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Collaborative Life Writing: An Appraisal of *I, Phoolan Devi* and *Viramma, life of an untouchable.*

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Abstract

The autobiographical genre of collaborative life writing has come as a relief to overcome the stumbling block of illiteracy. It gives a chance to those who live in the fringes of society to become a voice of their worlds and also gain foray into the world of print. Anchored in the genre of autobiography, the collaborative life writing mode of narrating lives comes as a boon for its record of indigenous voices. This paper by use of the life narratives of Viramma, and Phoolan Devi attempts to gain an understanding into collaborative life writing. The texts chosen for the purpose are *I, Phoolan Devi* (1996) and *Viramma, life of an untouchable* (1997). The focus of this paper is to attempt to figure out the pros and cons of collaborative life writing and interrogate the gendered slant in its use and reach.

Keywords: illiteracy, Life narrative, collaborative life-writing, indigenous, autobiography.

Literacy gave the print medium a flip and created a divide between those who can and cannot read or write. Those who can read and write got access to books or wrote books themselves. On the other hand, those who could not read or write found it difficult to talk about their lives or get published because the Indian scene was plagued with illiteracy. While there are many genres in which books got written and published, the autobiographical genre was the closest to telling lived lives. Women in India like their counterparts from around the world lived in oblivion until a century ago, failing to gain prominence or fame in the print medium. This paper with the help of collaborative life writing of *Viramma, life of an untouchable* and *I, Phoolan Devi* illustrate the many ways in which the women who never received literacy gained a voice.

Collaborative autobiography which is interchangeably put in use with other terms such as collaborative life-writing/narrative is a variant of the autobiographical form of writing. The difference is that the number of people who are involved in the narration of a single life story increases in collaborative life writing. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson

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attempt to define the collaborative life writing process as "…two people are involved in producing the story: one is the investigator, who does the interviewing and assembles the narrative from the primary materials given; the second is the informant, who tells a story through interviews or informal conversations" (67). The suffix life writing is preferred to be in use conjointly with the prefix 'collaborative' and together called 'collaborative life-writing' because Laura Marcus in an introduction to *Autobiography* groups life-writing as an umbrella term that "…covers broad range of texts, including autobiography, biography, letters, memoirs, and diaries" (1).

The range of forms that are covered under life writing gives diverse opportunities for fashioning of the self. John Stuart Mill, the political philosopher who popularized utilitarianism in the, *The Subjection of Women*, underlines the importance of women being a voice for themselves. He says: "…we may safely assert that the knowledge men can acquire of women, even as they have been and are, without reference to what they might be, is wretchedly imperfect and superficial, and always will be so, until women themselves have told all they have to tell" (45-46). It is well known that in all fields of human engagement women's presence gained visibility gradually only after the efforts to recognize the loop sided men's representation of women slowly began to pay dividends.

Although there are several genres through which women's voice has found an expression, the inherent expressiveness of experiences is harnessed at its optimum best only in the self-referential mode of writing. Autobiography is one form of self-referential writing. Theoreticians of autobiography Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's comment in the book *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* highlights the purpose of women's writing as an aid "to write themselves to history" (5). The genre and its credibility is asserted by both Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson who in *Reading Autobiography* also lay emphasis on the potential of the self's narrative for according to them nothing can be "…more simpler to understand than the act of people representing what they know best, their own lives" (1). The ability of women's life writing is such that if an alternative history needs to be written there are plenitude of themes in relation to the revelation of self that can be foregrounded from within women's autobiographies.

On a closer look it can be found that women in India have mostly written in the several forms that belong to the life writing cluster and many of these writings find a place in a collection of writing called *Women's Voices* (xi). In the preface to *Women Writing in India*,

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the editors of the volume Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, underscore that women's writing "…illuminate the conditions in which women wrote" (xvii). Anyone who tries to understand the illustrative lives of women who made it into the pages of *Women's Voices* and *Women Writing in India* will not deny the fact that these women had the privilege to gain access to education and so got the advantage of their literacy. While regional literatures in translation offered more visibility to literate women writers, the women who were denied literacy and belonged to the marginalized groups failed to find any representation. It is in this milieu that the entry of collaborative life writing into the Indian literary scene works to bring light into the lives of those who have not received formal education or literacy.

There are two life narratives that are written as a result of the collaborative effort which form part of the analysis in this paper. These are based on the lives of Phoolan Devi and Viramma. The first of them is Phoolan Devi paraphrases her life in her autobiography as "I was born an underdog, but I became a queen" (Cover copy). Phoolan Devi was a bandit whose course of life and transformative experiences and decisions to quit her trade all form part of her narrative in *I, Phoolan Devi.* The work was published in 1996 by Sphere Publishers. Phoolan Devi narrates her life with the help of her collaborators. A 500 page narrative of Phoolan's life was an outcome of this collaboration.

Viramma on the other hand is an agricultural labourer. She lived at a time when serfdom was still in practice. Her songs were well known in her hamlet. It is for her traditional knowledge and her songs of dirge that Viramma was popular. The ethnomusicological researcher Josiane Racine together with Jean-Luc Racine conversed with her in order to document her knowledge. This conversation covered her life from birth to later life. It was first transcribed and later translated. The research collaboration in its final form came to be known as *Viramma, Life of an Untouchable* and was published by Verso in 1997.

Phoolan Devi and Viramma have little in common except that both are women with no formal education or literacy. Each of their life's representation in print is unthinkable if not for the initiative of collaborative life writing. Phoolan Devi in her narrative *I, Phoolan Devi,* expresses happiness on being able to tell her story to the world as, "I cannot read or write. This is my story…" (x). The life of Phoolan Devi found a voice in print through the collaborative efforts of Marie-Therese Cuny and Paul Rambali when they agreed with each other to pair with her in order to record her story. Phoolan Devi's outpour on what it felt for

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her to be able to vocalize her life in print finds a space in the epilogue of *I, Phoolan Devi.* Her words in the epilogue is illustrative of the genre's strength:

> So many people had spoken for me without me ever having been able to speak for myself. So many people had taken my photo and distorted it for their purposes. So many people disdained the little village girl, who was tortured and humiliated, but still was not crushed…I had seen all kinds of bandits. Assassins has tried to take my life, journalists had tried to get my story, movie directors had tried to capture me on film. They all thought they could speak about me as though I didn't exist, as though I still didn't have any right to respect. The bandits had tried to torture my body, but the others tried to torture my spirit. Now, for the first time, a woman from my community has been able to tell the truth about her life, and testify in public to the injustice we all had to suffer (496).

Phoolan Devi in her narrative expressed her wish to be treated as a human being over her other identities (497). This message would not have reached beyond her times, if not for the efforts to document her life. Although denied access to education or literacy, the tool of collaborative life writing came to her aid gave her a platform to fulfil her desire.

While the merits of collaborative autobiography is widely accepted, conspicuously there is no documentary evidence in India to align men's voice in the life writing tradition in general and collaborative life writing in particular. Interestingly the most popular or the most controversial (Gilmore 701) collaborative life writing like *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1983) from the west is also by a woman. Taking cognizance of these facts it can be claimed that this form of collaborative life writing has come to be hailed as a mouthpiece of women themselves.

The gendered nature of the use of collaborative life writing is only incidental but the form in itself is not free of demerits. One of the leading criticisms that is levied on collaborative life writing is its dependence on multiple subjectivities for its survival. It must be admitted that subjectivity is inherent in the autobiographical form of writing, but in case of collaborative autobiographies or life narrative, the subjectivity of the collaborator is dominant and determine the final outcome of the content in print. Such allegation on subjectivity in collaborative life writing is because it is "…multiply mediated by the interviewer and editor, and often two or more parties are included in the production of the published story, particularly when translation is required." (Smith and Watson, 265).

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In the translator's note of *Viramma, life of Untouchable,* Will Hobson the translator emphasises his helplessness on elements of the narrative that is lost in the process of translation for he says: "There are certain inevitable compromises and omissions when an oral culture is represented in print. It is hard to retain all the context that informs conversations –gestures, facial expressions, the pitch and tone of a voice, the interjections of other participants –and much of this has had to be left to the reader's imagination" (vi). The fact remains that the conversations between Viramma and Josiane Racine was in Tamil. The conversation was first transcribed then translated to French. The book was first published in French and later translated from French to English. These multiple translations have consequently not been without loss but as Will Hobson points out "…translation allows Viramma's identity to emerge, not just through her thoughts, emotions and the ways she has reacted to the events of her life, but also through the way she expressed herself to Joasine Racine throughout the 1980s" (vi). The interference of multiple subjectivities that is both language and culture specific cannot be denied. However, translation has further enabled the texts reach to many hands and lands.

As it was revealed from the aforementioned lines, in Viramma's narrative the subjectivities of the translators were dominant. There are similar references to inherent subjectivities that are present within Phoolan Devi's narrative too. Unlike Viramma, in the shaping of Phoolan Devi's narrative, the publisher's role dominates. This is evident from the indexical note of the publisher that appears in the last pages of the narrative in which the chairman of the publishing group Bernard Fixot says, "If you are illiterate, writing your autobiography is certainly a unique challenge. Publishing an illiterate author has been too…Phoolan agreed, and during the summer that followed she told her story on tape. Once transcribed, her account filled over 2000 pages. We commissioned two writers to bring the material down to size and together they gave it the shape of the book" (499).

The observation on collaborative life writing by critic G. Thomas Couser (1988) in the article "Making, Taking, and Faking Lives: The Ethics of Collaborative Life Writing" offers insight into the nature of the form and its inherent subjectivities when he describes the process as:

> Autobiographical collaborations are rather like arranged marriages and other domestic partnerships: partners enter into a relationship for some duration, they "make life" together, and they produce an offspring that will derive traits from each of them. Each

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> partner, has strong interest in the fate of the offspring, which will reflect on each in a different way. Much of this is true of any collaborative authorship, of course; with autobiography however the fact that the joint product is a life story that raises the stakes –at least for the subject. (335)

The subjectivities of the translator in shaping the life narrative of Viramma and the predominant influence of the publisher in the drafting of Phoolan Devi's narrative reinstate the observation of G. Thomas Couser who calls for a "…need to be attentive to the benefits as well as the liabilities of collaboration" (347).

In sum, the collaborative life writing form of self-referential writing has been of help to women who have been denied literacy to gain themselves a voice in the print medium. If not for the collaborative form of life writing, the lives of Viramma and Phoolan Devi could have easily slipped pass unrecognized in the collective memory of the Indian history of women's writing. The richness of the content of collaborative life writing is greatly backed by the scope it gives for the indigenous experiential telling. Strangely this very platform in which native voices get a channel to broadcast themselves, is not free from the interlocutor's subjectivity. The teller of the narrative has little choice over the content that finally makes it to print and those that are deemed to be omitted from the teller's narrative becomes the choice of the collaborator. Despite every demerit that could be pointed out, the merits of the collaborative model of autobiography stand out because it is through this form of writing that the voices from the lived lives of the indigenous reach out to them who haven't lived it.

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