

The Reconstruction of Coherent Identity in Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary*

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Abstract

Baby Halder's autobiography, *A Life Less Ordinary* (2013), documents the life of an ordinary domestic worker who stood unabated amid her life crisis. In the book, Baby recollects her lived experiences as an abandoned child, a married woman trapped in a violent marriage, a domestic worker, and subsequently her transformative journey to becoming a writer. She was a victim of child abuse, domestic violence as well as psychological harassment. However, her unyielding resilience and determination have left an indelible mark transforming her struggle into a remarkable strength and a unique representative voice for the marginalized. Baby Halder's autobiography has primarily been studied through themes of caste, class, gender, patriarchy, marginalization, domestic labor and poverty. But attention to the theoretical functions of Autobiographical Memory remains relatively limited. Hence, the present paper addresses this gap through a close reading of Baby Halder's autobiography by employing the directive, self, and social functions of autobiographical memory. The present paper examines how memory helps Baby Halder reconstruct her identity, understand her past, respond to the present situation, guide future choices, and maintain social relationships. The paper contends that Baby's recollection is a transformative process through which

her memories from various life events are reconstructed into a coherent sense of self. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates how autobiographical memory enables Baby Halder in transforming her marginalized position into an empowered identity.

Keywords: Domestic Worker, Autobiographical Memory, Coherent Identity, Marginalized, Transformative Image

Introduction

Baby Halder, a Bengali domestic worker turned author, is highly acclaimed for her autobiographical book, *A Life Less Ordinary* (2013), which vividly documents her painful memories as she traces her journey from childhood to becoming a writer. The publication of her autobiographical narrative was made possible by Dr Prabodh Kumar (Tatush), an employer and a father figure who encouraged her to read and then write. It was his guidance and encouragement that inspired and motivated Baby to write her life story. Ultimately, through the process, she documents her lived experiences from her fragmented past and reconstructs her identity through her memories. Baby's remarkable story of courage and resilience has not only offered hope to millions of marginalized individuals caught up in similar situations but also garnered recognition for her unique representative voice emerging from the margins of Indian society.

Baby Halder emerged as a transformative literary figure whose work continues to challenge society and bring new understandings of diverse marginalized voices. Her autobiography, *A Life Less Ordinary*, is also a social document of marginalized women that exposes the harsh, invisible societal pressures and expectations, patriarchal oppression, gender inequities and economic exploitation endured by them. Through this work, Baby contributes to the literary discourse on Indian women's autobiographies, broadening representation within the genre by sensitizing mainstream writers to the diverse lived experiences of women from different social backgrounds. Furthermore, it prompts critical discussions on contemporary issues such as identity, gender norms, trauma and memory, and the complexities of caste and class.

Writing an autobiography is intricately linked to memory as it helps construct an individual's fragmented lived experiences into a

coherent narrative. The role of memory in writing an autobiography is not solely for the purpose of recollecting past events. It is a crucial tool for preserving past events and helps shape an individual's identity over time. In essence, memory acts as a bridge between the past and the present, allowing the writer to revisit past experiences, thoughts and emotions and reflect on them to better understand the present sense of self. Through recollections and reflections of personal lived experiences, individuals can reconstruct fragmented lives and transform them into a purposeful identity. Autobiographical memory is one such memory that recollects personal experiences and events and helps construct the self. It is a "unique type of memory that ties our self to our past, that creates a sense of continuity and coherence to our lives, and that forms a life story that defines who we are, how we became this way and who we will become. This type of memory is quite simply our sense of identity across time" (Fivush & Waters, 2012, p.2). Conway and Pearce's (2000) observation is worth mentioning when they say that "autobiographical memory is of fundamental significance for the self, for emotions, and for the experience of personhood, that is, for the experience of enduring as an individual, in a culture, over time" (p.261).

Theoretical Framework

The present paper examines Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* through the theoretical framework of autobiographical memory, particularly its three primary functions: the directive, self, and social functions identified by Bluck et al. in "A Tale of Three Functions: The Self-Reported Uses of Autobiographical Memory" (2000). Though these three functions are typically studied in the context of psychology, they provide a conceptual framework for understanding Baby Halder's autobiographical narrative and for reconstructing her coherent identity from her fragmented memories.

According to Bluck et al., autobiographical memory serves three major functions: (a) the directive, (b) the self, and (c) the social functions.

A The Directive Function: The directive function of autobiographical memory "involves using the past to guide present and future thought and behavior" (Bluck et al., 2005, p.93), and also "drew in items

that represent meaning making about one's life trajectory" (p.108). This function reflects on past experiences to solve problems and to direct one's present and future-oriented actions to counteract human error. It also directs individuals to develop opinions and attitudes that motivate decision-making in the present, understand what caused them and make plans for the future. Through recollections of past actions and behavior, individuals learn from past experiences, asking new questions of past understanding and thereby directing present and predicting future outcomes.

B The Self Function: The self function of autobiographical memory allows individuals to maintain a persistent sense of self over time by focusing on "self-continuity" even in the face of "developmental change and life events" (Bluck et al., 2005, p.110). This function helps individuals maintain continuity between past and present. It also reflects on past life events and helps understand who they have become in the present, how they have changed, and constructs a stable sense of their identity over time.

C The Social Function: The social function of autobiographical memory focuses on two factors: "Developing Relationships and Nurturing Relationships". This function manifests "learning about another's life in order to form a new relationship and maintain warmth (e.g., empathy) and social bonding in existing relationships". (Bluck et al., 2005, p.110). It focuses on sharing personal memories, providing information about oneself to facilitate conversation and mutual understanding. It engages listeners by eliciting empathetic responses through personal memories of similar experiences. In this manner, this function initiates social bonds, builds a communicative bridge and helps interpret unique lived realities for those who are unfamiliar with others' lives.

Discussion

(A) Directive Function: Transformation and Empowerment Through Memory

A Life Less Ordinary (2013) narrates Baby Halder's transformative image from her childhood past struggles through adulthood and to becoming a writer. Her narrative encompasses a diverse range of her traumatic lived experiences. Growing up, Baby

had a rough childhood as she was abandoned by her mother and was substantially deprived of parental love and affection. Her mother's disappearance had deeply affected her emotional needs and affection during her childhood. These experiences of abandonment have shaped her ability "to comprehend the past and to predict future outcomes" (Bluck et al., 2005, p. 93). Drawing from this prior experience of her abandonment, she stays committed to taking care of her children and doing her best in providing stability, unlike her mother. In the book, she also speaks volumes about her married life following the domestic abuse she had long endured. Her married life was marked by misery and hardship as she was trapped in an abusive marriage and "violence seems to be an almost routine, everyday affair" (Butalia, viii). Baby was assaulted for petty reasons such as going to their neighbor's place which her husband (Shankar) did not approve of. She writes:

I grabbed my child and rushed home, full of fear. He didn't say a word when he saw me, but roughly caught me by my hair and started kicking and beating me. Then he began to shout and curse: "You bitch", he shouted, "I told you not to go there and you won't listen". Curses and blows rained down upon me. (Halder, 2013, p.79)

She had to endure her husband's abusive nature time and again. A heart-rending incident in the book was when one of her husband's friends Ajit pursued her persistently. Ironically, instead of confronting Ajit, Baby's husband taunts her and beats her, making it her fault: "My husband beats me up time and again and I tried to ask him why it was I who was getting the beating, and why not the man who was harassing me" (Halder, 2013, p.81). Baby was abused even to the extent of experiencing a near-death situation, when one time, her husband hit her head with a stone and her "forehead split apart, and blood gushed out" (p.84). And at times, she got beaten up for no reason at all. In the midst of all these tensions, she goes on living and keeping up with her husband's abusive nature until one day she decides to leave him after being thrashed badly. Baby's autobiographical memory informs her of previous experiences and serves as an "aid to solving problems and to the development of opinions and attitudes" (Bluck et al., 2005, p 93) and self-worth. Even when her father and

relatives insist her to go back to her husband, she was adamant about her decision and said:

I am not going there anymore. Only I know what I have had to bear living with him, now I've had enough. If I go back, the same thing will start all over again and my life will not only be a living hell but it will become a sideshow to anyone who wants to watch. (Halder, 2013, p.118)

Baby's past experience of her husband's constant domestic violence has led her to think of doing something about her life. She reflects on her painful memories when she writes: "It was that that made me realize that things would not work out and that I had to be strong and find a way out of this mess" (Halder, 2013, p.130). She realized that the only solution to stop these harassments and abuses was to walk out of her marriage. The realization that she will remain a battered individual in the hands of her husband is directed by her past experiences. This awareness urged her to "ask new questions of old information in order to solve problems in the present and predict future events" (Bluck et al., 2005, p.109). Ultimately, Baby left her husband and fled to Delhi along with her two children to start a new life. Baby's reflection on her painful memories shapes her present decision and fuels her determination to escape the cycles of exploitation and guide her future behavior. Therefore, the directive function of autobiographical memory guides Baby's decision-making by informing her current life choices and actions as she reflects on her past and redirects her life, transforming it into a remarkable journey of strength.

(B) Self Function: Memory and the Reconfiguration of Identity

In the autobiographical book, *A Life Less Ordinary*, Baby chronicles the unfortunate series of her life experiences beginning with her abandonment at four, her marriage to a stranger at twelve, and subsequently becoming a mother at barely fourteen. She extensively recounts her abusive marriage, which led her to leave her toxic husband and move to Delhi with her children. Thereafter, the later years of her lived experience as a domestic worker, the exploitative work environment she encountered, and eventually her journey to becoming a writer working at Dr Prabodh Kumar's residence. It is evident in the book that Baby's personal past promotes "continuity

and development of the self” (Bluck et al., 2005, p. 93). She persistently maintains her sense of self by reconstructing her fragmented memories into a coherent narrative identity over time. Through her autobiographical memory, she reconstructs a coherent identity across different life stages and asserts her identity from being a helpless individual to an empowered self.

The very act of recalling and writing about her past itself creates her “self-continuity”. Baby’s act of writing was guided by Dr Prabodh Kumar (Tatush), her employer, who motivates her to write about her life story. Baby recounts:

He pulled out a notebook and a pen from his writing table and said, “Here. Write something in this notebook. If you want, you can write your life story in this. Whatever has happened in your life ever since you can remember and you became aware of yourself. Whatever you remember up to now, write it down”. (Halder, 2013, p.152)

Baby was unwilling to write at first and wondered whether she would be “able to write or not”, but Tatush encouraged her to write persistently, “Write every day: you must do that” (p.152). And as a result of Tatush’s encouragement and mentorship, she eventually documented her life story by weaving together all her lived realities from her fragmented memories. It is only through reading and writing that Baby was able to assemble her lived experiences into a cohesive life story. She was able to foster her identity by “integrating past life periods with the present life” (Bluck et al., 2005, p. 110). This act of recalling bridges her disintegrated self as an ordinary woman and her present coherent identity as an extraordinary author. Kumar (2023) observes that, “Literacy provides the cognitive scaffolding that allows Halder to transition from a fragmented past to a coherent narrative identity” (p.180). Hence, the self function of autobiographical memory plays an important role in “identity maintenance”, even in the “face of developmental change and life events” (Bluck et al., 2005, p. 110).

(C) Social Function: Reinterpretation of Social Bonds Through Memory

In *A Life Less Ordinary*, the hardships that Baby faced as an abandoned child, a victim of child marriage, followed by domestic

violence, labor exploitation, and class discrimination mirror the collective experiences of many women facing similar oppressions like herself. Victoria K. Haskins and Claire Lowrie (2015) pointed out that “Baby Halder’s *Aalo Andhari* is not just ‘a book of her own’, but spoke for the millions of ‘ordinary’ women like her” (p.245). Baby’s narration of her personal memories develops a sense of collective testimony showcasing the shared traumatic experiences of millions of domestic workers who are marginalized. In the book, Baby exposed the wretched realities of domestic helpers by recalling how her previous employer treated her like a servant and gave her endless work. She was “made to work the hardest” (Halder, 2013, p.137) and was not “allowed to go anywhere, or talk to anyone” (p.137). And despite taking care of everything, she never felt that she “had succeeded in winning their confidence” (Halder, 2013, p.143).

Baby further shares the plight of being an underprivileged single mother in a patriarchal society. She reveals how society ill-treats, disrespects and excludes a woman living without a husband even in a metropolitan city. Baby recalls that everywhere she went, people kept on asking the same question: “Where is your husband?” (Halder, 2013, p.129), and when they found out that she was living without a husband, they treated her indifferently without trying to understand why she had left her husband. Moreover, she also unveils the plight of women who were victims of domestic violence living under patriarchal domination. Baby recalls an incident about her elder sister’s unfortunate passing due to her husband’s beatings and strangulation and also recalls the tragedy of a woman, her neighbor, who was burned to death. She writes: “A man called Panna had set fire to his wife and burnt her to death” (Halder, 2013, p.103). Panna (an alcoholic) finds his wife watching television at their neighbor’s house and in a fit of rage, he violently dragged his wife home, poured acid on her and set her ablaze.

By documenting the predicament of these women in her autobiography, Baby creates a social bond with readers who may not be familiar with the realities of women from the margins. Sharing personal memories provides others with information about oneself, initiates “new social relationships”, develops social bonds, and “engages

the listener and elicits empathetic responses” (Bluck et al., 2005, p. 94), towards these women. Baby develops and maintains these relationships by resonating with the struggles of many other marginalized women, offering hope and empowerment. Jyoti Pandey (2023) asserts that Baby’s autobiographical account is “not only a testimony to the hardships she has undergone all her life being a woman, but also a source of inspiration to other women facing similar circumstances” (p.459). In fact, Baby Halder’s *A Life Less Ordinary* is not merely a recollection of her painful memories. It serves as a tool to amplify the voices of the underrepresented who have been silenced and marginalized since time immemorial. Thus, by sharing Baby’s lived experiences and those of women in her community with the public, the social function of autobiographical memory cultivates empathy, mutual understanding, and “social bonding in existing relationships” (Bluck et al., 2005, p.110), providing a critical reflection on marginalized women.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it has been observed that Baby Halder’s autobiography, *A Life Less Ordinary* (2013), is not merely a recollection of past memories; it goes beyond a personal narrative and emphasizes on the process of reconstructing a coherent identity over time. Through the lens of the three functional frameworks of autobiographical memory, it becomes evident that past recollections can shape an individual’s identity and help reclaim the marginalized woman’s dignity. The directive function redirects to a new path, helps in decision-making, and guides Baby’s future-oriented actions. The self function reconstructs her fragmented past experiences into a coherent sense of self, and ultimately, the social function transforms her personal recollections into collective testimony and fosters social bonds. Furthermore, the present paper demonstrates that Baby’s narrative not only reflects her painful memories but also uses them as a transformative tool for empowerment while challenging social inequalities often ignored by mainstream society. Her story also serves as a social intervention, bringing new insights into the diverse lived realities of women and paving the way for future marginalized voices in the literary landscape.

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