The Representation of the Postmodern Subject in Autobiography

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Received: 14/12/2017
Accepted: 31/12/2018

Abstract
Autobiography, a narrative in which the author recounts his experiences, could take the form of a fiction or a poem, or an honest explanation of one’s life. Autobiography heavily relies on our memory of the experiences we have had over a certain period of time. The related events might not be retold in linear time, but represented in the text in fragments. The “self” in the author’s mind enjoys a close relationship to the events that have left an impact on his life. The subject of an autobiography is the product of moving from one moment to another, and from one experience to another. This multiplicity in the subject’s position, once regarded as an abnormality, has now turned into a postmodern norm. With the removal of ambiguity from the modern concept of the sovereign subject of the Enlightenment and replacement of reality with the subjective constructs rising from the autobiographer’s desire, the meaning of the subject in autobiography is the performance of a fragmented “self,” which might also be assumed as the “other.” The question this article aims to answer is what role the ambiguous “I” plays in our reading of a postmodern subject in an autobiography. It also explores how the “others” reconstructed in the text, could free themselves from the status of otherness, so as to adopt a position in the world from a historical point of view and be considered as the “I” who is the author of an autobiography and participates in various discourses.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Autobiography, Subject, Representation, Discourse

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction
The fragmentation of the subject is a characteristic of the postmodern era where reality is replaced by represented images of individuals. As such, subjectivity in the form of the performance of the “self” creates a series of represented images for which no single origin can be identified. Therefore, the question of identity and attempt to fix or treat it as infinite will arise. Nowadays, identity crisis is discernible in all aspects of individual, social, cultural and political life, abundant instances of which exist in social media worldwide.

Autobiography, a written account of the first person’s life as “I” and a style of writing to produce oneself, is inherited from the Enlightenment of the 18th century. Intellectuals of that period regarded self-contemplation as a virtue of those who think and “thus exist” and participate in social discourses. Autobiography as a an expression of the self by the isolated contemporary individual afflicted by identity crisis draws attention to itself in the fields of philosophy, cultural studies, literary theories and criticism. Although theories about this style of writing have flourished in the Western academic centers since the 1950s, it has rarely been dealt with in Persian language. In view of the growth of autobiography around the world, it seems necessary to learn about its historical background, theoretical foundations and to critical approaches to its analysis. Hence, the present article seeks to prepare the ground for theoretical and practical research in this field in Iran.

2. Theoretical Framework
The first question that comes to mind is whether we deal with an individual, fundamentalist self that is integrated, unified and is a creator of meanings or we are reading a fragmented, unstable subject, i.e., a dynamic subject that undergoes changes over time. In our reading of autobiography in this article, we move from the traditional, humanist notion of the subject to the unstable postmodern subject, and consequently to the role of a multiplied “I” and an “other” arising from such texts. Consequently, we should question any simple relation
between discourse and the speaking subject, particularly the view that “experience produces the voice”; i.e., being a woman means to speak with a feminine voice. The autobiographer tries to become the “other” in his writing by adopting techniques and forms from various discourses, which include multi-cultural ways of self-representation. Foucault, likewise, states that we write to become another person. Therefore, autobiography provides an opportunity for the transformation of the Self as by thinking about the events in our life and writing about them, we gain the opportunity to discover how we have become the “other”.

3. Methodology
The present study, which is based on an interdisciplinary reading, offers a new concept of autobiography and identity and tries to provide a clear perspective on human’s status in relation to the other in the contemporary world. As such, this study tries to help develop knowledge in philosophy, literature and cultural studies in the postmodern era. The library research methodology is used, and the data has been gathered from current literary and philosophical writings on the subject in English.

4. Findings and Discussion
The growth in writing autobiographies since 1970 is indebted to the formation of social and political movements in the world, giving opportunity to a wider range of people to publish their expectations of life and suppressed histories. There are two main points about the contemporary genre of autobiography. First, as far as the form is concerned, certain autobiographies are experimental, unstable and multi-voiced. They serve as documentation of the Self, and to the same extent, they are varied and could include criticism, parody or imitative replicas of the Self. Secondly, some autobiographies focus on telling a different story of the Self, rather than telling a story in a different way. The emergence of movements dealing with identities in the recent decades is responsible for the creation of different texts and expansion of this writing style, paving the way for critical and theoretical studies on gender, race, feminism and post-colonialism. Also, in an autobiography,
the private and public lives of the author are closely intertwined, granting the narrative legitimacy and allowing for its fabricatedness. Identities are constructs, and at the same time, give embodiment to one’s wish for stability and positioning in a certain time and place. In the text of autobiography, the writing subject is engaged in meaning creation as something related to the realm of images or the mirror stage. Images constructed in the writing subject’s mind are encompassed in the “signified”. The writing subject is likewise entangled with the meaninglessness of the symbolic order when realizing the fragmentation and gap in the Self, which cannot be filled otherwise.

5. Conclusion
The theory of the subject in autobiography points to the existence of multiple contradictory subjectivities as the outcome of multiple discourses in every moment of history. The notion of individualistic, unified and indivisible Self of the Enlightenment era has given rise to the representations of hegemonic autobiographies. This outlook hides the ways we have been shaped in language and adopted different positions according to our race, social class, gender and ethnicity. Since the paradigm of essentialist-humanist Self generalizes and globalizes its viewpoint about human beings, it de-historicizes individuals and ignores the dialectics of historical moment as well as the ideological workings that give forms to subjectivities. Finally, we should admit that autobiographies are not an innocent search for a better understanding of one’s Self or past. Every person has a motive to present themselves or their pasts. The study of autobiographies thus offers an opportunity for cultural criticism and social changes.

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Bibliography


