

The Politics of (Re)naming in the Autobiographies of Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das and Bama Faustina

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What Is in a Name?

“What is in a name?” (Shakespeare *Romeo and Juliet*, II.II 16). Though this quote from Shakespeare’s famous play *Romeo and Juliet* connotes that the names and naming are nothing more than just a handy reference work, the utter prominence of naming system lies in the fact that the orderly world without it cannot be imagined. It helps us in establishing our self-identity. Naturally, we build an image in our mind by putting together our experiences and attributes and then attaching that image with the name. A person’s identity invariably begins with his/her name, which becomes a complement of the self. Though it is initially a mark of physical identity, the name also comes to represent for the person an inner being. Therefore, for some persons the name becomes a veritable reflection of their self. Some cherish it; some change it to represent their being. The name of a person helps in developing his/her sense of self. Some try to live up to their names while some try to run away.

The Study of Self

The study of self, beginning with name has been invariably a multifarious subject to tackle with due to its suppleness. The ancient philosophers would never have agreed to the postmodernists’ notions of the self. Due to the multiplicity, flexibility and uncertainty of self, it becomes somewhat difficult to render a simple analysis of the representation of self by the three major women autobiographers namely Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das and Bama Faustina. The problem is further accentuated by the fact that though all the three writers are women born in the twentieth century in India, they belong to different sects or religions, regions and class amounting to their difference in the perception and construction of their selfhood. The present study has, therefore, undertaken to point out the commonality as well as differences in the life experiences and self-reflexivity of these women autobiographers.

There is a close connection between a person’s given name and their feeling of identity and self. In child psychology, it has been observed that the parents’ choice of names for their child will have an influence on the overall development of the personality of a child. In literature too, the names and naming system carry a larger significance. It affects the authors in their process of writing. Alastair Fowler observes, “In literature, names are often doors to meaning, and words giving glimpses of the writer’s intensions” (“What’s in a literary name?”).

The Politics of Naming

The politics of naming as a literary feature is one of the most perennial topics of interest, yet very little general discussion has ensued over this topic. Benedicto observes, “Authors often make use of the strong connection between names and the feeling of personal identity as an element in their thematic structures” (Val 282). The politics of naming system tends to appear either in the portrayal of the characters by the author or the renaming of the author him/herself in his/her personal life.

In the onomastics (the study of the history and origin of proper names, especially personal names) research, names and identity are quite intertwined. Mihály Hajdú is of the opinion that “an interest in names or the germs of onomastics can be found in myths, legends of ethnogenesis and works of literature as long as thousands of years ago. This is evidenced by explanations and etymologies given to names. (“The History of Onomastics”). The theory of onomastics is illuminatingly helpful to understand the author’s intension behind the politics of naming system. Poststructuralists are of the opinion that though the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, it provides language an empirical power. (Eagleton 127-129). It helps us to change and construct the perceptions.

Berthoff, in another book *Reclaiming the Imagination* argues:

The power of naming, however, goes beyond shaping the perceptions of the name. Once chosen, a name suggests permanence, as if it could lay a claim upon the true nature of an object. By fixing an object or experience with an apparent unity or permanent focus, names appear to represent the true nature of phenomena. (151)

The same writer, in his book *The Making of Meaning* observes, “Central to this conception of naming is the understanding that naming, in its most simple representation, involves individuals in a concurrent process of sorting and gathering, comparing and contrasting within one’s evolving view of reality (110). The writer seems to suggest that the names and that the associated phenomena become synonymous once the image gets integrated with the name.

Naming Characters with a Purpose

There are many instances in literature where the writers name their characters with a purpose. For instance, writers like Shashi Deshpande adopt this very naming system in her famous novel *That Long Silence* where Jaya is renamed after marriage as Suhasini. The word ‘Jaya’ denotes ‘Victory’ while ‘Suhasini’ means soft woman and a placid woman. Here, the protagonist has been renamed from her pre-marital status to post-marital status. This change basically defines the crux of the novel. It goes, “Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out the rest of the world, you are safe. That poor idiotic woman Suhasini believed in this. I know better, now I know that safety is always unattainable. You are never safe” (17).

Social Behaviour

It is a general concept that social behaviours are not social in their origin but are inborn. It is well known that biological essentialism has been the bedrock of most traditional thinking about women which is used both to depreciate and to venerate them. In this way they become

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inevitable and incontrovertible. The idea of gender roles whether it is the issue of childcare, the violence of male power or the suitability of women to fight in the front line has been particularly prone to this idea of a natural determinism. However, it is always stated that gendered behavior is dictated to us by nature, though feminist thought has consistently challenged this idea. The gender and identity manifested are the products of a socially and culturally sanctioned system and hierarchy, and not the inevitable result of naturally occurring differences between men and women or pre-programmed by chromosomes, genes or genitals. The social behaviors and identities that are defined as feminine are seen as the product of purely cultural and historical forces, rather than any natural propensity or essence. Gender behavior is the result of purely human factors and is not we may be born with certain body types, but the modes of appearance, patterns of behavior, distribution of social and economic power and opportunity together form the gender structure of a given society. Such gendered social structure is the production of a specific political history and as well as specific institutions. This distinction between biological sex and cultural gender rejects theories – even feminist ones – that fall back on the biological difference between the male and female bodies as clarification for the different behavior of men and women. The latter are to be seen as artificial and thus changeable. Monique Wittig has put it like this: “By admitting that there is a ‘natural’ distinction between women and men, we naturalize history, we assume that ‘men’ and ‘women’ have always existed and will always exist. Not only do we naturalize history, but also consequently we naturalize the social phenomena which express our oppression, making change impossible” (10-11).

Theory of Representation

The theory of representation involves the awareness of one’s sensory state. The convergence of the conscious self and the phenomenal self constitutes self-representation. Any conscious sensory experience/state contains two essential components namely qualitative character and the subjective character. “The former is implicated in the distinction between sensory states and non-sensory cognitive states like thoughts and beliefs, while the latter is implicated in the distinction between conscious and unconscious mental states”, says Joseph Levine (“Conscious Awareness and [Self-] Representation”). The theory of self-representation distinguishes conscious states from non-conscious states. Describing it in more comprehensive manner, Urieh Kriegel and Kenneth Willford state:

On the one theory, self-representation is what distinguishes conscious states from non-conscious states. Having a conscious experience is itself a matter of occupying a state that reflexively represents itself. On the other theory, self-representation is used to distinguish phenomenal concepts from other ways of representing conscious experiences. On this view, there is not anything particularly reflexive about a conscious experience per se.

Exclusionary and Creative

The act of naming “must be viewed as an exclusionary as well as creative” (Cherryl Armstrong and Sheryll Fontaine 9). Moreover, as Kenneth Burke explains, because by naming we are not only classifying what has taken our attention, we are necessarily “directing the attention into some channels rather than others” (45). Through the act of naming, one shapes out

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an identity of oneself. It is only through naming that an individual or a group is excluded or included, burdened or unburdened.

Autobiography

Autobiography as a piece of writing is an inter-subjective, retrospective construction from within the existing, discursively mediated practices of writing and telling a life. Living as a human being inevitably entails reflexivity. Representation is invariably inter-subjective; it is necessarily located within a social relation to others. In this sense, autobiography is a form of discursive practice that reconstructs the past as the major means of self/other understanding. Autobiography is a mode of discursive practice the major function of which is to construct continuous, unified personal identities at the intersection of the multiple discontinuous, fragmented and often contradictory socio-cultural positioning available. This construction is a process of articulating different narrated events together into a temporarily fixed coherence, providing a sufficient sense of identity through the narrative devices and structures. Autobiography as a genre emerges in the dialectic of the narrated and narrating events.

Represent Their Self by Re-naming Themselves

All the three women writers namely Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das and Bama Faustina resolved to re-present their self by renaming themselves. The essential differences in the way the three writers re-named themselves bring out the flavor of comparison or contrast in their ideas and self-perception, reconstruction and representation.

Amrita Pritam

In the autobiographies of Amrita Pritam namely *The Revenue Stamp*, *Shadow of Words*, and *The Black Rose*, she cherished her first name but did not stick to the Sikh identity marker of 'Singh'/ Kaur and thus shows her subversion of social ethnic conventions. She did not bind herself with any preset ethnic gendered identity. By doing away with these confinements she tried to reflect her spirit of critiquing social/ ethnic identities and divisions, which also forms the soul of her autobiographies. She avoids being dogmatic and moves towards inclusivity. This renaming is not discussed in her life writings as is done with the second subversion. The second subversion is that after marriage she adopted not the last but the first name of her husband. Though the relationship between Amrita and her husband, Pritam Singh had not been a fulfilling one, she did not disassociate herself with his name even after separation perhaps because either the word 'Pritam' best represented her self's craving for love or she wanted to carry it as a tribute to the goodness of her husband, who was afraid of public opinion but did neither restrict nor oppress her or it was to cherish Sahir, whom she loved from the core of her heart – a love that could not be consummated but was an inseparable part of her inner being that abundantly crept into her art. The subversion of the naming system reflects subversion of the patriarchal normativity whereby she foregrounds her subjective self, her needs and desires as a woman, which she sought through extra marital relationships and live-in relationship with Imroj, unperturbed by the public opinion about her. But true to her first name search for a spiritual self is central to her autobiography.

Kamala Das

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Like Amrita, Kamala's quest for self-realization through fulfillment of desire as woman is the central motif in her autobiography. As far as her self-representation in *My Story* (1973) is concerned, Kamala Das accepts her socially constructed identity with the second name of her husband. Kamala's pen name 'Madhavakutty' changed into Kamala Das after her marriage which at the age of 65, after her conversion to Islam (1999), she changed to Kamala Suraiya. It is also a noticeable thing that her autobiography *My Story* was written much before her conversion. It was written when she had established herself as a writer. Retaining Das's represented her feminine self through her stay within marriage and dropping her matriarchal family name, Nair showing both her individual and family internalization of and conformity to the social and ethnic conventions. Following the social conventions, she used the last name of her husband with her name. Her Islamic middle name after her conversion and hence not included in her autobiography, along with the last name of her husband again indicates her persistence with the socio-ethnic follow up. Her naming system does not show in any sense her secular spirit and, thus, true to her name, the realization of her material self (physical and emotional) is a predominant part of her self-representation in her autobiography, though we also find her seeking both an emotional and intellectual partner in her 'extramarital' virtual/ visionary relationships.

Gender differences are constructed in contexts of the family and society just as we find the difference in genitals, one possessing and one lacking. And self-formation and identity is directly and indirectly affected by these conditions. The components of feminine identity in all walks of life invariably are assigned to women by patriarchal society. Mitchell, a feminist says that the imposed feminine identity will continue in the absence of resistance. Hence selfhood and subjectivity demand resistance to the norm, and resistance requires a certain level of consciousness of the conditions of the self to assume agency. Kamala Das's autobiography represents her own despairs and hopes and is termed as confessions but merely dismissing as a confession is ignoring the structure of writers' aesthetics. Eric Erikson's opinion regarding women autobiographies as recreation of one's own image and making those images as convincing fits to the case of Kamala Das. It becomes pertinent to see what image Kamala Das was trying to create for herself.

Das looks back not to present herself as a woman in conformity to the social ideal but to represent herself as a woman, she would like to be. That is why visions, dreams and hallucinations form an important part of the self-representation. Second, she looks back to recapture the moments when she finds the courage to assume subjectivity and claim autonomy of herself. Third she looks back and represents herself not as an object but as subject. Kamala Das finds herself unable to calculate her resistance as she confronts depression at mind level and sickness at body level.

On the contrary Amrita Pritam has subversive nature. Dreams and visions are also a significant aspect of her autobiographies, but Amrita is able to interpret those dreams to resolve the dilemmas of the self, which she is able to evolve conceptually too.

Women's Subjectivity

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Women's subjectivity has been historically constructed and expressed through the phenomenological equation of self/other which necessarily rests masculine selfhood upon feminine otherness. Today women exhibit strong desire is to de center this socially dominant discourse of power, agency and autonomy in order to actualize, strengthen and represent as well as re-present their self in the world. They undertake to talk about their selves, their experiences, their ways of being and becoming because they feel that they cannot long for, reject or synthesize a new mode of being from a thesis which has never contained, expressed or presented what they have felt their experiences to be. Therefore, much of their writings have come as both a self-representation and self re-presentation. They re-evaluate the women's self and offer the chief sources of their oppression, besides examining self's roles as a mode of social control. It is their practice of consciousness-raising which has forged a new individual and collective identity of women. However, within these representation of woman's self, there lie embedded multiple differences in experiences of life, giving rise to a heterogeneous character within a homogenizing experience of othering.

Bama Faustina

While discussing the reasons of (re)naming, apparently, we find that Bama Faustina does not talk of the reasons of renaming herself in her autobiography – *Karukku* and *Sangati: Events* too but the changes she subjectively made in her name reveal the secular aspect of herself. Her full name Faustina Mary Bathima Rani reflects the inclusivity of Christianity, Islamic and Hindu religious beliefs and thus her stronger commitment of the self to humanism than to any one religious order. In renaming herself, Bama did not incarcerate herself in any single idea of ethnic identity. It is important to note that she dropped "Rani" from her name because of two reasons. Firstly, and most influentially, born in a dalit family she had not been treated as queen in real sense. She led a life of poverty and deprivation, which seemed quite ironical to her name. Secondly by dropping the ethnically signifying names and jumbling the syllables into a new coinage 'Bama', she exhibited her vision which transcended the ethnic divisions and hence like Amrita Pritam sought for a representation of a more secular self than Kamala Das did.

Feminine, Feminist and Female Characteristics

In the (re)naming of all three women autobiographers, thus, we find the glimpse of feminine, feminist and female characteristics. The very act of (re)naming has brought to the fore their craving for subjectivity and selfhood. They want to discard such a society that has provided them no room of their own. By (re)defining themselves, thus, Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das and Bama Faustina in particular and all women writers in general are (re)building the canonical literature grabbed in the clutches of patriarchal tradition.

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