kill thousands of people daily.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that the holocaust was a horrific event that left mental scars on the many who witnessed these events and were able to survive. Survivors who saw their loved ones killed were left with psychological traumas for their lives. Some of these people decided to record their experiences to get a sense of psychological release. It was not a mere act of writing one's memoir but these narratives left a piece of the experience to be understood by the future generation and at the same time have a purging effect on the writer. Thus, the holocaust memoirs display thematic concerns which can be traced through many of these narratives.

Stop to Consider

In many parts of the world Jews faced discrimination and they were considered a threat to the majority group. One of the agenda behind Hitler's World War II campaign was to eradicate the entire Jewish people from Europe. The failure of Germany in World War I led to the formation of the Nazi government on the pretext that Jews were responsible for their failure in the war. While taking the leadership of the Nazi government, Hitler set out his mission to exterminate the Jewish community not only in Germany but also in every country Germany came to occupy in the Second World War. Ghettos and prisons were set up to make the Jews suffer. This massacre of Jews left many traumatized. The survivors of this horrific incident decided to record their experience in what became a separate form of life-writing known as holocaust memoirs.

Self-Assessment Question

1. Do you think the holocaust was the first time the Jewish community faced discrimination in Europe?

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2. How are extraordinary historical events such as World War II linked to the dehumanisation of the Jewish community in Europe?

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2.4.3 Examples of Works:

Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* is one of the first works of life-writing to come out from this horrific event of the holocaust. This work is responsible for creating a general interest in the works of life-writing arising out of the Holocaust. Anne Frank was born in Frankfurt, Germany and her parents were German citizens. They were a Jewish family. However, when she was a little girl, the family decided to move to the Netherlands as Hitler and his Nazi party were gaining influence in Germany and exhibited openly their anti-Semitic views. She was brought up in the Netherlands and as such she learned to speak the Dutch language. However, after the occupation of the Netherlands by the German forces the Franks got stuck. Her father Otto Frank had to leave his business. As the German forces started segregating the Jews, the family went into hiding. It was at this time Anne started writing her diary in a diary copy which she received as a birthday present. By August 1944 the family was discovered by the Gestapo, the secret police of Nazi Germany.

The family members were sent to different concentration camps. Along with her sister Margot, Anne was sent to Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in Northern Germany. Both the Frank sisters could not endure the harsh conditions of the concentration camp and possibly died due to typhus in this camp. The family completely perished during their forced imprisonment in these concentration camps except for their father. Otto Frank returned to the Netherlands after the war and retrieved the diary

from his assistants who kept it safe. As a last tribute to his daughter, Otto Frank published the diary which became one of the most read diaries of all time.

The diary gives us insight into the mind of an adolescent girl. Her understanding of the world around her and the people with whom she had a dynamic relationship; all are recorded in this diary. The adolescent feeling of loneliness that is peculiar to every young individual is reflected well in this diary. Anne finds herself without a confidant with whom she could share her innermost thoughts, that is the reason why she chose to write her diary. The changes in her body and the kind of attraction she feels for the opposite sex are also recorded well. However, the diary cannot be described as a peculiar teenage girl's diary. She and her family were going through one of the most terrible events in human history. Anne was going through the most troublesome period of her life at a time when her family was hiding from their persecutors and the threat of war was upon them. That is why one of the primary themes of her diary is the constant fear and anxiety that this young girl feels throughout her period in hiding. Even a little noise would startle her as she would fear someone would find their location. In this constant environment of fear and anxiety, Anne was trying to have a normal life and cope with the mental and physical changes that she was going through as a young girl.

Apart from the diary of Anne Frank, there are other works from the holocaust which provide us with an eyewitness account of the situation. *Night* by Elie Wiesel is another important autobiographical work which describes the eyewitness account of the Holocaust. Published in 1960, this memoir describes the experience of Eli Wiesel in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald where he was imprisoned with his father during the Holocaust. Wiesel was a Jewish resident of Transylvania which in present-day is known as Romania. During the Second World War, the country was invaded by Germany. The German military quickly segregated the Jews of the area. Later Wiesel and his father were taken to Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland which was controlled by the German forces. Wiesel talks about the terrible conditions of the Jewish people in these concentration camps. He focuses on the rapid dehumanisation of the individuals in these camps who were treated like animals. His father almost lost his sanity and

the young son had to take care of him under the circumstances. In this unhygienic environment and under constant torture his father died while he could not do anything to save him. Under such circumstances, Wiesel lost all his faith in humanity. The themes of suffering, fear, anxiety and extreme hopelessness all are present in this story which makes it one of the most remarkable memoirs recounting the Holocaust experiences.

So, from the above discussion, we can get an idea of what kind of themes are prevalent in Holocaust life-writing.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the meaning of the word 'Holocaust'?
2. Write the names of a few important examples of holocaust life-writing.
3. What are the dominant themes found in holocaust narratives?

2.5 Nation-Building:

Nation-building is another prevalent theme across various genres of life-writing. It is mostly prevalent in the autobiographical works written by many freedom fighters and world leaders across the world. The auto/biographical work written by or about these individuals is often marked by the theme of nation-building and national progress. These auto/biographical works do not only explore the growth of the individual but also explore the growth of the nation. In these works of life-writing, the individual becomes the medium through which the nation's identity is revealed to the readers. The history of the individuals becomes the part of the most significant part of the nation's history too. In these narratives, as the writer becomes mature so too does the nation. These works of life-writing also explore the social and cultural history of the nation. It also reveals how the cultural identity of the nation helps in the formation and growth of the individual identity of the leader. The most important aspect of this theme is that the individual leader's contribution to the freedom struggle or foundation of a new national identity is closely narrated in these works.

2.5.1 Patterns Related to the Theme of Nation-Building:

The first stage of this kind of life-writing explores the past both of the nation and the individual that is the subject of the work. This is done through the exploration of the childhood of the author. By exploring this childhood, the narrative allows us to look at a past which is unadulterated by negative experiences like colonialism. It tells us how the individual subject first became familiar with their culture and started identifying with the land, its people and the history connected to the land. This attachment to the culture and the land provides an important platform for the development of a nationalistic identity. The second phase of these narratives talks about the early education of the individual possibly in a foreign land or through a foreign language. This creates conflict in the mind of the subject who becomes more aware of the value of one's own culture. The third phase of this narrative recounts the freedom struggle in which the individual becomes a medium for the reawakening of a national consciousness and the groundwork for an independent nation is laid down. The fourth phase talks about the early days of the independent nation and how the leader struggles to build a better nation for future generations.

2.5.2 Examples:

Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* follows this pattern of narrative and in this work of life-writing the theme of nation-building finds prominence. Gandhi starts his narrative by talking about his childhood experiences when he became familiar with Indian culture of which religion was a major part. The seeds of his cultural identity started forming in this stage. Then Gandhi talks about his education in England where he went through a cultural shock, and his practice in South Africa where he tried his method of non-violence for the first time. However, it was after his return from South Africa to India that he began to identify himself truly as an Indian. It was his extended journey through the country in which he reacquainted himself with the culture of the country that he formed an identity which is truly nationalistic. At this stage, he started planning for a better future for India and its people, initially under British rule and finally as an independent nation. Since this work was not written towards the end of Gandhi's life, we do not get a complete picture of Gandhi's vision. Still towards the

conclusion of the book Gandhi talks about certain ideas which are meant for the posterity of the independent nation of India.

Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography *Towards Freedom* which is also known as *An Autobiography* follows the same thematic concerns of nation building. The interesting thing about this work is that it was written entirely during the time he spent in prison for his involvement in the freedom struggle of India. It was written from the year 1934 to 1935 and was finally published in 1936. The book follows the same pattern that we have discussed earlier. Talking about the purpose of the work Nehru says that he wanted to trace his personal growth by writing down the various important events of his life. He also writes that his ideal reader is his countrymen, not the foreign audience.

From the beginning itself, Nehru sets the tone of his autobiography where he tries to talk about building an independent nation with the help of his countrymen. The beginning of the work traces the history of his ancestors. He says that his ancestors relocated themselves from Kashmir to Delhi. By tracing his descent from Kashmir, Nehru connects his identity with the spatial boundaries of India. He then moves on to talk about his higher study in Cambridge where he was influenced by the English language and its culture. He also talks about this cultural hybridity at length where he finds himself in an in-between space. Sometimes it becomes difficult for him to understand if he belongs to East or West. However, he finally decides that his Indian identity will win over the other foreign influences on his character. The theme of nation-building is prominent here as he says that wants to build a nation which does not discriminate between various groups, where people can live freely, without being a subject of prejudice or having a prejudice against any groups.

While tracing the theme of nation-building, we can also look at a work such as *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) by Nelson Mandela. In this work, Mandela presents the discrimination faced by the black population of South Africa under the apartheid system. Mandela described the hard battles he had to fight to build a nation where his community would get equal status and the social and political rights they deserved as the natives of the land. Mandela also describes his journey joining the African National Congress in 1950 and his organisation of guerrilla tactics and underground organisations to battle against apartheid. The work also talks about the fruition of his

labour as the apartheid system was finally broken down and he became the first president of the country in 1994. Thus, Mandela truly got the chance to fulfil his dream of building his nation as the president of South Africa.

Stop to Consider

Many freedom fighters recorded their struggle in their autobiographies and memoirs. The growth of their individuality and the nation go hand in hand. The individual's life story in this thematic pattern becomes the medium to express the growth of the nation. Moreover, the contribution of an individual towards building a nation is appreciated and highlighted. The theme of nation-building follows various patterns through which the growth of the individual and the nation are laid out to the readers. Some of the notable examples in this regard are Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiment with Truth*, Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* and Nehru's *Towards Freedom*.

Check Your Progress

1. What are the various stages connected to the works which include the theme of nation-building?
2. Who are the ideal readers of Nehru's autobiography *Towards Freedom*?
3. What kind of system existed in South Africa before Mandela became the President?
4. How does Mandela's autobiography reflect the theme of nation-building?

2.6 Sense of Loss:

Life-writing is considered to be a genre where the individual tries to assert his/her subjecthood. The individual traces the growth of the self and looks back at the crucial moments where the primary facets of his/her identity was being formed. As such, it is almost unthinkable and quite contrary to the very idea of life-writing to connect the theme of the sense of loss in life-

writing. However, as a theme, the sense of loss is one of the most relevant themes in the genre of life-writing. This sense of loss is connected to the individual whose markers of identity are ambiguous. This may happen due to a hybrid identity like the immigrants in a different country, to the discriminated groups like women or the black population etc. This ambiguous identity can generate a sense of loss in an individual who may then question his/her sense of belongingness to one particular place or a group. So, rather than seeing the growth of a concrete identity, we may see the emergence of the self which has multifaceted identities. These complex narratives however provide us a chance to study life writing from a completely new approach. This approach does not focus on the formation of a linear concrete narrative rather it looks at the different elements that shape the identity of a person. These kinds of work of life-writing are also very close to other forms of literary genres like fiction and poetry as the poignant emotions of the subject is revealed to the reader with utmost honesty. This makes sense of loss as a very important theme in the field of life-writing.

2.6.1 Sense of loss in feminist life writing:

A pervading sense of loss as a theme can be traced in the writings of women. This sense of loss can be seen in terms of the loss of self, agency and power. Traditionally, women are not encouraged to have an opinion or career of their own. They have to abide by the rules laid down by society. In addition to this, her marrying away to another household adds to the alienation from the paternal household. Further, she is deprived of power in her in-law's household which makes her feel powerless. In patriarchal societies, women are treated as subordinate to men. In traditional Indian society, the woman lives under the command of her father before marriage and the husband is entrusted with that responsibility after her marriage. Women are not allowed to participate in social affairs which further consolidates her sense of alienation. They are treated as only a caregiver in her paternal and in-law's household. Their ability of rational thinking and sensibility had often been neglected and they have been side-lined from mainstream society. Many women describe their attempt to gain lost power and to assert their subjectivity. In the process of writing autobiographies and biographies, they started documenting their self. In the autobiography of Kamala Das's *My Story*, she tries to fight back against the patriarchal system rooted in Indian society.

Stop to Consider

It is the medium of life-writing through which individuals try to assert their identity and selfhood. However, sometimes life-writing becomes an outlet through which individuals may also talk about the loss of their identity and selfhood.

Hybrid identities can create a situation where the person may feel difficulties in choosing any one of their identities. However, loss of selfhood can also occur due to systematic oppression and discrimination of a person or group in a society. This idea of loss of selfhood pervades the writings of women which gets manifested in the loss of power, agency and self. Many women writers attempt to regain their lost power, and agency through life writing.

2.6.2 Black Autobiography and the Sense of Loss:

The black population in the United States of America also felt a sense of disconnectedness from the country because of the prejudice and discrimination they faced. They were made unwanted in the country by the segregation laws. Under such circumstances, many influential black figures experience a sense of loss and the marginalisation of their identity. Writer and social activist W.E.B DuBois left the United States and became a permanent citizen of Ghana spending his last few years in that country. Just like DuBois, many black expatriates went to different African countries as they felt unwanted in the United States. The first part of Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) talks about the sense of loss they felt in America.

Check Your Progress

1. What are the various forms of life writing through which the thematic issue of the sense of loss found expression?
2. Why did the black people feel unwanted in the United States of America?
3. Name an important work of life writing that uses the thematic concern of the sense of loss.

2.7 Recovery of the Self:

Connected with the theme of loss of self we can find another important theme which is recovery of the self. Life-writing is itself an act of documenting self-assertiveness in the form of a diary, memoir, autobiography and biography. Life-writing with this theme focuses on the social, and moral development within an individual. The writer traces his/her journey from unknown to known. Even in the works where the sense of loss as a thematic concern becomes dominant, we can still have a desire for the recovery of the self within the work. The theme of recovery of the self is one of the most common themes across different forms of life-writing. This theme resides at the heart of the practice of life-writing as life-writing is essentially a practice of looking at the process through which the growth of self can be traced. While 'sense of loss' as a theme indicates the various ways through which the self loses its agency and assertiveness, the theme of 'recovery of the self' points out the various strategies in life-writing through which this loss of identity can be recovered and the agency of the self can be restored. The act of writing about one's life itself gives us a certain amount of control and agency over one's life in which an individual can determine how their life can be presented to the public. This power of controlling the narrative of one's life can provide individuals the opportunity to recover their self and identity. Thus, as a theme, recovery of the self is important in the field of life-writing.

As discussed earlier, Maya Angelou's work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) talks about the loss of identity and we can also look at how this work can also be read from the perspective of the recovery of the self and identity. Feeling unwanted in the United States where she was born, Angelou felt a sense of loss. Like many black expatriates, she also decided to leave the country as she felt that she did not belong there, where she and the entire black community had to face racial discrimination. To trace her lineage and recover her selfhood, she decided to leave for Africa. As the black community had been captured and brought to America as slaves, it was the only place where she hoped to trace her original lineage. She understood the chances of actually tracing the family ancestor were next to impossible, still on a symbolic level going to Africa indicated her desire to recover her selfhood and discover a place which she could claim as her

own. Thus, the theme of recovery of the self becomes central to the structure of this work.

Self-Assessment Question

Do you see any connection between the themes of the sense of loss and the recovery of the self?

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Check Your Progress

1. Why did Maya Angelou leave America?
2. How is the theme of recovery of the self, reflected in the work of Maya Angelou?

2.8 Spirituality:

One of the important themes of life-writing is spirituality. As life-writing is an act of looking inside the self of the subject, some individuals take the spiritual route to rediscover themselves. The theme of spirituality is so prevalent in autobiography writing that a whole genre can be carved out for them from the larger field of life-writing. Spirituality offers a way for many individuals to trace the evolution and growth of the subject from a state of naivety to maturity. The theme of spirituality is reflected in the works of life-writing through certain established patterns that can be traced across many works belonging to this area. This pattern concerns the journey of the individual from a state where the individual tends to engage in various immoral activities to get the status of spiritual grace. In the first stage, the past life of the individual will be described where the individual cannot distinguish between good and bad. Generally, under the influence of youth, the individual engages in many amorous and immortal activities. In the second stage, the individual suffers for his action and generally gets an epiphany, a sudden awakening which makes that person realise the error of his ways. Finally, in the third stage, the individual starts a long and arduous process of cleaning one's acts and becoming a truly spiritual person who is eligible for God's grace.

The first known Western work of life-writing which has the theme of spirituality as a primary focus is St. Augustine's *Confessions*. This work follows the same pattern that we have discussed earlier. Here, Augustine talks about his immoral actions during his youthful days. He says that it was a sinful period of his life when he was not concerned about God or the consequences of his actions. However, in the later period of his life, he starts to understand the folly of his earlier way of life. He starts correcting his ways and finally finds spiritual grace when he finally becomes a devout Christian. The rest of the book is written in a prescriptive manner in which he advises others to follow the path of religion and spirituality through which they can finally attain meaning in their lives.

Another modern example of the theme of spirituality can be found in William Dalrymple's work of life-writing entitled *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (2009). This work takes a curious journalistic approach to the study and understanding of the mystic and spiritual aspects of India. The biographer tries to capture the lives of nine individuals who represent nine types of approaches to spirituality. The individuals described in this work do not only practice mysticism as a means of vocation rather it is a way of life for them. The objective narrator understands that his way of looking at the lives of these individuals from a strictly scientific point of view may not be sufficient to understand the kind of lived spirituality they practice. As such, in the text, the author provides the individuals with the opportunity to voice their views in front of the readers. This method of writing a biography has the advantage of making the more authentic as the subjects in the biography also share the narrative agency with the author himself. By doing this the author wants to explore the spiritual landscape of India with a certain degree of authenticity and detail.

Check Your Progress

1. Write a short note on the various themes of holocaust memoirs.
2. Do you think that there exists a relationship between themes of the sense of loss and the recovery of the self? Discuss in your own words.
3. How does the writer become a metaphor for the growth of a nation in the theme of nation-building?

2.9 Summing Up:

- The experiences of the Holocaust recorded in the form of diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies reflect these experiences of horror through eyewitness accounts.
- Many freedom fighters recorded their struggle in their autobiographies and memoirs where the growth of their individuality and nation go hand in hand.
- It is the medium of life-writing through which the individual tries to assert his/her identity and selfhood.
- Loss of the self as a theme can occur in the writings of those who have a hybrid identity like immigrants in a different country or the discriminated groups like women and the black population etc.
- The sense of loss as a theme where the individual feels devoid of agency and power pervades the writings of women. This can also be found in the writings of black people who find it difficult to be part of the mainstream American Society.
- Spirituality as a theme in life-writing goes back to the times of St. Augustine who wrote the first spiritual autobiography. However, modern writers like William Dalrymple treat this from a different angle where he mixes the anthropological and objective methods with the eyewitness accounts by sharing his narrative authority with his subjects.

2.10 Reference and Suggested Readings:

Hayes, Patrick. *The Oxford History of Life-Writing: Post War to Contemporary, 1945-2020*. Oxford UP, 2022.

Moore-Gilbert, Bart. *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics and Self-representation*. Routledge, 2009.

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UNIT- 3

LIFE WRITING: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 History and Definition
 - 3.3.1 Origin
 - 3.3.2 Autobiography and its Origins
 - 3.3.3 First Attempt at Theory
- 3.4 Beyond Autobiography
- 3.5 A Few Fundamental Concepts
 - 3.5.1 Fact vs. Fiction:
 - 3.5.2 Representation
 - 3.5.3 The Romantic Selfhood
- 3.6 Theory and Practice
 - 3.6.1 Poststructuralist Theory
 - 3.6.2 Feminist theory
 - 3.6.3 Postcolonial Theory
- 3.7 Summing Up
- 3.8 Reference and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives:

This unit discusses the theoretical and practical aspects of life writing. After going through this unit, you will be able to

- *explain* the history and evolution of the genre of life writing,
- *discuss* the various theoretical influences on the genre of life writing,
- *analyse* the various forms of life writings,
- *discuss* and evaluate the various practical examples of the genre of life writing.

3.2 Introduction:

Life writing is a field of study which is interconnected to many other fields like literature, anthropology, political science, sociology, cultural studies, etc. Originating from the field of autobiography, life writing intersects with many of these fields of study. Because of the nature of its engagement with so many areas of study, life writing cannot be seen as an exclusive literary genre. As life writing is a genre which falls in the in-between zone of the literary and non-literary space, it is very hard to define or theorise it in a linear framework.

In this chapter, we shall try to get a comprehensive idea of the field of life writing. We shall begin by tracing the origin of the field of life writing and how it evolved from the genre of autobiography. We would try to find a theoretical framework to understand life writing. The chapter will also try to look at how different theories have affected the understanding of life writing. Finally, we would also take a look at how the theoretical aspects have been reflected in the praxis of the genre.

3.3 History and Definition:

3.3.1 Origin:

Life writing as a separate genre has a very recent origin. To understand this genre of writing better we have to look at its evolutionary history. The genre of autobiography serves as a precursor to life writing. Life writing takes up many of the issues that constitute the genre of autobiography. However, life writing has an extended scope. If we trace the etymology of the word autobiography, we will find that it has originated from three Greek words- 'auto' (self), bio (life) and graph (writing). Taken together these three words mean the act of writing about the self. In a literary sense, Robert Southey was the first person who used the term autobiography. However, it was William Taylor who first used the term with a negative connotation by calling it 'pedantic'.

3.3.2 Autobiography and its Origins:

The first known autobiography in the Western tradition is believed to be Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (400 AD) in which he describes his journey

from a life of passion to his conversion to Christianity. This book followed the Christian tradition of confession in which it is generally believed that one who confesses his sins is forgiven by God and thus becomes eligible for entering heaven after death. One important thing to note here is that in the Christian ritual of confession, the sinner talks to the clergy in a confidential room. By deriving his title from the Christian ritual of confession, St. Augustine created two features for his autobiography which will later become the characteristics of the autobiography itself. The first feature deals with confidentiality which means that the author is permitting his readers to gaze into the confidential matters of his life which would otherwise be hidden from the public view. The second feature deals with factuality which means that by claiming the book as a confession, the author also claims to tell the truth to his readers. The religious connotation of the word confession itself provides a certain degree of purity and integrity to his autobiography. Undoubtedly, these two features of St. Augustine's autobiography have the genre-defining power. Ever since his *Confessions*, autobiographies have been always circling the issues of confidentiality and the truth-telling. We still see the influence of this text, while looking at the definition of autobiography.

3.3.3 First Attempt at Theory:

Attempting a definition of autobiography is not easy as it raises questions related to the boundaries of the field itself. The widely accepted definition of autobiography was given by Philippe Lejeune in his influential essay "The Autobiographical Contract" (1982) where he defines it as "a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" (Anderson 2). This definition tries to accommodate many of the characteristics of the genre that one would expect from autobiography or life writing. However, this definition fails to answer many questions related to this genre. One of the primary problems related to this definition is its exclusion of writings other than in prose. Many confessional poets write their autobiographies in verse. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* which is subtitled as '*The Growth of a Poet's Mind*' is an autobiography in verse. This definition also fails to demarcate the boundary of this genre and to separate it from other genres, particularly fiction.

Stop to Consider

Wordsworth's *The Prelude or The Growth of the poet's Mind* is an autobiography in verse. It was published in 1850. Initially, it was intended as a prelude to his philosophical poem *The Recluse*. In this autobiographical poem, Wordsworth reveals how various childhood memories primarily received from nature helped him to grow as a poet developing his imaginative power.

Although Lejeune's definition cannot be called the most accurate definition of autobiography, this definition provides us with a definite direction. Lejeune was also one of the first persons to try and create a theoretical framework to study autobiography. His definition of autobiography itself extends to what he called the 'autobiographical pact'. By this, he suggested that there exists a relationship between the author, the text and the reader through the condition of authenticity. It points towards the issue of truth-telling that we have mentioned earlier. According to Lejeune, the author must tell the truth and represent his life factually. He also points towards another pact that exists between the author, the narrator and the protagonist in an autobiography. This definition would point towards one of the basic differences between fictional writing and autobiography. In fictional writing, the writer tends to keep a bit of a distance from his fictional characters. However, in autobiography, the writer is the represented self on the pages. This idea of the autobiographical pact can be called one of the first attempts to theorise a genre which seems to have no boundaries. From the discussion above we come to know one of the primary problems that is associated with any attempt to define autobiography or life writing i.e., its relationship with fiction.

Check Your Progress

1. Which is the first known Western autobiography?
2. What are the key components in Philippe Lejeune's theory of the 'autobiographical pact'?

3.4 Beyond Autobiography:

This inability to demarcate the boundaries and to arrive at a clear definition for autobiography has created the need to look for a greater scope for the genre itself. Since the different strands of biographical writing cannot be accommodated in a simplistic definition of autobiography, we arrive at a new understanding of this kind of biographical writing with the word 'life-writing'. Life writing, the word itself indicates that this is an attempt to emancipate the genre from just the categories of biography or autobiography. This new understanding of the genre seeks to liberate biographical writing from the limited concepts of auto/biography. Rather than focusing on the conventional understanding of the genre as a formal piece of writing in which the events of a person's life are neatly put together in a narrative with a beginning, middle and end, life writing seeks to understand the various moments and events of person's life through different perspectives. For life-writing linearity is not a prerequisite. It does not look for the formal structure of the auto/biography. Life-writing seeks to correct many of the shortcomings of its parent genre which is auto/biography.

Now the scope of the genre can be extended and many types of writings which earlier could not be discussed in auto/biography can also be included. Many new forms such as memories, diaries, journals, letters, and eyewitness accounts including biographies and autobiographies are now studied under this extended form of the genre. Rather than looking for a well-written and completed piece of auto/biography, it looks for lesser-known aspects of a person's life which were earlier hidden from the public view like the letters written to friends and family or the diary kept for one's personal use. Being unbounded by the shackles of auto/biography life-writing can now look for places where the self becomes a secondary subject to something else like the travel narrative. In travel narrative, the descriptions of the places are given primacy over the person who visits those places. However, the narrative of the travel is always mediated through the personalised opinion of the writer. Life writing understands this nuanced connection of the author to his subject and tries to study how the self is connected to the spaces that it inhabits. Thus, life writing becomes a broad genre which is not limited by the constraints of auto/biography.

Check Your Progress

1. How did the field of life-writing emerge out of the genre of autobiography?
2. What are the forms of writing that are studied in the field of life writing?

3.5 A Few Fundamental Concepts:

To understand better the theoretical paradigms related to life-writing we need to consider a few fundamental concepts connected to it. These concepts have been discussed below.

3.5.1 Fact vs. Fiction:

While discussing life writing, the primary question that can arise in our minds is whether life writing is an example of fact or fiction. If we look at the definition given by Lejeune of the autobiographical contract he points towards the factual integrity of autobiography. What it means is that one would expect a certain degree of factuality and truthfulness from a piece of life writing. But the question we have to ask ourselves is whether complete authenticity is possible while writing about one's life. This is where we enter into the realm of fiction. When we read one's life in a piece of life writing what we essentially read is a story. There is always a degree of fictionality related to life writing.

Life writing is subjected to forces of memory i.e., remembering and forgetting. While recording the events of a person's life, either by themselves or by others, the writer has to go through the process of reconstructing the events of that person's life in sequential order. The gaps in memory can also create a gap in the narrative of the story which requires a certain amount of fictional reconstruction of such events. Besides, there remains the possibility of incorrect remembering of an event which can always lend a certain degree of fictionality to the narrative.

Even in the case of writing by a different biographer than the subject who may have the resources to verify certain facts from different sources, we still have to understand that different sources can contradict each other and each person may have their take on the truth. Thus, though it appears at first glance, life writing cannot be called a pure form of non-fiction.

The close relationship that life writing shares with fiction creates a problem for the theorists to define clearly the boundaries of the genre. It would appear that life writing is a genre with no boundaries. Many books of fiction tend to be biographical in some sense. For example, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a work of fiction which has many parallels with Joyce's life. D.H. Lawrence is famous for using materials from his own life in his works of fiction. Thus, it seems that life writing is a genre with an endless potential to proliferate in fictional writing. The novelistic genre of *Roman a clef* which literary means 'novel with a key' actually bases its characters on real-life people. Real authors or famous personalities form the characters in such fictional works.

This essentially creates the problem of separating life writing from fictional writing. So, rather than trying to separate it from fiction we probably could try another approach to understand autobiography.

Stop to Consider

Roman a clef- the literal meaning of this term is novel with a key. It is a French term that refers to the idea that real-life characters appear in disguise of fictional characters blurring the demarcation of fact and fiction. It was Madeleine de Scudery who coined this term to satirize contemporary political and public figures in her veiled fictional writings. One of the notable examples of Roman a Clef is *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway.

3.5.2 Representation:

As we discussed in the section above life writing falls into the liminal space of fiction and non-fiction. Thus, rather than looking for the issues of authenticity and factuality, the contemporary study of life writing focuses on the issue of representation. Representation is a very suggestive word. What it primarily suggests is the fictional attributes of life writing which gives us ample incentive to study life writing in the ambit of literary studies. It also means that rather than trying to verify every fact in a piece of life writing we try to read the words on the pages. We pay more attention to the minute details and nuances of the language that is used in the narrative of the life

that we are reading. Life writing is always an act of choice. What we mean by this is that when creating the narrative of life from the events of one's life the writer is always conscious of choosing certain details and leaving others off. This is true across the various forms of life writing. As writing always involves a certain degree of formality, the language itself mediates between the actual events that have happened and the events represented through the process of writing. Of course, the levels of intimacy that we can get from different formats vary considerably as diary entries might reveal to us more personal details than a traditional biography. Yet we still have to understand that the diary entry is also a representation of an image as one would perceive oneself to be. Thus, representation becomes an important tool which helps us study life writing from a newer perspective.

3.5.3 The Romantic Selfhood:

The romantic selfhood is a fundamental concept that permeates the genre of autobiography. If we go back to the origin and look at the evolution of romanticism in the 19th century, we would understand that it is deeply connected with the historical developments of the time. The one historical event that has been influential in a revolutionary change in the process of thinking is the French Revolution. This revolution which carried forward the ideas of liberty, fraternity and equality was the first place of modern individualism in Western thinking. Many of the leading figures of the Romantic movement in England were directly and indirectly inspired by the ideas propagated in this revolution. William Wordsworth went to France during the period of the revolution. He was inspired by the ideas of the revolution and also fell in love with a French woman named Annette Vallon. After his return from France, Wordsworth employed many of these ideals in the new kind of poetry that he was trying to formalise as Romanticism. Thus, Romanticism carries with it the idea of individualism that found its genesis during the French Revolution. Many romantic poets and writers saw their works as a reflection of their self. Poetry for them was not impersonal but it carried with it a part of the poet's self. Wordsworth himself tried to write his *Prelude* as an extended autobiography in verse. Rousseau's *Confession* is another such autobiography where the individual self becomes all-encompassing. The romantic self in the biographical works appears larger

than life. These selves claim to represent the true self of a person who is responsible for the creation of literary outputs.

Self Assessment Question

Is there any kind of relationship between theory and life writing? Give reasons in support of your answer. (in 80 words)

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3.6 Theory and Practice:

In the section below the various theoretical approaches and their practical examples in the field of life-writing will be discussed in detail.

3.6.1 Poststructuralist Theory:

The poststructuralist theory questioned the idea of the genre itself. Using Derrida’s deconstructive framework, we can see how the genre becomes a fossilised structure which tends to restrict the flow of ideas from one format to the next. The idea of the genre has been questioned and destabilised by poststructuralist enquires. However, it has also opened up new perspectives and approaches to analyse life writing.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that life writing cannot be easily defined or put into a simple theoretical framework. However, many of these problem areas were pointed out by the poststructuralist interventions in this field. The approach of poststructuralist theory is to find the various fault lines in a pre-existing structure. It destabilises what otherwise would seem like a concrete structure. No doubt poststructuralist theory when applied to the sphere of auto/biography raises many problem areas. This intervention is one of the reasons why literary studies has moved away from just the study of autobiography to the extended area of life writing.

Poststructuralist theorists like Paul de Man questioned the idea of autobiography as a legitimate genre. Questioning the limits of the genre and its relationship with fiction, he says that auto/biography does not have any boundaries to be qualified as a stand-alone genre of literature. Rather,

autobiography can invade the boundaries of fiction at will as many fiction writers use the material from their lives or the lives of people that they know. Thus, it essentially raises questions of claimed authenticity and truth, two of the core elements in any piece of life writing. If biography and fiction can be used interchangeably then how can any piece of life writing be taken as a record of truth? The autobiographical contract that Lejeune talks about where the character and real-life person should be the same is under attack by this question. Rather than a complete truthful representation of a person's life, life writing can now become just another fictional representation of a narrative. Under the poststructuralist scrutiny, the biographical subject is endangered. Poststructuralism sees the biographical subject just as a representation of the actual person, a characteristic of language itself.

Poststructuralist scrutiny of the traditional self of the biography opened up many avenues through which a newer theoretical understanding of the genre became possible.

Self-Assessment Question

Do you think post-structuralist theory opened up the field of life-writing for another theoretical approach? Give your opinion.

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Stop to Consider

The poststructuralist theory questions the seemingly coherent structure of life writing. The poststructuralist intervention paves the way to look at other approaches beyond the primary study of autobiography to life writing. Paul De Man argues that the fictional elements have also a share in autobiography. This theoretical framework also challenges the traditionally glorified and celebrated self in autobiography.

Thus, in effect, poststructuralist theory is responsible for the expansion of the field of lifewriting from the limited scope of autobiography.

3.6.2 Feminist Theory:

From the above section, we come to know how the poststructuralist theoretical approach has questioned many of the traditional notions connected with the genre of life writing. Poststructuralism particularly targeted the romantic selfhood that was connected with the romantic notions of the autobiographical self. The conventional figure of the white male who tends to be the subject of the biography has also been scrutinised by this new enquiry. This enquiry provided a gap through which feminist theory could intervene in the understanding of life writing as a genre.

Feminist theory first questioned the conventional autobiographies which were mostly dominated by the man, particularly the Western white man. The reason behind this phenomenon was historical. Historically, biography is in a sense connected to the vocation of the person who is the subject of the biography. Only if a person is renowned, he/she occupies an important position and considered a worthy subject of a biography. It is generally believed that such a person could provide important insight not only into his/her personal life but also how through his/her personal experiences and struggles this person rose to such an important position in public life.

The problem with this understanding of biographies is that it leaves behind a lot of people with unique stories and experiences to tell. The traditional understanding of biographies would not have allowed the inclusion of any person's life story who is not a public figure and is not socially acknowledged as a successful person. Historically, women have been kept out of the workforce in the Western world before the World Wars; largely, women's experiences were ignored and were not thought to be 'important enough' to be the subject of biographies. This is the kind of conventional attitude that feminist theory contests. The intervention of the feminist theory has also helped to broaden the scope of the genre itself. As many women before the 20th century could find space in the genre of biographies, to understand their experiences one would need to expand their horizons from the traditional criteria of auto/biographies and look into other sources which could give us an idea about their life experiences. Thus, anything that was connected to the life of these women such as journals, letters, anecdotal records etc., became important. We now move from looking at the neat categories of auto/biographies to the expanded genre of life writing.

Alice James, who was the sister of the psychologist William James and the novelist Henry James, wrote a diary which became a major source of understanding the experience of 19th-century women. Alice who suffered throughout her life with disease and disability has left behind the diary as a brilliant source of life writing through which we can look into her extraordinary struggles with the social constraints that she faced as a woman and the physical pain that she suffered because of her disease. During her life Alice James although related to famous personalities of the time was not famous herself. Her life would not be considered as 'worthy' of being the subject of a popular biography. However, the publication of her diary revealed to us a person who was both talented and smart on one hand and a resilient and courageous person on the other. Because of the restrictions put up on the women of the time this incredibly intelligent woman could not participate in public affairs as her brothers did. However, this diary records the true potential of the woman who has brilliant psychological insights into her sufferings and the talent to poetically convert them into a narrative which might equal her novelist brother Henry James.

The traditional constraints of the genre of autobiography would not have been able to include Alice James' diary as it would not fall under the ambit of traditional autobiography. Thus, life writing in a way is a more inclusive genre that has been able to retain the voices of those who were otherwise ignored.

Many women, particularly female poets, have also taken the form of confessional poetry as a means to tell the world their own story. This is a form of life writing which takes the peculiar features of poetry to convey their story which would otherwise not be possible in a conventional form of autobiography. Features such as nuanced language, deeply emotional language, informal speech and an intimate connection with the readers which are peculiar characteristics of poetry have enabled these woman poets to connect to their readers in a very unique and personal way. This allows the subject to bear their hearts empty before their readers. Personal tragedy and traumatic events can be conveyed to the readers in a much more effective manner keeping the emotional sensations of the events intact.

The female poets used the medium provided by the form of confessional poetry to recover their voices in a society which actively tries to silence it.

For female poets, confessional poetry became a tool to assert their identity. The format of confessional poetry which falls between fiction and fact is a perfect platform to put one's own story while still retaining the fictional universality which allows the readers to relate to it much more easily than to a traditional autobiography. Confessional poetry does become an instrument of liberation for these female poets who finally have a platform through which they can show the struggle that they faced in society. The complex experiences of being a woman are reflected in the works of these confessional poets.

Sylvia Plath is one of the most important figures when we talk about confessional poetry. She has taken the form of confessional poetry to a new height. Plath's own life was filled with many tragedies, starting with her psychological distress because of which she tried to commit suicide many times in her life and finally, her life also ended in one. Her relationship with the British poet Ted Hughes has also become a matter of public gossip. However, it is through her confessional poems that we get to know her complex personality and her troubled psyche. Her autobiographical poems would allow us to look into this troubled personality who had many problems with her own family while growing up. Her fatal fascination with death and her struggle to survive are all described to us in all its complexities. Her poem 'Daddy' presents her complex and problematic relationship with her father. It shows her desire to be free from the influences of her father. Another important autobiographical poem of Plath is entitled "Lady Lazarus" which presents both her fascination with the idea of suicide and the universal theme of the struggle of women in a patriarchal society. In fact, both these poems were included in the collection *Ariel* (1965) which was published after she committed suicide in 1963. Thus, these two poems along with many other poems included in the collection, *Ariel* which were written in the same confessional style are considered to be important autobiographical sources for the understanding of Plath's brief but brilliant creative and personal life.

Kamala Das was one of such poets who used the confessional form of poetry to protest against the social inequalities that she faced as a woman. Her poetry is also a kind of self-reflection. In her confessional poems, she allows the reader to get a glimpse of her personal life, her troubled psyche, and the complex nature of her mind. There is no prejudice associated with

her poems. Rather she bears her heart open to her readers with all its intricacies and trusts her readers with the intimate information of her life. Her confessional poems are famous for presenting the complex workings of a woman's mind which is conveyed to us in an intense emotionally charged language. The poem "An Introduction" is a famous example of Kamala Das's take on autobiographical poetry. In this poem, she touches upon many of the personal and societal issues that she believes have relevance not only to her but to all the women in the country. The political struggle for the rights of women, her struggle against patriarchy, the choice of language for her poetry, her own troublesome married life and the struggle to attain the status of individual identity are all described in this long confessional poem. This makes Kamala Das one of the prime practitioners of this kind of autobiographical poetry.

Check Your Progress

1. How does feminist theory question the traditional form of autobiography?
2. What are the different forms of life writing that are used by feminist writers to capture their unique life experiences?
3. Who are the famous female confessional poets that have contributed to the field of lifewriting?

3.6.3 Postcolonial Theory:

The traditional Western understanding of biography tends to be dominated by a white male subject who represents the cultural and ideological hegemony of Europe in every sphere of knowledge. To establish a hegemonic rule the colonial powers tried to erase the identity of the native population of the colonised country. These powers used certain strategies like the erasure of the language and culture of the native population and the imposition of colonial languages like English or French in their colonies. By imposing a foreign language and a foreign culture, the colonial powers tried to make the natives look at the world through the eyes of the colonisers. This effectively erased the subjectivity and individual identities of the colonised population. The erasure of the identity of the colonised population helped the colonial

powers to easily rule the native population. This has crippled the native population from raising any voice of protest against the colonial powers. Without having any ideas about self-identity, a population cannot understand or dream about the ideas of nationhood. This was one of the greatest victories of the colonial powers. This ideological manipulation of the native population ensured that the colonial power could rule that land with minimal use of military powers.

In this context, postcolonial theory can provide an important insight into the genre of life-writing. The postcolonial theoretical approach suggests that the act of writing an autobiography or any other piece of life written by a colonised subject can have greater consequences than just recording one's life story. The postcolonial theory tries to destabilise this hegemonic domination of the West in the sphere of knowledge production by reclaiming the identity of the native population. The act of writing a biographical piece suggests the attempt by the oppressed population to reclaim their subjecthood. This can be seen as an attempt to assert their own identity. Thus, the act of writing an autobiography or any other form of life writing is an assertion of one's agency against the colonial forces that want to erase the selfhood of the native population.

M.K. Gandhi's autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1929) stands out as one of the most influential works of lifewriting written under the shadows of British colonial rule of India. Gandhi's autobiography not only talks about the formation of his selfhood but also describes the process of the formation of an Indian national identity. However, when writing this autobiography one of Gandhi's friends asked him why he was engaging in an act which is a Western practice. Gandhi writes in his introduction to his autobiography-

“But a God-fearing friend had his doubts, which he shared with me on my day of silence. ‘What has set you on this adventure?’ he asked. ‘Writing an autobiography is a practice peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the east having written one, except amongst those who have come under Western influence.’” (Gandhi 44 - 45)

The above conversation between Gandhi and his friend points to the fact that to the common Indians even during the freedom struggle the idea of the autobiography was connected to the West. It was assumed that only the people from the West had the claim to subjecthood and individual identity. These kinds of ideas were ingrained in the minds of the native population of the colonised countries which effectively deterred them from ever asserting their individuality and asking for a free nation. Even Gandhi refused to call this work an autobiography and rather asserted “But it is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, the story will indeed take the shape of an autobiography” (45). Gandhi thought that his experience in the political field which has acquired a certain degree of popularity even in the West and his numerous experiments in the spiritual field would be helpful to the common public, even if they are not interested in his personal life. However, in any case, Gandhi’s autobiography stands out to be one of the primary examples of when a colonised individual asserted his subjecthood and through this, he also claimed the status of nationhood for India.

Nelson Mandela’s autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) is another such example where the colonised subject (in this case subjugated under the Apartheid system) tried to tell their story from the years of struggle to the reclamation of the political rights in their own country. Mandela’s story is not just the story of a single individual, it is the story of a whole race of people who were oppressed and discriminated against in their homeland because of the colour of their skin. Mandela describes how even having a comfortable living he could not attain peace because of the knowledge that his countrymen were suffering under a system of oppression. Even though he could have earned enough for a comfortable living, he was not happy with himself as the black population in South Africa was not given the dignity of living. They were treated as a second-class citizen in their own country. Thus, the autobiography of Mandela is an attempt to regain this dignity and equality by telling the struggle of his community.

Check Your Progress

Q1. How does Postcolonial Theory provide a new perspective in the field of life-writing?

Q2. How does the theoretical approach shape the understanding of the field of life-writing?

Q3. Discuss the historical evolution of life writing.

Q4. How does life writing by women challenge traditional male-centric writing?

Q5. How does the idea of selfhood get reflected in autobiography? Illustrate with example.

Stop to Consider

The Postcolonial theoretical approach to life-writing suggests the possibility of looking beyond the traditional method of life-writing which is dominated by a Eurocentric mindset. For the colonial subject writing about their life is not a mere exercise in self-glorification. Rather, through the act of writing, the colonial subjects recover their identity and assert their agency. Writing about their life may in fact be understood as the first attempt at self-awareness and a reawakening of the desire to be independent from the colonial powers.

3.7 Summing Up:

- Autobiography is the precursor to life-writing.
- Robert Southey was the first person who used the term autobiography.
- Philippe Lejeune was the first critic who attempted to create a theoretical framework for autobiography.
- Life-writing goes beyond the form of autobiography. Many new forms such as memories, diaries, journals, and biographies include the corpus of life writing.

- The demarcation of fact and fiction embedded in the narrative of life-writing is very thin.
- The idea of selfhood is a fundamental concept that pervades the genre of autobiography.
- The celebration of selfhood reaches its peak during Romanticism.
- Different kinds of theories such as poststructuralism, feminism, and post-colonialism help life writing to challenge its traditional way of expressing and diversify this genre.

3.8 Reference and Suggested Readings:

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UNIT- 4

INTRODUCTION TO BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 Biography
 - 4.3.1 Types of Biography
 - 4.3.2 Methods of writing Biography
- 4.4 Autobiography
 - 4.4.1 Types of Autobiography
- 4.5 Summing Up
- 4.6 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives:

After reading this Unit, you will be able to–

- *understand* the concepts of biography and autobiography as literary genres,
- *discuss* the different types of biographies and autobiographies,
- *explain* the basic differences between the methods of composing them.

4.2 Introduction:

Biography and autobiography are two genres devoted to life writing of any person. Although both write the life of a person, there is a basic difference between the two –biography writes the life of someone else and autobiography writes the life of the self. In simple terms, the writer of biography writes the life of a person known to him and in the autobiography the writer himself/herself is the subject of the narration. Let us discuss the two genres separately. Whatever be the type of narration, both biography and autobiography, there is always the question of selection of events and

incidents: things that are presented and things that are chosen not to be presented.

4.3 Biography:

The term biography was first used by John Dryden in the year 1663 and he defined biography as “the history of particular men’s lives.” *The Oxford Dictionary* defines biography as the history of the lives of individual men as a branch of literature. History, individual life, and literature are the three crucial elements that form the crux of the biography from this definition. But biography differs from history proper in the sense that it is a record of life of only one individual. It is usually a truthful record of an individual, composed as a work of art. It should provide a pleasing reading experience to the readers. The biography basically chronicles the events within the narrative which should be confined within the two points of birth and death. There may be other characters within the biography but they must revolve round the central character of the hero. It studies its subjects from within and without, relating both the tales of achievements and failures of the central personality. It should be a faithful picture of the subject, a balanced and detached narrative containing both the virtue and faults, neither praising the former nor condemning the latter. At the same time, it should not be a mere recollection of events, but must have the ability to classify as a work of art leaving a lasting impression on the minds of the readers. It rebuilds a living man from dead bones.

A really honest biography is of immense importance to the historians, because it has the ability to recreate the past by presenting its subject and its achievements in relation to its contemporaries and the events of the time. Noteworthy is that the biographer must reveal the truth and create the beauty that comes from a perfect synthesis and portrayal of the subject without which it may become a dull recital of facts.

Check Your progress

1. When was the term “biography” used for the first time and by whom?
2. What is biography? Discuss briefly.

4.3.1 Types of Biography:

Biographies can be classified into two types- pure and impure. A 'pure' biography provides us with the realistic or almost perfect picture of any person's life – both external and internal. A pure biography carries immense value, especially historical. There are many factors that spoil the purity of biography and make it an impure one. The most common cause is the desire of the biographer to celebrate the dead figure. While the Victorian biographers tried to amplify the virtues of the subject, the Modern biographers have an inclination to emphasize the shortcomings of the same. Both these approaches of the biographers create a fabricated figure. The biographer must distance himself /herself from the subject to be able to view the subject clearly and dispassionately. Any form of moral judgment on the subject should be avoided by the biographer. At best, biography should remain as a true work of art free and sovereign as the truth. It should be allowed to remain simply as a faithful history of a human soul, without distorting the truth for any propaganda.

Self-Assessment Question

What are the different types of biography? Discuss. (80 words)

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4.3.2 Methods of Writing Biography:

Although different writers have tried their hands in writing biographies, there are mainly two methods of composing a biography: exhaustive method and selective method. In the exhaustive method, the biographer includes everything that is known about the subject in the narration. All the events may not be equally important or necessary, but this method gives us a relatively complete picture of the subject. Trevelyan's *Macaulay* and Froude's *Carlyle* belongs to this category. On the other hand, the selective method instead of telling everything, the biographer selects only the events and incidents of the life of the subject which is necessary for a re-creation of life of the subject. The success of this method depends both on the

method of selection of events and the skill of the biographer. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, Carlyle's *Life of Sterling* and Goldsmith's *Biographical Sketches* belong to this category of life writing or biography. A biography should be well constructed, furnished with sufficient details that provide pleasure to the readers. Here comes the importance of the points of view of the biographer that helps him to select or to reject an event. But the biographer must be cautious enough not to thrust his/her points of view on the subject. An ill-constructed biography is simply reduced to the mere tale of events instead of becoming a portrayal of a throbbing life. Modern biographers mostly follow the selective method in writing the biography.

It is impossible for anybody to know everything about a person. It is even more difficult for a biographer, who has not spent a significant portion of his life with the subject to tell the life of the same. So, the chance of misrepresentation is always there. James Boswell, the celebrated and famous biographer who wrote *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), the biography of 18th century great Dr. Johnson, was a close friend of Dr. Johnson. Another famous English biographer John Gibson Lockhart, who wrote *Life of Scott* (1836-38), was the son-in-law of Walter Scott. Foster, the biographer of Dickens was closely associated with Dickens. For these accomplished biographers the task was easy. But for those who choose to write the life of someone with whom they don't have much affinity, it becomes a herculean task. They must gather the information from different sources so as to render an authentic portrayal of the subject. Another difficulty and perhaps the most important one, of the biographer is that it is impossible to include or cover every aspect of an individual's life within the confines of a biography – may it be physical, intellectual, moral or spiritual. Sometimes, the biographer depends only on his conjecture for the portrayal of certain events and incidents of the individual life or the subject. However, English literature has a rich tradition of well-constructed biographies that continues even in the modern period. A celebrated modern biographer, Lytton Strachey popularised what he calls 'debunking' by insisting upon the human weakness of famous people. Strachey has made this tendency popular in his *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and has stressed the two-fold method of selection and scrutiny of all material for the purpose of composition of biography. He included the figures of famous Victorian personalities like Cardinal Manning, Dr. Thomas Arnold, General Gordon and Florence Nightingale. He dissected

the life of these famous personalities and revealed the hitherto unknown facts about their lives. For example, Florence Nightingale, who is known as the lady with the Lamp, becomes the lady with the Lamp in her spare moments. At other times she was an Angel of Wrath armed with thunderbolts, which she never hesitated to throw.

The art of biography has undergone considerable changes in the modern period. It has tended to become more psychological and has almost rejected the didactic, descriptive or other commemorative methods used by biographers of earlier ages. Now the biographers give equal importance to both the seen and the unseen sides of the personalities they are going to describe or write. Therefore, the modern biographies have been equally a psychological narration of the inner life of the subject as well.

Self Assessment Question

Discuss the methods of composing biography. (60 words)

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4.4 Autobiography:

Autobiography, as the name indicates, is the life story of the self. If a writer writes the story of his/her own life, achievements or failures in the public domain then it is termed as autobiography. Like the biography it also aims at providing a faithful representation of the person concerned as well as his/her time. But, unlike the biography, an autobiography is always incomplete and this can be taken as an inherent defect of the autobiography. However, critics prefer autobiography to the biography. Dr. Johnson, most popularly believed that the best writer of a man's life is the man himself. It is because the writer of his own life has at least the first qualification of a historian, the knowledge of the truth. However, there are ample possibilities for temptations to disguise it and at the same time, equally the opportunities of knowing it.

Memory plays a significant role in the writing of autobiography. But memory may not be always reliable. People may not remember every detail of his/her early life. Moreover, we only remember whatever we want to. That is why the narrator may have to depend on some external account of his/her life as well. However, Dr. Johnson put the authenticity of autobiography much higher than the biography. The autobiographer is the best judge of himself/herself. No one knows his/her whims or wishes better than him/her.

Although William Tylor first used the term in the year 1797, autobiography has an origin in antiquity. For example, different classical writers like Sappho, Herodotus and Xenophon had written about their lives. Augustine's *Confession* from 4th century can be taken as the first instance of autobiography as we can find it today. This is an intensely personal account of his self-exploration of spiritual journey. In the Enlightenment period, there is a proliferation of the autobiographical writings and anthropocentric humanism that encouraged people to explore and analyse themselves in greater details. The genre changed over the period with the shifts in tendencies of literature. Autobiographer of late medieval and Renaissance period mostly present lives in a chronological manner to provide a coherent self through it. One popular example is John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666). Autobiographies became common by the 16th century. Benvenuto Cellini, the sculptor from this period was the author of most vivid autobiography ever written during this period. From the early 17th centuries autobiographies became more and more straightforward as it became a common practice to keep a diary or a journal and to compile memoirs. John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) is one of the important autobiographies of this time. Evelyn and Pepys were also publishing their famous diaries during this period. Gradually autobiographical form of writing became more confessional and self-revealing in nature. Many significant publications followed: David Hume's *My Own Life* (1777), Edward Gibbon's *Memoirs* (1796), Boswell's *Journals*. Popular narratives of the genre published during the period such as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1766) and Rousseau's *Confessions* (1781 & 1788), set the tone for autobiography for the years to come. In the next century the genre of autobiography might have influenced the development of the then new literary form novel. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Lawrence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*

(1768) are two significant examples in this regard which can be taken as a kind of autobiographical fiction. Later, it might have influenced the stream of consciousness technique. But in the Romantic era autobiography like Rousseau's *Confessions* (1781) and Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* (1823) focused mainly on the writer's emotional experience. Other types of autobiographies were also produced in the 19th century autobiography that included factual, detached narrative, self-concerning narrative etc. Leigh Hunt's *Autobiography*, Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1873), Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) are some of the notable examples from this period. The trend continued and the first World War produced a significant number of fine autobiographical records like T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), Siegfried Sassoon's *The Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man* (1928) and *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), George Bernard Shaw's *Sixteen Self-Sketches* (1948) etc. The publication of autobiography proliferated in the modern era especially after 1950s onwards and all the influential persons or anyone who have achieved any kind of name have tried to record their life in the form of autobiography. Some notable examples from this period are Stephen Spender's *World Within World* (1951), Primo Levi's *Se Questo e un unmo* (1958), Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoires d'une jeuneurangee* (1959), Graham Greene's *A Sort of Life* (1971), V. S. Naipaul's *Finding the Centre* (1984), etc.

Self Assessment Question

What do you understand by autobiography? Discuss with examples.
(60 words)

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4.4.1 Types of Autobiography:

The terms *subjective* and *objective* autobiography, while these are not formally recognized categories in literary theory, do hint at two contrasting approaches to how the author construct the self. There are autobiographies

that focus on the personal experiences, feelings, and emotional and psychological aspects of author's life. Whatever interpretation of events are offered, these are colored by the author's biases, perspective and emotions. Anne Frank's diary is a good example this kind, where Ann Frank offers insight into her thoughts, feelings, and experiences during the holocaust. In Cheryl Strayed's memoir, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, the author recounts her journey of self-discovery focusing on her inner emotional turmoil, struggles, and personal growth. The text unravels her thoughts, feelings, and reflections on her past experience, making it a deeply subjective account of her life.

In contrast, there are autobiographies that strive for a more factual and impartial portrayal of the author's life. It aims to present events, experiences, and observations in a neutral and unbiased manner, without significant emphasis on the author's personal interpretations or emotions. A detached and analytical style of narration is adopted suited to presentation of accurate and comprehensive account of the author's life. Benjamin Franklin's autobiography is often cited as an example of an objective autobiography. While it does contain elements of personal reflection and subjective interpretation, Franklin primarily focuses on providing a factual account of his life and achievements. He details his upbringing, his accomplishments, and the lessons he learned along the way in a relatively impartial manner, making it a more objective portrayal of his life. Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* is another example of an objective approach to autobiography. Here Gandhi describes his personal beliefs, principles, and experiences, while his primary aim is to provide a factual and impartial account of his life, including his struggles, successes, and failures. The narrative is more analytical and detached, focusing on presenting Gandhi's life and philosophy in a clear and objective manner.

Stop to Consider

When examining autobiographical works, it is important to recognize the fluidity and complexity of categorizing them as purely "subjective" or "objective." Authors often blend elements of personal reflection with factual storytelling, making the distinction between the two

categories somewhat blurred. Moreover, an author's claim to objectivity can itself be a stylistic choice or a rhetorical device rather than a reflection of absolute neutrality. With these considerations in mind, try to assess some of the autobiographical texts that you may have gone through. It is good idea to also consider some of the critically acclaimed autobiographical texts in the literature of your language. In other words, besides dealing with such texts as *Memories of my melancholy Whores* , *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* by Gabriel Barcia Marquez, or *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov , you will do well also to include autobiographies of Harkanta Sadar Amin, *Mor Sowaran* by Padmanath Gohain Barua, *Jiban Binar Sur* by Padmadhar Chaliha, *Mor Jiban Dapon* by Benudhar Rajkhowa, *Tinikuri Dah Basarar Smriti* by Raja Bala Das, as well as the more recent autobiographical texts by Dr. Hiren Gohain, Dr. Pranab Jyoti Deka and other prominent writers of Assamese literature.

4.5 Summing Up:

Biographies and autobiographies, as literary genres, are narratives chronicling the story of an individual's life. Though both are written records of a person's life, the basic differences lies in the perspective of the author and the style of narration. As mentioned earlier, a biography is the one where the author writes about another person's life, their experiences, principles, ideals, values, as well as their contribution to the society. A biography usually narrates the life story of famous and important persons. On the other hand, an autobiography is a comprehensive account of the author's own life.

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UNIT- 5
INTRODUCTION TO OTHER LIFE
WRITING GENRES: LETTERS, DIARY
AND TRAVELOGUES

Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 An Overview of Letters, Diary And Travelogue
- 5.4 Letters as Life Writing
- 5.5 Diary as Life Writing
- 5.6 Travelogue as Life Writing
- 5.7 Summing Up
- 5.8 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives:

This unit will help in introducing you to other forms of life writing except biography and autobiography. By the end of this unit, you will be able to

- *recognize* different forms of life writing,
- *identify* these forms of life writing,
- *understand* these forms of life writing,
- *discuss* letters, diary and travelogues as a life writing genre.

5.2 Introduction:

Generally, we think life writing contains only autobiographies and biographies. But it is not so. In this unit, you will be learning about letters, diaries and travelogues as a life writing genre. Life writing is not just limited to biographies and autobiographies. It encompasses other forms like diaries, letters, travelogues, memoirs, journals and testimonies. In today's world life writing also includes blogs or blogging. After repeating the term life writing a couple of times, a question, perhaps may arise in your mind – What is meant by life writing? All kinds of accounts of individual lives and real life experiences fall

in the category of life writing. Life writing narrates the stories of lived experiences of people. The two words ‘life’ and ‘writing’ means ‘writing about one’s life’, that is, it is about one’s experiences of life.

The term ‘life writing’ was first used in the 18th century. From the 1980’s onwards, this term became popular and was much favoured within the academic circles. The writers and scholars of life writing are particularly concerned in issues such as the construction of the self, the ways a sense of self is created in the narrative., the relation between the self and the society, representation and significance of ordinary lives of the common people and so forth.

5.3 An Overview of Letters, Diary and Travelogue:

A letter is a medium used to convey messages from one person to another. In the earlier times, letters were mostly used as a means of communication. The primary purpose of letters was to send information, news and greetings.

Stop to Consider

With the advancement of technology, the use of letters has diminished. In the present time, mobile phones, online platforms and social media networks like WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram and the like are used for communication. Before, when letters were sent to someone, it took days to reach them. The anticipation of the reply of the letter is a feeling one cannot express in words. The moment the reply comes, of course, in the form of letter the person’s excitement is on another level. Now-a-days, it does not even take two seconds to send and receive a message. It happens with just one click instantly. Today’s age is an age of a click of a mouse. With one click of the button, a message is sent and received.

Letters are also a storehouse of information. In letters, a person writes about his/her experiences or feelings and emotions or the events of the day and so on. A person can write anything and everything he/she wants to write and inform the recipient about. Letters contain information the sender

wants the recipient to know. So, if we read a letter we get to know about the personal life of someone.

Letter writing was in trend for many centuries, until, telephone, mobile phones and internet took over the whole world. In ancient times, letters were written on different materials such as on bark of trees, metal, lead, wooden slabs, stones and so on. Later, letters have been written on paper. *The Paston Letters* (1422-1509) is the most ancient famous collection of letters. *The Paston Letters* shows the correspondence of three generations of the Norfolk family. Other widely known collection of letters are that of Keats, Flaubert, Mozart and Horace Walpole.

A diary is a written document for memorabilia. Diaries are a collection of memories. The events in diaries are arranged by dates, stating the happenings of the day or a period of time. Such arrangements in diaries are called diary entries. And a person who keeps a diary is called a diarist. A diary evokes the writer's experience and feelings in the truest sense. Since the earlier times, people have been writing diaries, recording their life events. A diary which is personal includes the writer's experience, thoughts and/or feelings about the incidents of his/her life. Diaries are written or can be read as episodes of a person's life. Diaries are episodic narratives of the occurrences of a person's life.

It is seen that keeping a diary became a habitual activity in the seventeenth century. However, diary records are also found from the earlier times too, which have been lost. Yet, some records are still in existence from the sixteenth century such as the diary kept by King Edward VI when he was a boy. The two great diarists of the seventeenth century were Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) and John Evelyn (1620-1706). Their diaries were published much later. Some minor diarists of the seventeenth century were Edward Lake, Henry Teonge and Roger Lowe. In the eighteenth century, women too started keeping and writing diaries regularly. Some notable female diarists were Elizabeth Byrom (1722-1801), Fanny Burney (1752-1840), Mary Countess Cowper, also known as Mary Cowper (1685-1724) and so forth.

Anne Frank also used to keep a diary with her. She used to note down all the day's events of her life when they were hiding from the Nazis. Years later, the diary was published in the form of a book, namely, *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Travelogue is a realistic account of the experiences of an individual who is travelling. In simple terms, a travelogue is a writing piece about travel. The writer writes about his/her experiences while travelling to a certain place, the way he/she feels about it, the thoughts which came into his/her mind during the journey and so on. It is written in the first person. The writer in the travelogue describes what he/she sees, hears, tastes, smells and feels about the places he/she visits during the travel.

Travelogues have existed since ancient times. The first travel writer is Herodotus of Ancient Greece. *Histories* (450 BC-420 BC) by Herodotus was a travelogue recording his travels across Greece, East Asia and North Africa. Hence, we see that people have always been captivated by unseen, distant places. They always had the enthusiasm or zeal to travel to such places, to search or find out the unknown. The earliest records of travel writing are from Egypt. There is an anonymous fourteenth century BC record known as *The Journeying of the Master of the Captains of Egypt*. Early accounts of travel also came from China of people travelling to India, mentionable works are by Fa-Hien (AD 399-414) and Shaman Hwui-Li (AD 630). The travel accounts are about their journeys to the Far East.

Travelogues help people to learn about different places, its history and cultures without moving an inch from home. Travelogues are both informing and entertaining at the same time. Isn't it interesting that we see places through someone else's eyes?

Self Assessment Question

In the 21st century digital world, do you find other forms of life-writing which can be included in this genre ? Discuss. (80 words)

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5.4 Letters as Life Writing:

As already stated life writing means writing about one's own experiences, which also means writing one's stories. In letters, a person writes about himself/herself – their struggles, the happenings in their lives and the like. Letters depict the real-life stories. Letters are written to communicate with people who stay far away. So, letters help to establish personal contacts between people. Through letters, we learn about the individual. We get to know the person from within as we tend to know their personal lives through letters. Letters, mostly, are used in the communicative frame of reference. The sender generally writes information about his/her personal life. Letters can also contain photographs, newspaper clippings, if needful. The sender can give information about the related things like photos, newspaper clippings or invitation cards. If we study letters, it can give us a lot of information about the person on a broader context. For example –

In Keats's letters, we notice the thoughts and concerns which pre-occupied him and his idea about poetry. His creativity and his insights which we get to learn from his letters has influenced many writers from generation to generation. We learnt the concept of "Negative Capability" through his letters. Keats also wrote about Shakespeare, Wordsworth (his contemporary) and Milton in his letters. Thus, through his letters we get to know the real thoughts of Keats which might have been impossible to know otherwise.

Stop to Consider

Epistolary Novel:

In simple terms, it is a novel written in the form of a letter. An epistolary novel is a work of fiction written as a series of letters. The fictional characters in the narrative write letters to each other which forms the epistolary novel. We get to know the story through the letters the characters write to each other. The epistolary form makes the text more realistic, telling the story in a truthful way as it gives the reader a glance to the interior world of the characters. Some examples of

epistolary novel are – Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie or The New Heloise* and so on.

Let us take another example of Charlotte Bronte’s letters. In the letters she wrote about the struggles which she faced with the publishers. Then she wrote about the deaths of her sisters, Anne Bronte and Emily Bronte and the tragic death of her brother, Branwell. We also get to know her difference of opinion regarding marriage through the letters; the conflicts and disagreements which she had, to reach to the decision of marriage.

Hence, we see that the letters showcase the inner lives of the people. It provides us a glimpse to their minds, the formation of ideas and the like, for example – Keats’s notion of poetry. Through the letters we know about the person’s life after all. In the letters of Charlotte Bronte, she stated the events of her personal life and her emotions in connection with it. So, we learned the course of events which she went through during her lifetime; the hardships, the conflicts she faced in her life. Thus, the letters show one’s experience of life or the lived-experience.

Check Your Progress

- Q1. What is the purpose of letters? Substantiate your answer.
- Q2. Why are letters called storehouse of information? State your reasons.

5.5 Diary as Life-Writing:

Diary is a medium to express our own views and thoughts. Diaries too record the life events of a person. Diaries gives us a close insight into a person’s life. A diary is written on a day- to-day basis recording the daily happenings. The diaries also showcase the feelings and emotions of the diarist closely. Diary reading helps us to observe the person closely and learn the narratives of his/her life. Diaries are in a chronological order so it

helps us to learn about the person's life in an episodic manner. It also helps in the process of self-reflection.

A person can look into the behaviour pattern of oneself through diary. It can help to channelize the unattended emotions as the feelings and moods or emotions are described in the diary entries. Although, diary is in an episode form, the episodes are inter-related and tell a coherent story of the individual. A diary is a self-narrated story. A diary at first glance, may give us the idea that it is a monologue. But actually, it is a dialogue. A diary is always addressed to someone - it can be an imaginary reader in the diarist's mind, God, or a dialogue with oneself.

For example –*In The Diary of Anne Frank*, Anne Frank used to describe all the daily occurrences in her life. She wrote the diary at a time when the Nazis were ruling Germany that is the Holocaust period. Adolf Hitler used to send the Jews to concentration camps and in order to escape from it, Anne Frank and her family remained hidden. In her diary she described in detail, how they used to do their daily chores so that nobody found them out. She also expressed her emotions and feelings in her diary.

Hence, we see that in a diary we find a person's life story. The diary gives us a detailed description about his/her personal life and his/her concerns regarding various matters. We can read the diaries of great personalities like Marco Polo, Leonardo da Vinci, Marie Curie, Charles Darwin and so forth. We can get insights into their minds and their lives through diary reading and eventually get inspired.

Self Assessment Question

Do you think journals can be included in the life writing genre? (40 words)

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5.6 Travelogue as Life-Writing:

Travelogue brings new experience to an individual's life and new knowledge about a place. A travelogue is basically an account of a place visited by a person. It is a person's real adventure to a place. Human-beings have always been fascinated by travelling. They love to wander and move from place to place. Travelling also makes us learn a lot of things about the place, the people residing there, its history and cultures and their habits, food and so forth. Travelling makes us a learned individual with new experience. By reading a travelogue, the reader can enlighten themselves about the place. They can learn the history and its culture or about the people without actually going to the place. Reading travel literature can give you the feeling of going there and seeing it through your eyes by sitting at home.

A travelogue is not a guide book of the place. It is the writer's individual experience while taking on the journey, the feelings associated with it, how the journey has helped the writer in some way or the other and so forth. A travelogue narrates the real-life adventure of a person. It also gives insights into the deepest emotions of the person while travelling. The experience varies from person to person due to varied perspective. A person during travel might experience something new and unexpected during the journey. Few examples of travelogue are – V.S. Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies*, Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet*, Biswanath Ghosh's *Tamarind City: Where Modern India Began*, Srinath Perur's *If It's Monday It Must Be Madurai*, *Following Fish: Travels Around the Indian Coast* by Samanth Subramaniam and so on.

In the travelogue, *If It's Monday It Must Be Madurai* by Srinath Perur, the author writes about the experience of travelling in groups. He meets different people coming from varied culture from all over the world during his travels. This is also something which is amusing for the travel enthusiasts, that is, they get to meet people around the world and learn about each other.

Travelogues are interesting piece of writing and at the same time is informative. We also get a peek into the writer's mind in travelogues; their perspective which they provide through their experiences. A travelogue is a mix of memoirs and autobiography as a person writes about his/her 'self.'

Self Assessment Question

Q1. What are travelogues? Provide examples. (40 words)

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Q2. What do you understand by the term lifewriting and how does a work become a form of life-writing ? Give reasons to support your answer. (30+60 words)

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Q3. Do you think letters, diaries and travelogues fall into the genre of lifewriting? Elaborate your answers with examples. (50 words)

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5.7 Summing Up :

Until now, you must have been thinking that only two forms of life writing exists. However, this unit has helped you to learn about the other forms of life-writing like letters, diary and travelogue. After deeply understanding this unit, you will be well-equipped to write letters, diary and travelogues to express inner feelings and life experiences in an artistic way. In this unit, you have also learned why diary, letters and travelogues are included in the life-writing genre. This unit has helped you to establish an outlook for innovative explanation of the outer world as well as the inner thoughts.

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