

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

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## Aspects of Autobiography and Biography in Indian Writing in English

### Editors

Pauline Das, Ph.D.

K. R. Vijaya, Ph.D.

Amutha Charu Sheela, M.A., M.Phil., M.B.A.

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## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

**Pauline Das, Ph.D.**  
**K. R. Vijaya, Ph.D.**  
**Amutha Charu Sheela, M.A., M.Phil., M.B.A.**

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This short volume focuses on some selected autobiographies and biographies written by Indian leaders in English. For a contrast, we also include two essays that deal with the autobiography of a great scientist Charles Darwin and a biography of a great American writer Loyd Douglas.

### **Autobiography and Biography in Indian Writing in English**

Autobiographies and Biographies occupy an important place in Indian Writing in English for various reasons. Indian leaders communicated their worldviews to Indian people using this genre. Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* is an excellent example. *My Truth* by Indira Gandhi is yet another example of communicating the message of an individual to a larger world. *Jivansmriti (Reminiscences)* of Rabindranath Tagore narrates his early years of life, while in *Toward Freedom: the Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru* Nehru writes to his "own countrymen and women." Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, published in 1951, stands apart as a great master-piece, combining personal life experiences with a strong motivated worldview ("the conditions in which an Indian grew to manhood in the early decades of this century" [20<sup>th</sup> century]).

### **Rationale and Justification for Writing Autobiography**

These leaders have also debated on the need or otherwise for writing such works.

Jawaharlal Nehru writes in his *Autobiography*: "... this account is wholly one-sided and, inevitably, egotistical; many important happenings have been completely ignored and many important persons, who shaped events, have hardly been mentioned. In a real survey of past events this would have been inexcusable, but a personal account can claim this indulgence."

Gandhi justified writing an autobiography with these words:

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. And what will you write? Supposing you reject tomorrow the things you hold as principles today, or supposing you revise in the future your plans of today, is it not likely that the men who shape their conduct on the authority of your word, spoken or

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written, may be misled. Don't you think it would be better not to write anything like an autobiography, at any rate just yet?'

This argument had some effect on me. 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, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. But I shall not mind, if every page of it speaks only of my experiments. I believe, or at any rate flatter myself with the belief, that a connected account of all these experiments will not be without benefit to the reader.

### **Language Medium for Major Autobiographies and Biographies**

Indira Gandhi's work is a compilation of her writings in a manner that the book has an autobiographical format. Nehru wrote his *Autobiography* in English. Gandhi and Tagore wrote their autobiographies first in their mother tongues (Gujarati and Bengali respectively) and then they sort of translated or recreated their works in English. Nirad Chaudhuri wrote his celebrated work in English.

### **A Historical Perspective – The Absence of a Tradition for Autobiography**

Rulers in India (in every region and ethnic and linguistic group of this nation) was not generally inclined to leave their history as part of their great work. India developed almost an anti-history tradition. For example, gigantic temples of South India were built by kings and queens and other nobles, but celebration of the builders and supporters was not part of Indian tradition. In some temples you get some direct or indirect references to the builders in some inscriptions, but no detailed history of the people who were responsible for building these temples was recorded. Glory goes to the deity, etc. Kamban was a great Tamil poet, with demonstrated capacity and skill in composing a very long and mostly elegant epic. He even immortalized a new poetic form (*viruththam*) through his *magnum opus*. And yet hardly any autobiographical reference is found in his work. He could have easily composed another few hundred poems to narrate his life!

Kalidasa, Tiruvalluvar, et al., became subjects of myth but the actual history of their life was not recorded.

Brahmins and some other non-brahmin communities among the Tamils retained their family history only for a few generations, but they maintained their *gothra* history through their inherited relationship to a sage.

On the other hand, we also learn that members of some communities were not allowed in the past even to have the initial letter of their fathers' names. In Tamil, use of *thalai ezhuththu*, initials attached to the names of individuals, became a privilege of many communities, but some other communities were denied the use of this provision. On the one hand, we see a tendency not to

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maintain factual history, and on the other hand we also see that the practice of maintaining personal and family history functioned as a tool to reveal and enforce social status and ranking.

The genres Autobiography and biography are somehow entwined with the social history in most communities. Again within the Tamil folk tradition, *villuppaaTTu*, musical narration in front of village deities, became a powerful medium to narrate the life-story of individuals with mythical additions. In all these, factual history took a back seat.

Even in modern times, most national leaders did not write any autobiography, which would have us a great picture of modern history through the makers of such history. It is clear that language skill was no barrier or an obstacle to them, because most of these leaders were great writers in their own tongues, and many in both their mother tongue and English.

### **Biographies in Indian Writing in English**

There are many biographies written by Indian authors. These biographies cover many personalities from every field: politics, science, sports, cinema, drama, religion, literature, etc. Indeed, biography writing is a very popular pursuit among Indian writers in English and other Indian languages. Sahitya Akademi has brought out a number of biographies of varied quality.

### **Controversial Nature of Biographies and Autobiographies**

Both biographies and autobiographies may raise controversies of various types: political, social, familial, regional, religious, etc.

A recent biography-like book on Muhammad Ali Jinnah by Jaswant Singh (*Jinnah: India-Partition-Independence*) raised a hue and cry among Jaswant Singh's own party members. Earlier in recent times, actor Om Puri's biography *Unusual Hero* by his wife created strong and deep controversies. Such controversies arise out of revelations in public of private personal acts and thoughts that may involve others and thus hurt the feelings, careers and interests of people referred to. It looks like that the biographer or the autobiographer never asks the permission of others to narrate the incidents which involve these "friends", etc.!

### **Autobiography and Biography versus Fiction Writing**

Writing an autobiography or biography is quite different from writing a novel or short story or any type of material that aims at catering to the literary sensibility of its readers. Facts and related, relevant and appropriate interpretation of facts and events become the hall mark of autobiography and biography, in some sense.

Narration is usually straightforward following the course of events and implications presented in these works. Authors of fiction have greater freedom and employ many techniques of presentation in their narratives. Hidden and explicit metaphors, lack of any explicit didactic conversations, creating curiosity to look forward to the next event, conflict, confrontation,

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resolution, etc. play an important role here. Characterization and characters follow a different course in fiction than in autobiography or biography. Actually, most events narrated in biographies and even autobiographies are already public knowledge. On the other hand, fiction offers a progressive revelation of unknown events, etc.

However, autobiographies and biographies have their own aspects difficult to master. Even the authors of these works are burdened with the responsibility of ensuring that the readers are with them and are comfortable with the journey they choose to undertake with the authors.

### **The Goal of This Short Special Volume**

The goal of this Special Volume is to make a survey of some of the major autobiographies and biographies written in English in India and other South Asian countries, by Indians and other South Asian authors. It is assumed that these authors, like Nirad C. Chaudhuri, are products of a system that taught and nourished Indian Writing in English through the teaching of English by Indian and other South Asian teachers. They may have been greatly influenced by their education and living abroad, but their language is, for its better part, derived from Indian Speaking and Writing in English. Their world is typically India and South Asia.

### **What We Need to Do**

When we choose an autobiography or biography for inclusion in our assignments or recommendations to our students to read, we may consider the following. Note, however, the choice of autobiographies and biographies should not be done mechanically. Consider the worth of each work and also their relevance to the level of your students. Most of the Biographies published by Sahitya Akademi are known for their factual statements, but we as teachers should look for human interest stories, not for the narration of facts and figures.

1. Describe the content briefly.
2. Depending on the level of our students, we may ask our students to focus on the structure of the chosen autobiography or biography: introduction, characterization, language and style, narrative techniques, idioms and metaphors, the author's justification for writing the autobiography or biography and how this justification is revealed in the work, clarity of language and thought, effect on readers, readability of the text, gaps in information, *gaffes*, etc. This is only suggestive of what we can do. We need to be creative and imaginative to work on our plan of research, description, analysis and interpretation, conclusion, etc., which we want our students to carry out.
3. While reading in itself is a great goal, as teachers we need to present an advanced approach to our students so that their critical skills are developed along with their ability to re-write the story as they understood it.

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4. We may also make a comparative or contrastive of two or more autobiographies or biographies available in Indian Writing in English and in other Indian languages.
5. We can use this opportunity to also improve their report writing skills. For example we can ask them that all quotes the original and other sources should be properly cited following either MLA or APA format. We can use this opportunity to teach them the elements of MLA Style sheet, how to avoid plagiarism, how to cite sources in the text and how to present the references at the end of their report in an orderly fashion. All sources should be acknowledged where these are used in the text of their paper. No bibliography is to be added. They need to have only a list of references. Their paper should be predominantly their own work, not a compilation of comments, etc., from other sources. They need to read the autobiography or biography in great detail and write their paper with adequate understanding.
6. You may question whether all this can be achieved in any of the classes you teach. Indeed, all the above listed steps are taught even at the high school level in English classes in the United States. Not much advanced, but the elements of critical thinking and reporting are an integral part of high school English classes.
7. Remember that even engineers and scientists are required to produce reports at work. Elementary training in elements of report writing should be introduced, using materials that are interesting to the students. Autobiography and biography are interesting tools as the structures of these types of materials in usually simple and linear.

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# Memoirs of a Patchwork Life

Maneeta Kahlon, Ph.D.



## Jerry Pinto's *Leela*

A biography is generally assumed to be a complete biographical detail of an individual. The word comes from the Greek - "bios" meaning "life" and "graphein" meaning "write." But the book under consideration here is not a biography in the conventional sense of the term but Jerry Pinto's *Leela* comes across as a refreshing change. The book in the prologue clears this misunderstanding.

At the outset *Leela* says, "Literary critics have now come to the conclusion that no one can give a full account of their lives any more than anyone can document every moment in the life of a universe." (1) So, we are prepared to read about episodes in Leela's life which have influenced her life rather than the chronological details.

Samuel Johnson said, "Biography has often been allotted to writers who seem very little acquainted with the nature of their task, or very negligent about the performance. They rarely afford any other account than might be collected from public papers, but imagine themselves writing a life when they exhibit a chronological series of actions or preferments; and so little regard the manners or behavior of their heroes that more knowledge may be gained of a man's real character, by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied

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narrative, begun with his pedigree and ended with his funeral." (Johnson:Rambler 60, Oct13,1750)

Jerry Pinto and Leela in this book believed in the above refrain because *Leela* the book is far more than just a chronology because detailing of facts sometimes is not necessarily the truth and definitely not the complete picture of an individual. An accumulation of stories and anecdotes would reveal the real person. Then this is no biography in the traditional sense. It's a string of anecdotes that speckled her life, so the book is aptly titled *A Patchwork Life*.

The book is elegantly written and has in-depth information. The narrative style helps us to look at her life objectively and what I feel most strongly is that it helps us to be non-judgmental. Had the narrative been chronological, we would be sitting in judgment over how she lived her life despite the opportunities she got but at times the episodes remain just episodes and it becomes difficult to understand the link with her life.

### **Interesting, Selective Focus**

For example, we respect the authors' decision not to talk of her first marriage but the wish remains to know about her children and how they coped with her absence, their growing years, their life, their marriages and what role as a mother did she play in their lives. It comes as a shock when she talks of her daughter's death but not how and when she died. Also the book does not talk about the love or closeness, or for that matter, rivalry between the twins. This aspect of motherhood has been dealt with from Leela's side but not from her daughter's angle, but then it is her biography, not her daughters'.

### **Two Narrators and Two Points of Views**

The fact that there are two narrators, one Leela Naidu herself and the other Jerry Pinto remind one of Nelly Dean and Lockwood in the gothic love story *Wuthering Heights*. Jerry introduces the book like Lockwood, and then Leela like Nelly Dean, using a stream of consciousness, in the non-linear narrative style. The narrative moves backward and forward, talks of the enigmatic past. Both the books are gripping and intriguing and *Leela* is no less captivating than *Wuthering Heights*. Essentially the book is in Leela's own voice artfully handled by Jerry Pinto.

### **Between Two Stools, But Not Falling!**

Leela was born to a distinguished Indian scientist Dr. Ramaiah Naidu and French journalist Marthe Mange, who was half-Swiss. She was privileged in the sense not that she was born to affluence but because she was lucky to be born to parents who never pressurized her to follow a particular direction. They rather allowed her to follow her heart's desire with only one condition that she see it through completely. Perhaps it was this that allowed her the freedom to be the master of her own destiny and perhaps that is why there wasn't the desire to succeed as in her own way. She thought she was accomplished enough, never ill at ease anywhere: "I'm between

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two stools but I am not falling. I can understand the Europeans and I am at home in India. I can grow roots anywhere”. (107) Her cosmopolitan upbringing did not leave her ill at ease, rather she comfortably straddled both the worlds.

### **Great Contacts with Persons of Repute and Disrepute**

Leela talks of all the famous and enigmatic people of the last century, from Madam Curie to Prince Yousouppoff famously known for killing the infamous Rasputin to Benito Mussoloni who showed a cruel streak even when he worked with her grandfather in his factory and for the people that she personally knew. The list is as diverse as chalk and cheese and yet she had a special rapport with each one of them. In fact, one is constantly surprised at all the great people she knew.

Leela talks of a Mickey Mouse who is devouring chocolates with great delight and we are startled to know that the Mickey Mouse is none other than Gandhiji. Sarojini Naidu is her aunt, Mother Teresa and she prayed together, Imelda Marcos showed Leela her famous shoe collection, Salvador Dalí, the Spanish painter, sketched her, Jean Renoir the famous French film director, Alfred Hitchcock, David Lean, the man who made Dr Zhivago and wanted to give the role of Tonya to Leela, Eugene Ionesco, French playwright whose works she translated, Monsieur Cartier who restrung her pearls without a fee, Gunter Grass, the acclaimed writer, Ingrid Bergman, the famous Swedish actress, Ravi Shankar, the sitar player, Satyajit Ray, the most famous movie director, wanted to make a film with her and Marlon Brando, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, the director, who launched her in Anuradha, J Krishnamurti, the philosopher guru, B K Iyengar, the yoga guru, J R D Tata, the business baron, was her uncle Jeh, Ramnath Goenka, the press baron, Raj Kapoor, who wanted to sign her up for four films, Dilip Kumar, Balraj Sahni, actors she knew and worked with, Merchant-Ivory, the film producing duo, who made Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s novel ‘The Householder’ into a movie with Leela and Shashi Kapoor, Shyam Benegal, who directed her in Trikal, Dom Moraes, Arundhati Roy, etc. An amazing list!

### **So Close and Intimate – A Great World of Experience**

The list is endless. The feeling I got was of Alice in Wonderland, having one adventure upon another. The manner of introducing each great personality is so matter of fact that one gets the feeling that she knew these people intimately. The style of writing is so subtle and humorous, the sarcasm is ironical and not hard hitting. For example, she makes us laugh and I was giggling reading about the deflectable bra that the heroines had to wear along with the layers of pancake which was actually unnecessary given her porcelain peaches and milk complexion. Also she talks about a client who had commissioned her to do an advertisement for a sari, and the client wanted the bodice to be glistening “so I got her a bodice made of metal scales. It glistened.” (93)

Her life as an actress is how we would characterize her profession yet she was so unlike the actress of her time, daring in her acting skills and even more so in doing only those films that appealed to her, she is extremely candid about her leading men and how they won’t be averse to

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her beauty. Leela Naidu was crowned Miss India in 1954, and the same year was featured in Vogue magazine's list of the world's ten most beautiful women.

### **Many and Diverse Facets of Leela**

Yet she yearned to be known for other things than her beauty. She makes us see the filmy world realistically devoid of the rose tinted glasses that others wear when it comes to the movie industry. She also made films both as director and as a producer unofficially by following her heart's desire and when the budget wasn't forthcoming or had fallen short she spent money from her own kitty but insisted on having the best people on her team. There are various episodes wherein we see her as an activist, especially her role in the blood donation documentary that she made raising awareness to save lives or making a movie about special children called 'A Certain Childhood' which was screened at the Leipzig International film festival. She had a sensitivity which made the audience empathise with the children depicted in the movie.

Asansol coal mines and the sub human working conditions was the subject of her next documentary. She did her best to get and give equal status to the marginalised and the subaltern, the spot boy who injured himself, the extra girls who would continue to stand as there were no chairs, the Dalit farmers whose land was occupied by the upper class mafia goons, even to the animal used in her film, Rani the elephant.

### **Magnanimity**

Most of all is her magnanimity which comes to the forefront. especially when talking of her ex-husbands, she doesn't mention the abusive and violent relationship with her first husband, Tikki Oberoi nor does she degrade her second husband and more importantly her friend, Dom Moraes. All that she says of him is that he "lived under the misapprehension that anything could be improved by the addition of alcohol in good measure". (127) That indeed is magnanimous, especially when he left her for a younger woman with whom he was collaborating on a book on Bombay. Rather it is through Dom Moraes' biography, 'Never at Home', that we come to know that Leela was unhappy, or so he presumes she was, because of his incessant drinking and socialising. Leela, however, does not want to talk of her 'trials and tribulations,' because they serve no purpose other than becoming 'another narrative of feminine pain'. Perhaps what her father told her, "You never attack, you are always on the defensive" (108) is the way she lived her life. But despite all the pain and suffering in her life, she was the epitome of all dignity, grace, and elegance.

### **Language Use**

*Leela* the book uses a language of understatement. For example, she talks of a lunch with Renoir, an amazing menu, an equally exciting guest list she tells us one should kick oneself if one doesn't make notes and then promptly says, "Excuse me while I kick myself." In another incident, she says, "An overenthusiastic maid had polished the granite stairs with mansion polish and three dinner guests slipped and fell in one night. One of them was me." (132) Notice the

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humor in these lines. “Inside it were three bras with rubber baggies tucked inside them. They were equipped with little nozzles so that they could be blown up to the appropriate size. She wondered who blew them up and who decided the appropriate size. Did the heroine herself blow them up and then came out of her dressing room? She imagined an assistant director telling her: “No, Madamji, in this film, you are a 38B cup, remember?” At which she would say, “Oops!” and go back to the nozzle, to deflate or inflate her measurements. (53)

### **One Liners**

Also her use of one liner is fantastic, like the following lines:

“I don’t think we understood each other, the Hindi film industry and I.”

“Beauty is one of the most subjective abstractions and standards change.”

“Violence to me is a lack of imagination.”

“And somewhere in a mural in Spain, I became a holy mother too.”

“Beauty is just a happy accident of DNA.”

“The poor are an abstraction for whom we can all feel an ambiguous benevolence.”

“To know a city one must walk its streets.”

“I wonder whether it is easier for us to sympathise with anonymous masses than with the actual people we are confronted with in real life.”

‘Leela The Princess of Kuchh Nahin.’

### **Intriguing Chapter Titles**

The title of the chapters of the book are also intriguing like the very first chapter. It is called, “The Naked Count on the Lawn.” “Three rubber bras and a yellow nose,” describes her experience as a leading lady. “A man possessed” is the chapter about Ismail Merchant and James Ivory. “She has no bad angles” is a tribute to her beauty as these were the very words used by Bert Stern, the great photographer for Leela. “Have you stopped acting” was the question she was repeatedly asked and to which she never did have a suitable rejoinder as she wanted to do roles of quality which interested her and not just film after film. The next chapter is also mysteriously titled “The British on a hunger strike in the land of the Mahatma” and the last chapter so aptly titled ‘Seasons of mist and mellow Fruitfulness’.

### **No Sensationalism, Here**

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Most celeb biographies deal with excessive and lurid details about their subjects' lives to make the book sensational like the very publicized 'Unlikely Hero', Om Puri's biography but this is one book that does not talk of the sensational stuff rather it "makes the reader of different ages, smile, chuckle and laugh, and sometimes feel the sadness of humanity, past and present"(179) Cultural historian Navina Jafa says, "The functionality of a biography is to focus on a person's achievement. It's a report card on how a human life created social change." Leela too in the epilogue talks of telling Jerry that her book would "have funny anecdotes and the sad historic ones I came across" (179).

Let us not get into the conflict whether it is an autobiography or a biography or a memoir or a string of anecdotes, collection of stories, a unique collaboration, or episodes, beautiful reproduction of Leela's words by Jerry Pinto. It is said the memoir or biography should be enlightening and shed light about the person being written about. One should be able to place events and issues in perspective and in the context they emerged while presenting them in the manner that will be lively and helping to the reader - that is getting the reader involved in the process. Indeed, this book is all that and much more and, like Jerry Pinto, we too can say, "There is a Leela-shaped hole in my life.

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## A Kaleidoscopic View of Kamala Das' *My Story*

R. Tamil Selvi, M.A., M.Phil.

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**Kamala Das**

[www.english.emory.edu](http://www.english.emory.edu)

### Abstract

*My Story* is a best-selling woman's autobiography in post-independence India. It follows Kamala Das' life from age four through British colonial and missionary schools favored by the colonial Indian elite; through her sexual awakening; an early and seemingly disastrous marriage; her growing literary career; extramarital affairs; the birth of her three sons; and, finally, a slow but steady coming to terms with her spouse, writing, and sexuality.

The objective of this paper is to present the readers a kaleidoscopic view of *My Story*, encompassing the multifarious world of emotions a woman experiences. In the point of view of the narrator, the readers get an opportunity to travel through the story, giving us a glimpse of every event that happens in her life.

As the novel proceeds, we come to know about Kamala's several contradictory accounts of the genesis of *My Story*. In her preface to the autobiography, Kamala claims that she began to write the text in the mid-1970's from her hospital bed as she grappled with a potentially fatal heart condition. She wrote the autobiography, she states, "to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the lime came, with a scrubbed-out conscience" and in order to pay mounting hospital bills. Since the publication of her autobiography, Kamala has repeatedly changed her stance on this topic in interviews and essays. However, calling Kamala Das queer in itself provides no grand resolution to the myriad challenges posed by her work; rather, it serves as an initial vantage point from which one can glimpse the changing English-language literary terrain of this new century.

Keywords: Kamala Das, autobiography, kaleidoscopic.

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## Kamala Das' Statement on Her Autobiography



“*My Story* is my autobiography which I began writing during my first serious bout with heart disease. The doctor thought that writing would distract my mind from the fear of a sudden death and, besides, there were all the hospital bills to be taken care of.... Between short hours of sleep induced by the drugs given to me by the nurses, I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience... The serial had begun to appear in the issues of the journal which flooded the bookstalls in Kerala. My relatives were embarrassed. I had disgraced my well-known family by telling my readers that I had fallen love with a man other than my lawfully wedded husband...This book has cost many things that I held dear but I do not for a moment regret having written it.” (Das, Preface in *My Story*)

### Full of Intense Personal Experiences

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The above lines clearly express Kamala Das' state of mind, when she began writing the most controversial Autobiography ever written by a woman. Though she is well known in literary circles for her poetry in English, it was the publication of *My Story* that earned Kamala Das national recognition and notoriety among the English-speaking elite in India. It broke all the conventions of women writing in literature and proved to be one of a kind.

Kamala Das has presented herself as either too bohemian to care about revealing her sexual adventures and her periods of mental breakdown or the submissive wife following the dictates of her husband. And yet, at every opportunity Kamala reverts to the convention that she is India's most unconventional woman writer with no regrets about her work or her foci. In *My Story*, Kamala Das, a poet famous for her honesty, tells of intensely personal experiences including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside marriage, and her living in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home.

### **The Formal Structure of the Book**

Chapters in *My Story* are short. Each of them is about three or four pages. It is fragmented and not in any chronological order. It is typically all about Kamala Das' domestic life, her relationship with her parents and her close relatives, her husband and her lovers. Chapter titles are self-explanatory. They inform the readers about the happenings quickly even before reading it. For example, 'Each poem of mine made me cry', 'I prayed to the sun God to give me a male child', 'Passing away of my great-grandmother', etc.

Das talks about the domestic details of food, familial relations, marriage, childbirth, sexual liaisons, and the internal and external struggles of one woman in a repressive world. She also talks about her struggle in public life as a poet. Das tries to remain at the center of her story.

### **Childhood in Colonized India**

In the opening chapter, a picture of a colonized childhood can be seen. Das is alienated because of living between indigenous and colonized cultures. This alienation can be seen in the title of the first chapter "The humiliation of a brown child in a European school". From the first line, it is understood that India is still under the rule of Britain.

Kamala Das was a little child growing up in Calcutta. She says, "They behaved like our equals. It was normal for a British family to have one or two close friends among the Indians with whom they were on visiting terms". (Das, *My Story*, p. 1)

The discourse of colonial power is felt in the description of a ceremony that takes place at Kamala Das' school every day:

"In the morning while Madam sat at the grand piano on which stood the tinted photograph of the British royal family and we raised our voices in song, singing "Britons never never shall be

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slaves”, even the postman slowed his walk to listen. King George the Sixth (God save his soul) used to wink at us from the gilt frame, as though he knew that the British were singing in India their swan song.” (Das, *My Story*, p.3.)

## **Father and Mother**

Kamala Das is unhappy as one of the few brown children in a white school. She thinks that white parents support their children more than Indian parents, because in their tradition a girl child has different responsibilities in their lives and they do not need education. In the following chapters, she describes her ancestral home in Malabar which is called Nalapat House and the women who are living in that house.

Generally, in autobiographies that are written by women, the central theme is the relationship between the author and her mother. However, Kamala Das does not prefer to talk about her relation with her mother. It seems that she does this intentionally. Das focuses on Third- world women’s oppression and she puts her relations with men to the centre of her story.

Only in the first chapter, there is some information about her relation with her father and mother. She describes her father as a man always busy with his work. He is not very affectionate and because of this Kamala Das and her brother grew up neglected. She calls her father “an autocrat”. In ‘My Childhood Memories’, she describes him as a stern father before whom his children like street-dogs had to shy away, tucking their tails. But later in her poem ‘Too Late For Making Up,’ which she wrote after his death, she laments,

“Should I have loved you, father  
More than I did,  
That wasn’t so easy to do  
If I have loved others, father,  
I swear I have loved you the most.” (Das, 1973)

On the other hand, her mother is a vague and indifferent woman who spends her time lying on on a large four-post bed, writing poems in Malayalam. It can be understood from here that Das’ mother is also an exceptional woman. She was not a caring mother figure. Child psychology is much influenced by parental bondage. It appears that Das’ parents did not bring up Kamala Das and her brother with parental love and affection.

Apparently, this could also be one of the reasons for Das’ eternal quest for love in her life. Later as we run through the pages of *My Story*, at the age of fifteen, Kamala Das shares the same destiny like most of the Indian women. She marries K. Madhava Das. It is an arranged marriage by her parents. Kamala did not have any right to say something about the marriage. She feels herself lost and unhappy. She looks for a soul mate in her lover, the one who loves her body as well as her soul. She enters her conjugal life with legitimate expectations and innocent dreams:

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“I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts. I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms, the loneliness of my life.” Das, *My Story*.

Kamala’s only expectation from her husband is conversation, companionship and warmth. She wants him to treat her as her father treats her. But all she gets in her marriage is brutality and rudeness. She suffers through her husband’s selfishness and neglect of her emotional and physical needs.

After the birth of second son, at the age of twenty, she has a nervous breakdown while she and her husband attempt reconciliation after an early separation. Here, it is seen clearly that Kamala Das criticizes Indian marriage as patriarchal oppression. Actually, she is a middle class and a professional Indian woman from a very small minority of Indian society. She receives greater legal and social protection compared to the vast numbers of poor and peasant Indian women.

### **Failure in Marriage – the Blood-stained Moonlight**

Chapter 25, titled as ‘The blood-stained moonlight’, clearly expresses her failure in marriage and the impossibility of leaving it. Later, Kamala Das finds herself on a balcony attempting to commit suicide: “I felt a revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private parts was only a wound, the soul’s wound showing through.” (Das, *My Story*, p. 97)

However, Kamala Das does not throw herself off the balcony. At this juncture, we are reminded of Sylvia Plath , another woman writer who also underwent the same trauma as Kamala did. Their stylistic and thematic concerns are similar, as far as form and content are considered. Both writers express themselves as victims of patriarchy, both use confessional voices, both are victims of authoritarian father figures, both are let down by husbands, both show a remarkable love for their children, both are prone to nervous breakdowns and show suicidal tendencies.

### **Traditional Religious Imagery**



Another feature that is explicit in Das' *My Story* is the use of traditional religious imagery to sustain and dignify herself. She claims to search for an incarnation of the god Krishna in her love affairs and worships the god when the real men turn out to have flaws. Once, calmly facing death before a potentially fatal heart operation, she pictures herself as the goddess Durga and she titles one of her chapters "I Was Carlo's Sita," in which she tells about one of her affairs. Das reaches into her own religious tradition to find support for her defiant individuality. To an Indian woman, the love for Krishna is not forbidden. Hadn't Mira Bai, a historical figure turned into a mythical one with her infinite passion for the dark-skinned God? Hadn't she been revered, worshipped for her mad devotion to Him? A woman may be ostracized if she falls often in love with ordinary men. But it may be different if she loves the element of Krishna. Consequently, Kamala who falls in love regularly declares that she yearns only for the mischievous, eternal lover in men. In *My Story* she describes an encounter with one of her lovers:

"You are my Krishna. I whispered kissing his eyes shut. He laughed. I felt that I was a virgin in his arms. Was there a summer before the autumn of his love? Was there a dawn before the dusk of his skin? I did not remember. I carried him with me inside my eyelids, the dark God of girlhood dreams..... Oh Krishna, Oh Kanhaiya, do not leave me for another.

..... we stood together to look at the sea. The sea was our only witness. How many times I turned to it and whispered, Oh, sea, I am at last in love. I have found my Krishna..." (Das, *My Story*, p. 89)

### **A Never Ending Dialogue**

Autobiography is a never ending dialogue with the self. It is a depiction of the self by the writer himself. Das' dialogue with the self reveals her urges, yearnings and her inner longings. She knows that:

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“One’s real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one, who has decided to travel inwards, will realize that his route has no end”. (Das, *My Story*, p. 102)

The Magnitude of an autobiography depends upon the writer’s skill to arrange the past, and present of his/her life in an organic whole. *My Story* has no dates. The narration of *My Story* moves back and forth in time. Kamala Das’s life story is set in the once matrilineal framework of the Nair Tharavad. Colonization and the imposition of western notions of morality upon the native systems influenced her peculiar individual position. From the secure and serene warmth of the Nalukettu, both Kamala and her mother were taken away into the rashness of a city culture. They were not accustomed to their new social set up. From a matrilineal framework that offered complete security to the woman and their kids, they were thrust into a westernized patriarchal society.

### **A Fictional Account of the Factual?**

Kamala Das has tried to depict her inner self in the most candid manner. Nevertheless we are not assured whether this candid nature aims to give fictional account or the factual. Generally for an auto biographer, the factual truth is subordinated to the truth about himself. *My Story* is a life narrative of Das’ inner journey. It is a search for an identity. It is an identity of the split-self craving for true love. We find introspection and self-analysis in her life story.

### **Essence of Life for Women**

Das firmly believed that Love is the essence of life for a woman. She longs to receive and to give love. Her romantic ideas about love and home have been shattered by an insensitive husband. Her husband hurt her and evoked a sense of disappointment in her. Das has also given graphic accounts of her relations with her husband before their marriage. We can better understand the embarrassment with her and showed interest in her as a woman. It is clear that she admired him but we do not find glimpses of her love and affection for her hubby as a man or as a lover.

In *My story* she has expressed her romantic ideas of an ideal lover. She writes:

“I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be and my mother. I wanted conversation, companionship and warmth”. (Das, *My Story*, p. 84)

Das is unhappy about her marriage. She appeared to be a puppet, the strings of which being held firmly by her parent she wasn’t given a free choice to select an ideal lover. Her parents did not consider her preference. What hurt her most was this indifference to her individuality, she did not like the way in which her marriage was fixed. The account of Das’ physical relationship with her husband and his obsession with her body shocked many

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conservative readers. Right from her childhood a woman is taught to be docile and reserved about her instincts.

Kamala Das also observes that woman of “good” Nair families never mentioned sex. Nevertheless, Das is very candid in expressing her relationship with her hubby. She observes:

“The rape was unsuccessful but he comforted me when I expressed my fear that I was perhaps not equipped for sexual progress. Perhaps I am not normal, perhaps I am only a eunuch, I said.... Again and again throughout that unhappy night he hurt me and all the while the Kathakali drums throbbed dully against our window and the singers sang of Damyanti's plight in the jungle”. (Das, *My Story*, p. 90)

### **Kamala Among Women Writers**

Most of the women writers make meager journeys into the outside world. But the lengthy entourage into the innermost caverns of their minds compensates for the shortness of the distance they travel in kilometers. The fascinating sights they see ‘within’ and their experiences clothed in colorful imagination, churn out literature, which sometimes soothes like the gentle breeze and sometimes scorch the flesh. However, the magic lies in transforming the minor irritants of daily life into dazzling pearls of priceless literature. Perhaps, Kamala Das can be taken as the best representative of all women writers who availed of no formal education and who consistently draw from their own lives to write. Writing about one’s own experiences is hazardous in the sense that one is constantly at the risk of contradicting oneself. Perceptions vary at different times, thoughts evolve and opinions change.

Kamala Das has been charged with outrageous inconsistency, fickleness of the mind and even with waywardness. No doubt her mind, like a kaleidoscope, offers different images of the same object or person on different occasions. Evidences are plentiful if one wants to charge Kamala Das with inconsistency of feelings for her near ones- father, mother, brother etc. But whether she merits the criticism is doubtful. It is only natural to forgive the shortcomings of our dear ones after they are gone. That which is lost becomes dearer. Maybe, the understanding of a father who put on a very stern exterior was not easy for Kamala Das in her youth.

Several women writers revolted against the pre-established patterns. But above all a woman’s autobiography remained a definition of her subjectivity as against the backdrop of something more powerful. With Kamala Das, we come across a new kind of woman’s writings which is bold, daring, tantalising and self-assertive. Here is a woman conscious of her femininity but determined to vindicate it against male supremacy. For Kamala Das it was important to be a woman and a lover with a body and a soul. The autobiography becomes a vehicle for voicing an inner privacy.

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Kamala Das's autobiography *My Story* reveals that a woman is naturally creative and if given a room of her own, she can defend her selfhood and narrate the story of her life boldly. There is nothing unnatural in woman's literary creativity, though it cannot be a rival to her biological creativity. *My Story* is one such autobiographical journey which helped Das in coming to terms with herself and proved extremely cathartic:

"I have written several books in my lifetime, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me. I have nothing more to say."  
(Meena 2004: 101-102)

Das' life-story is centred around her inner self – many a times we doubt the authenticity of her account. Nevertheless she sounds very convincing when she narrates the experiences of the inner self of a Woman in a typically Conservative Social Scenario. She has remarkably displayed self-Centeredness in her life-story. She has depicted incidents, events and character sketches of other people but her inner self is at the Centre. How the inner being of a woman grow from a child to the youth and then to the middle age has been remarkably portrayed. Das' autobiography is a marvelous example of the life-story where the past events have played a vital role in making her what she presently is. Here we constantly feel that though she is the thesis of her book, she views herself as a different persona.

According to O.J. Thomas:

"Kamala Das's story is the story of a woman who was denied love, when she valued nothing but love in all her life. Love and affection remained a craze, a longing and a dream for her. She got almost everything in life-name and fame, a degree of wealth but she could never get love, as she saw it. It is in this background that she writes about love in all her writings." (Bhatnagar 2001: 83)

## **To Conclude**

Whether factual or fictitious, Das' autobiography has carved a niche in the area of women's autobiographies in India. She has opened up new vistas of autobiographical writings. She has been considered as a writer who fought for the rights of women. Thus, Das comes to the forefront with the innermost doubts and wishes of the modern Indian woman. The most remarkable point of Das' life-story is her confessional tone. She is at her best in the exploration of the female self. Her autobiography is the collective repository of woman's experience that would ordinarily be treated as superfluous. Nevertheless, Das has subverted patriarchal stereotypes by externalizing her innermost self.

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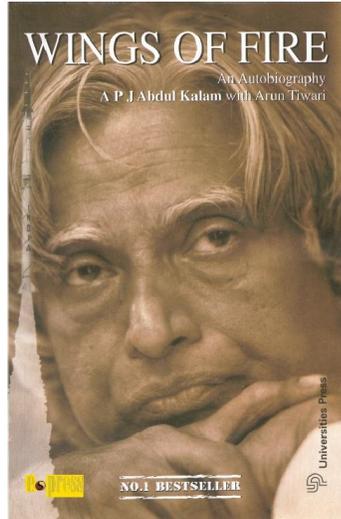
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# Abdul Kalam: A Complete Man

S. Somasundari Latha, M.A., M.Ed., M.Phil.

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## A Boy from Deep Rural South

Arul Pakir Jain Ulabdeen Abdul Kalam's autobiography *Wings of Fire* is an excellent inspiring book. It gives a positive message to the frustrated people of India. Kalam's *Wings of Fire* describes how an innocent boy from a remote corner of Tamil Nadu achieved greatness in rocketry and missiles technology and thereby raised his country's position in this applied science and technology to the international standard. This book delineates how Kalam, a boy from rural background, without any influence, with his positive attitude and hard work and perseverance was able to attain the highest civilian award in India, the Bharath Ratna. Kalam's humble ways of observing and admiring stalwarts like Dr. Vikram Sarabhai and Dr. Brahm Prakash, and learning skills like leadership quality and time management is really remarkable. No doubt, Kalam is a charismatic person, a combination of scientific endurance and human diligence who can inspire people in the world irrespective of age, caste, creed, religion and country.

## Structure of *Wings of Fire*

*Wings of Fire* has a preface by Arun Tiwari who worked under APJ Abdul Kalam for over a decade in the Defence Research and Development Laboratory (DRDL), Hyderabad. The book consists of four parts, namely, Orientation, Creation, Propitiation and Contemplation, and ends with an epilogue by Abdul Kalam.

There seems to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the author and collaborator of this book to bring in an aura of spirituality even as the topic deals with a man whose major work was in the

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fields of science and technology. The spiritual orientation is truly represented in the naming of the parts of the book.

### **The Beginning – Orientation or Initiation?**

‘Orientation’ (1931-1963) starts with a quote from Atharva Veda (book 4, hymn 16):

The earth is His, to Him belong those vast and boundless skies;  
Both seas within Him rest, and yet in that small pool He lies. (p.1)

It is a surprise that the great scientist’s autobiography starts with a kind of prayer. Abdul Kalam was born in the island town Rameshwaram, Tamilnadu. His father Jain Ulabdeen was neither rich nor educated but had innate wisdom and generosity of spirit. His father avoided comforts and luxuries and lived a simple life. Kalam’s parents were an ideal couple. Kalam recalls how Hindus and Muslims lived together amicably in that locality. It was Kalam’s father who inculcated in him the faith in God. Kalam has three brothers and a sister. His companionship with illiterate Jallaudin and Samsuddin provided him with a lot of practical knowledge. In his childhood, Ramananda Sastry, Aravindan and Sivaprakasan, boys from Hindu families were his close friends.

The high priest of Rameshwaram temple, Pakshi Lakshmanasastry was a very close friend of Kalam’s father. When Kalam was in the fifth standard at the Rameshwaram Elementary School, a teacher was unable to tolerate a Hindu priest’s son Ramanandhasastry sitting with a Muslim boy Kalam. Kalam was asked to go and sit on the back bench. When this matter was brought to the notice of the respective parents, Lakshmanasastry asked the teacher not to spread the poison of social inequality and communal intolerance in the young minds. Such was the context, both amity and conflict, in which Kalam grew up. However, we also read that there were people who were keen to maintain communal amity.

Kalam joined Schwartz High School in Ramanathapuram. Though he was home sick, Kalam tried to concentrate on his studies. In Schwartz School, his teacher Iyadurai Solomon inspired Kalam by instilling in him a sense of self-esteem and self-worth. It was he who suggested to Kalam that he should have intense desire and motivation in order to achieve a particular thing.

In 1950, Kalam arrived at St. Joseph College, Trichy to study B.Sc. Physics. Kalam was much interested by Father TN Sequeria who taught English to him and he was also the hostel warden. Kalam developed an interest in reading the great classics of Tolstoy, Scott and Hardy. Kalam’s ability to correlate the powerful and energetic planet with Milton’s description of the world in Paradise Lost Book VIII shows his proficiency in poetry.

“...What if the sun  
Be centre to the world, and other stars...  
The planet earth, so steadfast though she seems  
In sensible three different motions move? (p.15)

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## **Yearning to Fly**

On seeing cranes and seagulls soar into flight into Rameshwaram, Kalam longed to fly in the sky. To realize his dream, after his B.Sc., he got admission into Madras Institute of Technology (MIT). He emotionally recalled how his sister Zohara has mortgaged her jewels to pay one thousand rupees as fees. Since he was very clear in his goal of flying aircrafts, he opted for aeronautical engineering in his second year.

Kalam recalls three stalwarts who shaped his professional career. Prof. Sponder taught him technical aerodynamics. He used to observe Indians' failure to discriminate between disciplines and to rationalize their choices. During the farewell function, Prof. Sponder summoned Kalam to sit with him in the front for a photograph. Since Prof. Sponder was sure that Kalam's hard work would bring laurels to the teachers in future. Yes, his prophecy came true. Prof. K.V. Pandalai had opened up the secrets of structural engineering to him. Prof. Narasimharao taught him theoretical aerodynamics. These teachers, with their intellectual fervour and clarity of thought, inspired Kalam to have a serious study of fluid dynamics.

Kalam attended the interview in Air Force as well as in DTD&P [Air] (Directorate of Technical Development and Production) of the Ministry of Defence. Upset by not getting selected in his air force interview, he met Swami Sivananda in the Sivananda Ashram. When Kalam shared his unfulfilled desire to join the Indian Air Force, Swami Sivananda looked at him calmly and said to him in a feeble voice:

Desire when it seems from the heart and spirit, when it is pure and intense, possesses awesome electromagnetic energy. This energy is released into the ether each night as the mind falls into the sleep state. Each morning it returns to the conscious state reinforced with the cosmic currents. That which has been imaged will surely and certainly be manifested. (p. 25)

Swami's words filled him with confidence and peace and he collected his appointment order and joined DTD&P as senior scientific Assistant. In Bangalore, Kalam had the responsibility to make air-flying machine with his team. Kalam's first hover craft was christened Nandi. Then Kalam was absorbed as a rocket engineer at InCosPAR (Indian Committee for Space Research). In 1962, when InCosPAR set up the equatorial Rocket Launching Station at Thumba, Kalam got an opportunity to go to America for a six month training programme on sounding rocket launching techniques at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) work centers. Kalam's strong spiritual foundation provided him with enough courage to proceed in his career.

## **Creation**

The second part Creation (1963-1980) deals with the creation of SLV – 3 and Devil Missile with Kalam's achievement of Padma Bhushan Award.

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It is surprising to know the historical fact from Kalam that Tipu Sultan had 700 rockets and subsystems of 900 rockets in the battle of Turukhanahally in 1799. Kalam had an overwhelming admiration and appreciation for Prof. Sarabhai's working methodology. Prof. Sarabhai was optimistic, a hard task master, who often assigned multiple tasks to a single person. He would try novel approaches and a great leader.

Kalam with his team was assigned the task of preparing satellite launch vehicle and Rocket-Assisted Take-off-System (RATO). In 1968 when Prof. Sarabhai paid a visit to Thumba, Kalam asked him to activate the pyro-system through a timer circuit. Unfortunately the timer did not work. This incident taught Kalam that the best way to prevent errors was to anticipate them. The failure of the timer circuit led to the birth of a rocket engineering laboratory. Kalam regards Prof. Sarabhai as the Mahatma Gandhi of Indian science who generated leadership qualities in his team and inspired them with ideas and examples.

Kalam was appointed as the project manager for SLV and reported directly to Dr. Bhahm Prakash. After taking up the executive responsibility of implementing the project Kalam had a clear time schedule for carrying out various works since this project had made great demands on his time.

In order to lead a team successfully, the leader should be independent, powerful and influential. Kalam suggests two techniques in this regard.

1. Build your own education and skills, since knowledge is a tangible asset.
2. Develop a passion for personal responsibility. Be active, take on responsibilities. (p.77)

Kalam understood the fascinating mysteries of science while working for SLV project. Though the loss of his relatives, Jallaludin, his father and mother, one after another had shaken him, he was able to overcome the grief, with divine power. Kalam hears a divine voice insisting his commitment and responsibility in this world.

They carried out the task I designed for them with great care, dedication and Honesty and came back to me. Why are you mourning their day of Accomplishment? Concentrate on the assignments that lie before you, and Proclaim my glory through your deeds. (pp. 86-87)

After a lot of hurdles, on 18 July 1980, SLV-3 lifted off from SHRA successfully. Kalam and Prof. Dhawan met Shrimati Gandhi, the Prime Minister. Indira Gandhi lauded his achievement. It was a happy moment when he received Padma Bhushan award on the Republic Day in 1981.

## **Propitiation**

The third part Propitiation (1981-1991) begins with a few lines from Lewis Carroll.

Let craft, ambition, spite,

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Be quenched in Reason's night,  
Till weakness turn to might,  
Till what is dark be light,  
Till what wrong be right (p.107)

Kalam's joining DRDL on June 1, 1982 was a milestone in his career. Kalam realized that his scientist colleagues were still haunted by the failure of the Devil Missile. To inspire the scientists working there, Kalam invited experts from the Indian Institute of Science, Indian Institute of Technology, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and many other educational institutions.

With Defence Minister Venkataraman's initiative, Rs. 388 crores were sanctioned for surface-to-surface weapon system (Prithvi), the Tactical Core Vehicle (Trishul), the surface to air area defence system (Akash), the anti-tank missile project (Nag) and the last one Agni (Fire).

In this section Kalam mourns the death of Dr. Bhahm Prakash and Indira Gandhi as a huge loss to scientific community. With the successful launch of Prithvi, Agni, Nag and Akash, India found a significant place at the international level.

The verb *propitiate* means "to receive the goodwill of, to stop from being angry, to appease or reconcile those in power" (*Dictionary New Encyclopedic Edition*, 2004). This section deals with his contacts and acts in his career. It is true that Kalam was blessed with many supporters, admirers and followers in his career as a missile technologist. His handling of higher authorities was also appropriate in the context that prevailed/prevails in India. It looks like that the intent of using the word *Propitiation* for this section was not only to indicate his good relations with all around him but it also indicates his total dedication to his career, goals and spiritual pursuits as a single person.

### **Contemplation**

The fourth part titled Contemplation begins with a quote from the Qu'ran.

We create and destroy,  
And again recreate  
In forms of which no one knows (p.157)

On the Republic Day in 1990, Kalam was conferred the Padma Vibhushan along with Dr. Arunachalam. Though Kalam received so many awards from various universities, this one is significant because at that time our nation was celebrating the success of its missile programme. Towards the end of 1990, Jadavpur University gave him the honour of Doctor of Science. Kalam was excited to find out that the legendery hero Nelson Mandela also received the Doctorate along with him. In his acceptance address, Kalam once again recalled the stalwarts who inspired and guided him in achieving his missile mission. He justified that rocket mission and missiles are essential for the security of our nation. He concludes the autobiography with a positive note that

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Self Reliance Mission and Technology Vision-2020 will make our country strong, prosperous and a developed nation. (p.180)

Kalam's positive approach to life elevated him from Rameshwaram to DSRO, Hyderabad. From there he went to many places, met many leaders. Ultimately it brought him back to a locale closer home, in Kerala.

The autobiography clearly reveals Kalam's spiritual moorings even as he worked hard to reach greater heights in his chosen field of missile technology. He was fully engaged in the development of technology that is double-edged: it could kill millions even as it could save millions in times of war. It could help exploring the vast universe and could even be an instrument for humility in individual lives. His awards were meant for developing missile technology in the context of India's self-defence against possible and probable war mongering and belligerence from other nations. In real terms, he was and is on the Wings of Fire which could burn and destroy and yet would illumine the world and give it the much needed warmth. Dangerously close to the disastrous effects, Kalam was and is aware that this dangerous bent could still be used for the benefit and betterment of humanity. He sounds that this realization was not solely based on reason, but in seeking spiritual experience and wisdom.

Sometimes when we are ready, the gentlest of contacts with Him fills us with insight and wisdom. This should come from an encounter with other person from a word, a question, a gesture or even a look..... without the slightest warning, something new breaks into your life and a secret decision is taken, a decision that you may be completely unconscious of, to start with. (p.49)

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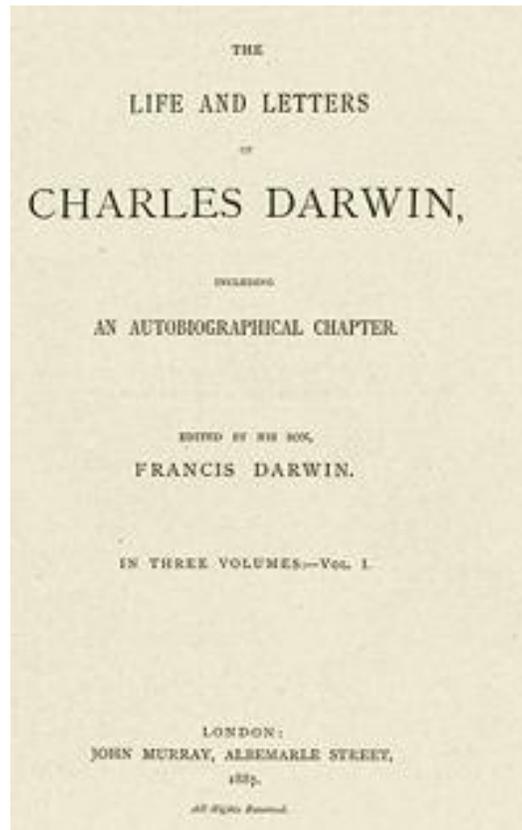
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*Recollections of the Development of My Mind and Character:  
the Autobiography of Charles Darwin*

Pauline Das, Ph.D.

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## Introduction

More than 150 years have passed since the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* launched a theological, philosophical and scientific revolution. Nearly everyone knows about the theory of evolution, but few know the man and motives behind it. Charles Darwin's autobiographical recollections were written for his children,—and written without any thought that they would ever be published. The autobiography bears the heading, *Recollections of the Development of my Mind and Character*, and end with the following date: - Aug. 3, 1876. From his autobiography we are able to understand the nature of his character. Many a time we are shocked.

## Childhood

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Charles Darwin was born at Shrewsbury on February 12th, 1809. His mother died in July 1817, when he was a little over eight years old, and he remembers hardly anything about her except her deathbed, her black velvet gown, and her curiously constructed work-table. In the spring of this same year he was sent to a day-school in Shrewsbury, where he stayed a year. He was much slower in learning than his younger sister Catherine, and he was a naughty boy.

By the time he went to this day-school his taste for natural history, and more especially for collecting, was well developed. He tried to make out the names of plants, and collected all sorts of things, shells, seals, franks, coins, and minerals. The passion for collecting which leads a man to be a systematic naturalist, a virtuoso, or a miser, was very strong in him and was clearly innate, as none of his sisters or brother ever had this taste.

### **Inventing Deliberate Falsehoods**

One little event during this year had fixed itself very firmly in his mind, and it had done so from his conscience having been afterwards sorely troubled by it; He told another little boy that he could produce variously coloured polyanthus and primroses by watering them with certain coloured fluids, which was of course a monstrous fable, and had never been tried by him. Darwin confesses here that as a little boy he was much given to inventing deliberate falsehoods, and this was always done for the sake of causing excitement. For instance, he once gathered much valuable fruit from his father's trees and hid it in the shrubbery, and then ran in breathless haste to spread the news that he had discovered a hoard of stolen fruit.

### **Friends of the Same Nature**

Darwin must have been a very simple little fellow when he first went to the school. A boy named Garnett took him into a cake shop one day, and bought some cakes for which he did not pay, as the shopman trusted him. When they came out Darwin asked him why he did not pay for them, and he instantly answered, "Why, do you not know that my uncle left a great sum of money to the town on condition that every tradesman should give whatever was wanted without payment to any one who wore his old hat and moved [it] in a particular manner?" and he then showed Darwin how it was moved. He then went into another shop where he was trusted, and asked for some small article, moving his hat in the proper manner, and of course obtained it without payment. When they came out he said, "Now if you like to go by yourself into that cake-shop I will lend you my hat, and you can get whatever you like if you move the hat on your head properly." Darwin gladly accepted the generous offer, and went in and asked for some cakes, moved the old hat and was walking out of the shop, when the shopman made a rush at him, so he dropped the cakes and ran for dear life, and was astonished by being greeted with shouts of laughter by his false friend Garnett.

### **First Trust in God**

In the summer of 1818 he went to Dr. Butler's great school in Shrewsbury, and remained there for seven years still Midsummer 1825, when he was sixteen years old. He boarded at this school,

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so that he had the great advantage of living the life of a true schoolboy; but as the distance was hardly more than a mile to his home, he very often ran there in the longer intervals between the callings over and before locking up at night. He often had to run very quickly to be in time, and from being a fleet runner was generally successful; but when in doubt he prayed earnestly to God to help him, and he attributed his success to the prayers, and marvelled how generally he was aided.

### **Carelessness**

As a very young boy, he had a strong taste for long solitary walks. He often became quite absorbed, and once, whilst returning to school on the summit of the old fortifications round Shrewsbury, which had been converted into a public foot-path with no parapet on one side, he walked off and fell to the ground, but the height was only seven or eight feet.

### **Poor Performance in Studies**

The school as a means of education to him was simply a blank. During his whole life he had been singularly incapable of mastering any language. Especial attention was paid to verse-making, and this he could never do well. He had many friends, and got together a good collection of old verses, which by patching together, sometimes aided by other boys, he could work into any subject. Much attention was paid to learning by heart the lessons of the previous day; this he could effect with great facility, learning forty or fifty lines of Virgil or Homer, whilst he was in morning chapel; but this exercise was utterly useless, for every verse was forgotten in forty-eight hours.

### **Disgrace to His Family**

When he left the school he was for his age neither high nor low in it; and he was considered by all his masters and by his father as a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard in intellect. To his deep mortification his father once said to him, "You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family."

### **At College**

As he was doing no good at school, his father wisely took him away at a rather earlier age than usual, and sent him (October 1825) to Edinburgh University with his brother, where he stayed for two years or sessions.. But soon after this period he became convinced from various small circumstances that his father would leave him property enough to subsist on with some comfort.

### **Trying to become a Clergyman**

After having spent two sessions in Edinburgh, his father perceived, or he heard from his sisters, that Darwin did not like the thought of being a physician, so he proposed that Darwin should become a clergyman. He was very properly vehement against his son turning into an idle

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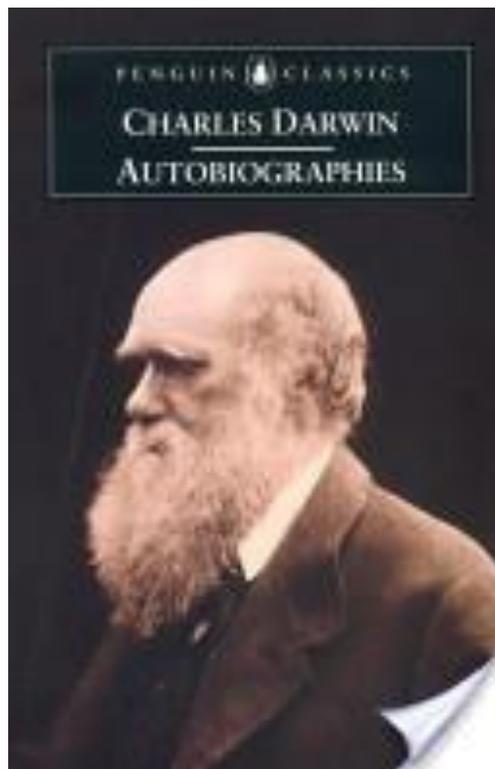
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sporting man, which then seemed his probable destination. Accordingly Darwin read with care *Pearson on the Creed*, and a few other books on divinity; and as he did not then in the least doubt the strict and literal truth of every word in the Bible. A person known to him once declared that he had the bump of reverence developed enough for ten priests.

As it was decided that he should be a clergyman, it was necessary that he should go to one of the English universities and take a degree; but as he had never opened a classical book since leaving school, he found to his dismay, that in the two intervening years he had actually forgotten, incredible as it may appear, almost everything which he had learnt, even to some few of the Greek letters. He did not therefore proceed to Cambridge at the usual time in October, but worked with a private tutor in Shrewsbury, and went to Cambridge after the Christmas vacation, early in 1828. He soon recovered his school standard of knowledge, and could translate easy Greek books, such as Homer and the Greek Testament, with moderate facility.

### **Natural Theology and Natural Philosophy**



He read Paley's *Evidences of Christianity*, and his *Moral Philosophy*. This was done in a thorough manner, and he was convinced that he could have written out the whole of the *Evidences* with perfect correctness, but not of course in the clear language of Paley. The logic of this book and of his *Natural Theology*, gave him much delight.

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During his last year at Cambridge, he read with care and profound interest Humboldt's *Personal Narrative*. This work, and Sir J. Herschel's *Introduction to the Study of Natural Philosophy*, stirred up in him a burning zeal to add even the most humble contribution to the noble structure of Natural Science. No one or a dozen other books influenced him nearly so much as these two.

### **Collecting Animals**

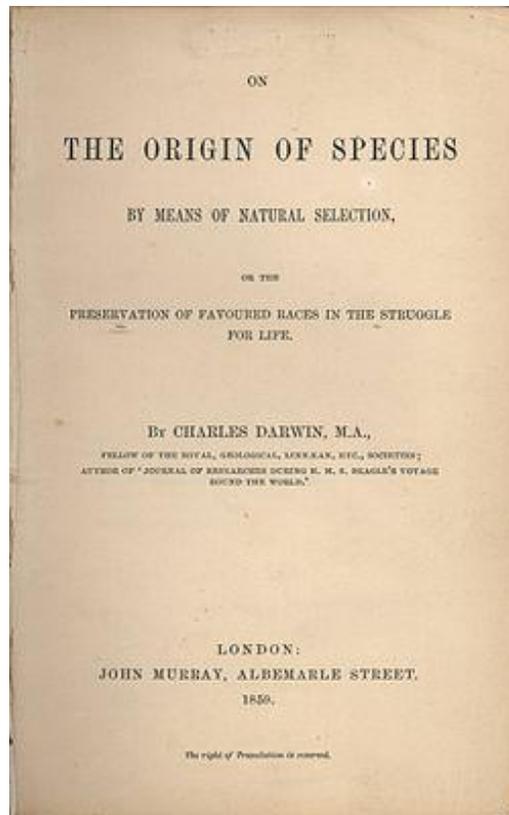
Another of his occupations was collecting animals of all classes, briefly describing and roughly dissecting many of the marine ones. During some part of the day he wrote his Journal, and took much pains in describing carefully and vividly all that he had seen. Everything about which he thought or read was made to bear directly on what he had seen or was likely to see; and this habit of mind was continued during the five years of the voyage. It was this training which enabled him to do whatever he had done in science.

### **Ambitious to become a Scientist**

He worked to the utmost with a strong desire to add a few facts to the great mass of facts in Natural Science. But he was also ambitious to take a fair place among scientific men, "whether more ambitious or less so than most of my fellow-workers, I can form no opinion". His collection of fossil bones, which had been sent to Henslow, excited considerable attention amongst palaeontologists.

His chief enjoyment and sole employment throughout life had been scientific work; and the excitement from such work makes him for the time forget, or drive quite away, his daily discomfort and sickness. He published several books.

### ***The Origin of Species***



From September 1854 he devoted his whole time to arranging his huge pile of notes, to observing, and to experimenting in relation to the transmutation of species. During the voyage of the *Beagle* he had been deeply impressed by discovering in the Pampean formation great fossil animals covered with armour like that on the existing armadillos; secondly, by the manner in which closely allied animals replace one another in proceeding southwards over the Continent; and thirdly, by the South American character of most of the productions of the Galapagos archipelago, and more especially by the manner in which they differ slightly on each island of the group; none of the islands appearing to be very ancient in a geological sense.

It was evident that such facts as these, as well as many others, could only be explained on the supposition that species gradually become modified; and the subject haunted him. But it was equally evident that neither the action of the surrounding conditions, nor the will of the organisms (especially in the case of plants) could account for the innumerable cases in which organisms of every kind are beautifully adapted to their habits of life—for instance, a woodpecker or a tree-frog to climb trees, or a seed for dispersal by hooks or plumes. He had always been much struck by such adaptations, and until these could be explained it seemed to him almost useless to endeavour to prove by indirect evidence that species have been modified.

After his return to England it appeared to me that by following the example of Lyell in Geology, and by collecting all facts which bore in any way on the variation of animals and plants under domestication and nature, some light might perhaps be thrown on the whole subject. His first

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note-book was opened in July 1837. He worked on true Baconian principles, and without any theory collected facts on a wholesale scale, more especially with respect to domesticated productions, by printed enquiries, by conversation with skilful breeders and gardeners, and by extensive reading.

In October 1838, that is, fifteen months after he had begun his systematic enquiry, he happened to read for amusement Malthus on *Population*, and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck him that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species. Here then he had at last got a theory by which to work; but he was so anxious to avoid prejudice, that he determined not for some time to write even the briefest sketch of it. In June 1842 he first allowed himself the satisfaction of writing a very brief abstract of his theory in pencil in 35 pages; and this was enlarged during the summer of 1844 into 230 pages. In September 1858 he set to work to prepare a volume on the transmutation of species, but was often interrupted by ill-health. It cost him thirteen months and ten days' hard labour. It was published under the title of the *Origin of Species*, in November 1859.

### **How the Book was Received**

It was no doubt the chief work of his life. It was from the first highly successful. The first small edition of 1250 copies was sold on the day of publication, and a second edition of 3000 copies soon afterwards. During Darwin's life time, in 1876, sixteen thousand copies were sold in England. It was translated into almost every European tongue, even into such languages as Spanish, Bohemian, Polish, and Russian. It was also translated into Japanese, and was there much studied. Even an essay in Hebrew appeared on it, showing that the theory is contained in the Old Testament!

When he found that many naturalists fully accepted the doctrine of the evolution of species, it seemed to him advisable to work up such notes as he possessed, and to publish a special treatise on the origin of man. The *Descent of Man* took him three years to write, but then as usual some of this time was lost by ill health, and some was consumed by preparing new editions and other minor works. A second and largely corrected edition of the *Descent* appeared in 1874.

### **What Scientists now say about *The Origin of the Species***

#### **Breeding Limitations**

While Darwin expressed plants and animals could vary to an unlimited degree, breeders were discovering otherwise. They were discovering that even though it was possible to breed a sheep with shorter legs, it was not possible to breed a sheep with legs of a rat, or breed a plum the size of a watermelon, or breed a horse with tusks. Each living thing was found to have built in limitations which prevent it from moving too far from the norm. Excessive breeding for a characteristic was also found to either result in a reverse back toward a given average after many

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generations, or it resulted in dead end species which were unable to reproduce (like the mule which is a cross between a horse and donkey). To date no breeding experiments have ever resulted in major, new traits resulting in a completely new species. Darwin had no answer for this limitation and simply assumed these variations could continue to an unlimited degree without evidence.

### **If Breeding is not the Cause of Evolution, then maybe Mutations are?**

Though Darwin also felt that if breeding were not the answer, then mutations might be. In other words, he felt maybe it was possible for forms of life to inherit changes, which could explain changes from one form of life to another over long periods of time.

### **"Natural Selection" Is a Mindless Process**

As part of the theory of evolution, Darwin also proposed that each time any organism evolves, every stage must be an immediate advantage to the species because "natural selection" is a mindless process with no idea where it is going, so it cannot plan or conceive an end goal. Creationists immediately argued that how could many organs of the human body, such as the incredibly complicated human eye, develop bit by bit by chance mutation, not knowing it was going to be an eye? Of what use would a half developed eye be? How could each step have been an advantage until the entire eye was complete? How about other parts of a body such as a kidney or jaw? How about the wings of a bird? What good is a half of a jaw or half of a wing?

### **Is Evolution Occurring Right Now?**

Darwin had always stressed that "survival of the fittest" was an underlying component of his theory of evolution. Though evolutionists cannot identify which aspects are important for survival because survival cannot be seen or proved. No evolutionist really knows how "natural selection" really works, or if it is currently working. Neither has a "struggle for existence" been found to exist among plants and animals.

### **Why Have We All Been Taught the Theory of Evolution as Fact?**

It's been over 150 years since the theory of evolution was proposed and promoted throughout the world, yet to this day we know little more about the origin of species than we did then.

### **Conclusion**

It is a fact that Darwin and many others who had an initial hand in theories surrounding evolution were known atheists or agnostics. The theory of evolution for them was essential to give them a mechanical explanation of the universe without any spiritual principles. Without the theory of evolution, atheists and agnostics have nothing substantial on which to base things, hence they tend to cling to the theory of evolution, even when presented with facts that show

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sub-theories like natural selection cannot be. Creationists on the other hand do not have that attachment since when the theory of evolution falls apart, creation still stands regardless.

For those that believe in God and in Scripture, many questions arise when discussing the Theory of Evolution. First, if every human being is given a soul by God, at what point during the evolutionary process did God step in and give human beings their souls? And when considering the earliest human beings, were their immediate ancestors non-human without souls? You may have heard the joke: if Adam and Eve were the first human beings, were their parents apes? This actually becomes a serious question for those who believe in Scripture.

Sir Julian Huxley, an English biologist and author, declared that "Darwin's real achievement was to remove the whole idea of God as creator from the sphere of rational discussion." What this means is, man, being descended from animals, is thus freed from being answerable for his own behavior. A few results of this are sexual license, the criminal as victim of society, and the Marxian belief that the end justifies and makes "moral" any means."

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# Gandhi's *Autobiography* as a Discourse on His Spiritual Journey

K. R. Vijaya, Ph.D.



## Truth and Experiment

Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth* is one of the imperishable classics of India. It originally appeared week by week in *Navajavan* (in Gujarati) and in *Young India* (in English). Later, it was translated by Desai and issued in book form in the year 1925.

The book is basically about how Gandhi arrived at the principles he held and how they came about from his search for truth. In this autobiographical record, he describes in detail, the events of his life from birth to his higher education in England, his formative years as Lawyer and activist in South Africa, his return to India, and his subsequent entry into and his reshaping of the Independence movement.

Gandhi clearly states "I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography" (Autobiography xii). He says "I shall try to be as harsh as truth as I want others also to be" (Autobiography XII). This book is a tool for him to express his concepts of *Satyagraha*, the holding onto *satyam* (truth) in negotiations, *Swaraj* (self-rule or Home rule), *ahimsa* (non-violence) and so on. He does this by reviewing and evaluating his life with the lens of truth.

Gandhi decided to write his autobiography at the age of fifty-six in the mid 1920's during the period between his involvement in the politics and his return to satyagraha campaigns. When he was in prison from 1922 to 1924, he read avidly on the books on Hinduism, Buddhism,

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Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. The shift of focus from active politics to spirituality made him draw inspiration from these religious text books. This decision to write the autobiography was not taken on his own initiative. Gandhi felt that at that point that his life had become so public that there was no need for him to write about it. But his followers and his friends repeatedly requested him to write out a story of his life for others to examine. He decided to write his life story in the weekly column in *Navajavan*. It was a period of self-assessment as well as the assessment of his principles in his vision of India.

### **The Purpose of Autobiography**

An autobiography can be said to have the purpose of affirming, confirming and reinforcing the self. But Gandhi's autobiography seems to contradict Gandhi's purposes. Right at the outset of his project, Gandhi declares that his purpose is not 'to attempt a real autobiography' (CW 39: 2). He elaborates that, 'I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth' (CW 39: 3). Gandhi quotes the song of Nishkulanand while talking about desires. "Renunciation of objects without the renunciation of desires is short lived however hard you may try."(Autobiography)

### **The Goal of Gandhi's Autobiography and Depiction of Self**

Gandhi's book accurately reflects the general goal and intent of his life - the search for truth and his firm belief in that truth. He believes that truth is God and all his experiments attempt to achieve truth and purity. In self-presentation, Gandhi presents himself as a person with the list of personal weaknesses. In his childhood, he was fearful and timid. He was swayed by his friend's idea that through meat-eating he could acquire strength. He began to envision the act of eating meat to be necessary for the Indians to overthrow the British. But the same person, after taking the vow not to touch wine, woman and meat, keeps the vow till his last breath. He began his experiments with vegetarianism while he was in England with Dr. Mehta.

One of the reasons for his experiments is his vow to his mother. One element of truth in Hinduism is purity of the mind and body and this is the purpose of many of Gandhi's experiments. He seeks to rid himself of lust through diet and to purify his body so his mind controls thought. No matter how ill he is, he will not eat meat or even beef broth or eggs. His family pretty much follows his lead. When Kasturbai was close to death, she did not accept meat or eggs as advised by the doctor. His experiments with dietetics are a life-long deal, and he seeks to find the perfect diet according to his belief - one that wipes out lust and allows man to control his mind and thoughts.

### **Search for Morality**

During teen years, he also seems to be searching vigorously for a true religion. He talks of what does and does not impress him about religion. It is at this time that Gandhi develops his convictions about morality. He says:

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But one thing took deep root in me - the conviction that morality is the basis of things, and that truth is the substance of all morality. Truth became my sole objective. It began to grow in magnitude every day, and my definition of it also has been ever widening.(Autobiography 34).

### **Choice of Religious Beliefs and Social Practices**

Gandhi's study of religion takes place throughout his life. His practice of Hinduism is not based on the worship of any of the gods. For him, truth is god. He doesn't follow all of the Hindu practices and customs except the ones that he can accept. Even as a child and young man, he did not accept many of the Hindu customs. Before he leaves for England, the Sheth makes him an outcast because he will not heed their wishes and give up his chance of studying in England. Being an outcast means nothing to him. He is not concerned about it when he returns from England either. Yet, caste is a very important part of Hinduism. The constraints of caste are not something that he accepts. The parts of Hinduism that he can accept are those that fit in with his view of God as truth. Even as he studies other religions, he still searches for God and truth as he knows it.

### **Secular Beliefs and Personal Practices**

To Gandhi, God is truth. Everything he does is based on truth. In his law practice, he will not allow any misrepresentation of facts. Clients have seen him withdraw from their case in court if he finds any misrepresentation. His life is based on the search for truth which is the purpose of all of his experiments. His vow to his mother not to touch women, wine or meat while in England is an example of this. The only lies he tells are lies of omission like not telling people that he is married with a wife and child during his school years in England.

### **Spiritual Growth Blocked by Human Passions**

Gandhi finds that human passions can lead one away from spiritual growth. Lust, pride and greed are also included in this list. Gandhi does not spare details in recounting struggles with his carnal desires. He shares even his lustful moments even at the hour of his father's death. "The shame to which I have referred in a foregoing chapter was this shame of my carnal desire even at the critical hour of my father's death, which demanded wakeful service" (Autobiography 26). He speaks of the shame of his lustful desires, never once acknowledging the fact that they are normal for a teenage male. Even Later Gandhi tries to control his lust by taking the vow of *brahmacharya* and moves out of Kasturbai's bedroom. Gandhi sees all of these experiments as a way of becoming one with truth.

### **"Fight" Against the Colonial Rulers – Non-violence is not Enough**

Non-violence and Satyagraha are basically the story of how Gandhi and his followers fight the British government. There is only one time in the whole autobiography where Gandhi resorts to violence and slaps one of the boys at his settlement. The boy does not listen to Gandhi and

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follow his orders and he responds by striking him. It is one of the few outbursts of anger that is revealed in the book and Gandhi does not feel good about it. To him it represents a lack of control on his part and he feels that he should be strong enough to control his own reactions and anger. When he is attacked by the crowd as he returns to Natal, he does not strike back even when they are hitting him. He seems to learn that just telling people to be non-violent is not enough.

The demonstrations and the day of *Hartal* show what happens when people are provoked and react with violence. There are a lot of people hurt and killed, especially in the Punjab where the massacre occurs. He responds that they did not receive proper training in his principles of self-restraint and that it proves his point of what happens when people are provoked and respond with retaliation.

### **Prayers as Source of Guidance, Good and Wicked Deeds**

Gandhi suggests the readers that prayer can be used as, a source of guidance. He feels that prayer combined with utmost sincerity and humility can cleanse the heart of desires. He feels:

Man and his deed are two distinct things. Whereas a good deed should call forth approbation and a wicked deed disapprobation, the doer of the deed, whether good or wicked, always deserves respect or pity as the case may be. Hate the sin and not the sinner is a precept which, though easy enough to understand, is rarely practiced, and that is why “the poison of hatred spreads in the world.”  
(Autobiography, 276)

### **An Array of Life Experiences**

Gandhi offers his autobiography as an array of experiences that open for others the possibilities of similar spiritual journeys.

The book is written in the first person. Everything the reader sees is seen through Gandhi’s eyes and perspective. All background information and viewpoints are through Gandhi. All of the characters are presented through him. He shows both sides of the arguments and discussions throughout the book but the reader is still aware that it is presented from Gandhi’s perspective.

Gandhi at some times comes across as being very opinionated because of this. At times the reader wants to criticize Gandhi as being stubborn and narrow-minded because he is so principled. But in an autobiography written in the first person there is no other way the material can be presented.

### **Gandhi’s Language and Style**

For the most part, Gandhi tells his story in clear, easy English. The book is well-written. He does not elaborate on the meaning of various Hindu terms and the reader will have a problem

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understanding some of Gandhi's points if he is not somewhat acquainted with Hinduism. For example, Gandhi does not explain the meaning of caste and the basis of Hinduism or some other religions that he comes into contact with. His constant striving for purity cannot be understood without some prior knowledge of Hinduism. It would be much easier for the reader to understand Gandhi and some of his beliefs if the reader understands something of Hinduism.

Gandhi uses various Hindu terms throughout the book. He does a fairly good job of explaining the meaning of terms like *tinkaithia* and *brahmacharya*. Gandhi quotes the Gita and other books in his autobiography. The reader can grasp enough to figure out that it somehow fits into to his concept of truth.

### **The Structure and Function**

Gandhi's autobiography is divided into five parts with the divisions mostly based on geography. There is a part for his childhood in India and another for his stay in England. His return to India and his time in South Africa are two other parts. His final return to India is the last part.

Each Part is subdivided into twenty-five to forty-seven short chapters. The parts are chronological but the chapters jump around within the part's time frame as Gandhi goes from topic to topic. The biggest problem is the lack of use of dates.

Most of the chapters in the book are very short, just two or three page long. In many cases they refer to a thought or incident. Since Gandhi, wrote most of his autobiography while he was in prison, did not have the use of notes and diaries. When he remembers something, he writes it in a separate chapter.

### **Gandhi on the Road Less Travelled by Others**

On the whole, "The Story of My Experiments With Truth" is about Gandhi's physical, social and personal experiments with Truth and his efforts to remove any falsehood from himself and those around him. This is the emotional journey that led him to the destination of God and Truth.

The autobiography is also a book capable of spectacular insight. It is in essence the road less travelled. Gandhi's life is that of an exercise of the human will trying to control the darker side of the human nature. Using himself as an example, he preaches the principles of simplicity, honesty and charity. It is an invaluable book aimed at passing through the darkness of life like "Everyman" of John Bunyan; a spiritual journey of human psyche.

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## Autobiography as a Tool of Nationalism

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P. Revathi, M.A., M.Phil.

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### Autobiographies and Biographies of Great Leaders

In the history of every nation, leaders impact the lives of people not only of their own generation but every generation that would follow them. Abraham Lincoln, Vladimir Lenin, M. K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Periyar Ramasamy, B. R. Ambedkar and Phule, for example, have had profound influence on the mental make-up of our modern world, social structure and intellectual development. Lives of scientists, inventors and business leaders like Thomas Edison, Einstein, Bill Gates and Narasimhamoorthy continue to inspire the young scholars and businesspersons in their endeavor in creating more wealth and more relevant knowledge. Some of these have written their autobiographies, and, for some others, only others have written their biographies.

However, both the autobiographies and biographies of such leaders among us have given us the most moving and candid accounts of the sorrows, sufferings and heart-aches, successes and failures of these leaders.

### Autobiography and Biography in the Wider Indian Context

Autobiographical documents can be found in all cultures. But detailed autobiographies are rare in ancient India. For example, Thiruvalluvar or Kamban, two among the many celebrated poets of Tamil, did not choose to write their autobiography. Temples with impressive *gopurams* (entrance towers) may have some inscriptions or copper plates that reveal the name of the king or the queen, et al. behind the effort to construct such huge edifices, but no detailed autobiographical sketches. Except in one or two temples, even the images of the kings or the queens are not carved, while so much effort had gone into carving so many beautiful statues, sceneries and other

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artistic expressions in stone, mortar and/or bronze. Their names and deeds are buried in mythological stories, not in realistic biographical details. Gandhi was questioned why he should write his autobiography, when this was not done in Indian tradition earlier.

### **Autobiographies and Biographies Foster Nationalism**

Thus, autobiography as a deliberate literary product is brought into existence only under certain conditions. One of the most important contextual factors is that autobiography flourishes well as a tool to foster nationalism, especially when a nation is under foreign yoke.

The term *nationalism* refers to

An ideology, offers an interpretation of the historical and contemporary reality in which a nation finds itself a critique of that reality together with a conceptualization of an ideal or preferred reality as a goal to be striven for, and a plan or set of guidelines for researching that goal (*Encyclopedia Americana* 435).

In effect, nationalism can be used to mobilize people for political action by cultivating or even creating through propaganda and education, a national consciousness based on the existing perceptions of common identity which differentiates the group of people from other nationalities. In developing this nationalistic fervor, myths may also be of great use. Myths are defined and described in terms of a heroic, glorious or romanticized past or a conception of a threat to the existence of the nation.

### **A Wide Variety of Authors**

All kinds of men and women acting from all kinds of motives, have written their own lives. But probably all of them have acquired a certain detachment from the events they choose to record. Their experience, something in the nature of a conversation or a change of environment or injustice, imprisonment in which the writer attempts to declare and to justify the course of his or her life or particular action thereof, exploratory in which the act of writing used as a research tool or simply egocentric portraiture in which the writer assumes that his or her life is worth sharing with others. (*Mahatma Gandhi: The Man and His Message*, 108)

There are many leaders who have used their autobiographies as a tool of nationalism. Among them are Nehru and Gandhi. Nehru's *An Autobiography, Letters from a Father to his Daughters* and Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

### **Nehru's Autobiography**

Nehru's *Autobiography*, which tells the story of his life and struggle, without a touch of self-pity or moral superiority, is one of the most remarkable books of the modern age. His Autobiography was written when he was in jail. As a story of national struggle, the autobiography influenced many readers in the past, and it continues to throw light on the happenings in India's freedom

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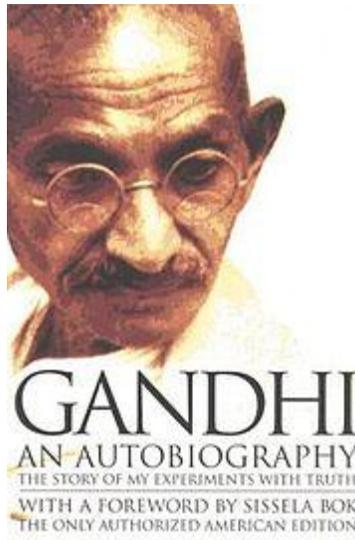
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struggle. The autobiography is also a sympathetic study of the characters of some of the men and women who shaped India's destiny in those fateful days.

### **Gandhi's Autobiography**



Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, tells the story of his numerous “experiments with truth.” Gandhi viewed his life as an ongoing experiment with truth in several layers. One could perhaps consider and describe every incident in his life as an experiment.

### **What is Meant by Experiment?**

The word *experiment* is, indeed, an interesting choice. In general plain English, it means a process, a process to find out the suitability of what is being experimented or tested for a purpose on hand. Dictionaries usually define experiment as “the act or test performed to demonstrate or illustrate a truth” (*Dictionary New Encyclopedic Edition* 2004). So, one has to be active, one has to test and one need not assume that he or she is on the correct track, one has the desire to get involved and act. Truth is not seen and assumed to be a changing variant, it is seen to be there already and is a constant. It is our process that can vary and adjust itself to reach and attain truth.

Gandhi's life, then, became a continuing process to identify, reach and celebrate truth. His Truth is intended for the universal audience, but in its specific operation touched the lives of millions first of all in his country of birth, India, and it consists of nothing but those experiments. It is true that the story has taken the shape of an autobiography. Gandhi's experiments in the political field are very well known and had its impact on movements of freedom around the world. His personal life, like in most autobiographies of public figures, did not receive detailed attention, as he was consumed by the public purpose and goals.

### **Overcoming Language Interference**

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Gandhi wrote his original piece in his mother tongue, Gujarati. His writing in English was vetted by an anonymous friend. There is a flavor of Indianness in his writing and at the same time, Gandhi expressed himself well to the audience around the world. Gujarati or Indian nuances do not stop his readers from reaching his heart.

In a vivid and direct style, he recounts the early scenes from his childhood, the years he spent in London and Africa, his early involvement in public life, the fight against the British and his friendship with great people. He shares with us his views on life, love, national duty, personal fulfillment and his unique vision of India. This is a fascinating insider's account not only of his life, but also of the forces that shaped India's history during the early years of India's struggle for freedom.

### **To Conclude**

The autobiographies of Nehru and Gandhi portray not only their life, but also their struggle and participation in national movement. It is not that they tend to show their nationalism through writing but it becomes necessary for them to document nationalism in their autobiography as it is part of their life. Thus their autobiographies become a tool of nationalism.

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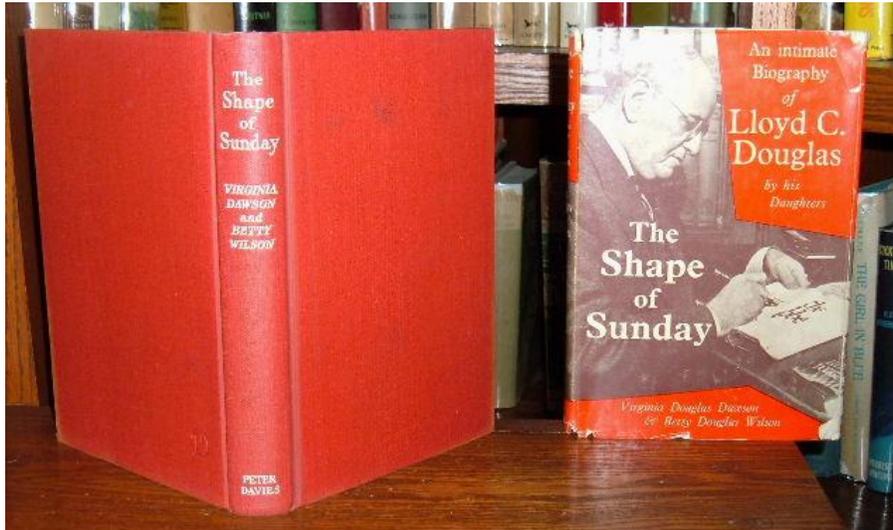
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## *The Shape of Sunday* - the Biography of Lloyd C. Douglas

Pauline Das, Ph.D.

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### ***The Shape of Sunday: A Continuation of Douglas' Autobiography***

*The Shape of Sunday*, the Biography of Lloyd C. Douglas was written by his two daughters, Virginia Douglas Dawson and Bettina Douglas Wilson. It was published by Houghton Mifflin Co., London, in 1953, a year after Douglas' death. It includes intimate details of his family background, interesting accounts of his work as a minister in various towns in America and Canada and gives us an insight into his writing career. The book lets us peep into how his novels were born, giving us a better understanding of his novels. Douglas himself wrote his autobiography, *Time to Remember*, his last work. But he died the following year in 1951, leaving his autobiography incomplete. *The Shape of Sunday* written in 1952 is therefore a continuation of Douglas' life story. In *Time to Remember* Douglas looks back with fond memories his past life. Though he resents the rigid way he was brought up, there is appreciation and understanding for his parents' ways.

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### **Lloyd Cassell Douglas: Early Life**

Lloyd Cassell Douglas was born in 1877 in Columbia City, Indiana, the son of Alexander Jacson Douglas, a Lutheran clergyman, and Sarah Jane (Cassel) Douglas. He grew up along the creek bottom of Indiana. His boyhood had a profound effect on his attitude toward life. He was educated as a minister at Wittenberg Seminary in Springfield, Ohio. His father promised to bring him up as a pastor. His writing career began as a student in 1900, when he wrote 'A History of a Class of 1900'. After his ordination, he served as pastor in North Manchester, Indiana, in 1903 and he was a 'good shepherd' to his congregation. In those days the pastors were looked upon as the actual representatives of God on earth. He was all the time preoccupied with the duties and attitude of a pastor. He started making a scrap book which contained the newspaper clippings that spoke of him as a preacher. In 1904, he married Bessie Porch, a minister's daughter.

### **Passion for Writing**

In 1905, Douglas moved to Lancaster, Ohio, and in 1908 to Washington, D.C. 'More than a Prophet' was his next work. He was a regular contributor in 1909 to 'The Lutheran Observer'. "Someday I'm going to try my hand at a novel" (*The Shape of Sunday*, p.204) Douglas often said. His passion for writing yarns began in 1910, but he could muster up only after a pause of nearly ten years.

### **Narrative Style**

From 1911 to 1915, he was chaplain and director of religious work at the University of Illinois. Later Douglas became a pastor of First Congregational Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Many

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of the students from nearby University of Michigan attended his sermons, famous for the lively narrative style. After living in college towns, Douglas spent many years as the pastor of churches in Akron, Montreal, and Los Angeles. Much of the knowledge of medical terminology and procedures of his books, Douglas picked up while conducting pastoral care visits to patients at Midwestern teaching hospitals.

Douglas finished *Magnificent Obsession* while he was living in Los Angeles and it came out just after the market crash of 1929. He was fifty years old then. After 45 printings, Willett, Clark, and Colby sold their right to Houghton Mifflin. In 1931, the work reached the bestseller list. Upon its success, Douglas retired from the ministry, to write more novels. During his new career, Douglas formed his own notions of the craft, such as: "Never start a chapter with conversation. Always start a new page with some care. Start with a paragraph of three or four lines without conversation. Minor characters must be endeared at once ..." (Lloyd C. Douglas: Best-selling author of *The Robe*, *Green Light*, *Magnificent Obsession* is a specialist in miracles whose own career is a major literary miracle' by Noel F. Busch, Time, May 27, 1946.) Douglas usually wrote 3,000 words a day, of which 1,500 were often rewrite of the previous day's chore.

### **The Making of the Plot of *Magnificent Obsession***

Douglas found the germ of his plot in a newspaper which reported the death of a doctor who had drowned from heart attack while his pulsator, which he always kept ready in the boat house for such an emergency, was being used to revive a young man across the lake. The idea never failed to intrigue Douglas. What had the young man thought when he realized his life had been saved at the cost of another's? Had he been stricken beyond natural remorse by the fact that an experienced, valuable doctor had died and he – young, but of small use to the society – lived? Had he been conscious of a duty to replace the older man?

In mid-winter of that year, Douglas preached a series of sermons which he called "The Secrets of Exultant Living" (*The Shape of Sunday*, p.211). He had long been trying to convince people of the very real power of religion as working energy in their lives if they would only experiment with it. He wanted them to think of it as a positive force – the "dynamics of Christian faith", (p211) he called it. The clues to this energy lay in the New Testament. "This idea had been there in the Bible a long time", Douglas said to his wife and children, "but its simplicity disguises its power. Once you try it, you have laid hold of something. I wish I could get the meaning across to more people. If I have a message, it's probably that". (p. 212) The blending of the theme with the original incident concerning the doctor who drowned and the young man who was saved came as a natural and opened the whole plot to the end, shaping every step of it. In spite of public's enthusiasm, *Magnificent Obsession* received mixed reviews in literary journals. Edmund Wilson said that "Instead of the usual trash aimed at Hollywood and streamlined for the popular magazines, one is confronted with something that resembles an old-fashioned novel for young people."

Writing was not an easy job for Douglas. "You've no idea what a terrific job a novel is .... A dog's job" (*The Shape of Sunday*, p.228), he observes in his letter to his friend Van Vechtens. He

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published his second book *Forgive us our Trespasses* in 1932. It is the story of rehabilitation of a girl who had committed sin. It was a great success, though written with an ethical purpose and described by the author himself as “old fashioned in which the characters are tiresomely decent. (D.C.Browning, *Everyman’s Dictionary of Literary Biography – English and American*, New York, 1970, p.198)

### **Giving Hope to Mankind through *Green Light***

Just as T.S Eliot views that the greatness of literature can be determined only by moral standards, Douglas is also a thoughtful spokesman of the conviction that the importance of literature is not merely in its way of saying but also in what it says. Underlying all else in the writing of *Green Light* (1935) is the shaping purpose of man, to make long strides morally. Douglas agrees with Keats that this earth is no ‘vale of tears’ but rather ‘a vale of soul-making’. Human life, for him, means to be a training school for the growth of character.

The entire structure of *Green Light* seems to be designed to meet the spiritual needs of the people, for Douglas’ audience consisted of men and women who longed for spiritual sustenance that would help them understand one another and make one another happy. *Green Light* is preoccupied with the middle class society’s desire to improve or move upwards. Its underlying message is: the road is clear before you. Go forward.

The idea Douglas portrays in *Green Light* is one he had worked up in his lecture ‘Flight to Freedom’. The thesis he wishes to embody in short, is of civilization’s long climb from the jungle to paradise – the long parade he calls it. It is full of set-backs and interminable stretches of flat country, but ultimately upward. A man’s spiritual life follows the same course, but if he can free himself from the burdens of frustration and old bitterness, he will get the ‘green light’ to proceed.

*The Shape of Sunday* says:

In Douglas’ view ‘growth’ is not a reflex action. It must be earned through the consideration of the full range of human experience, and it cannot exist without knowledge of profound despair. If society could be organized and administered to carry on with its progression in spite of hardships, freedom could be achieved. Fundamental is Douglas’ belief that human life has meaning, because of the plan and the purpose of the Creator. Nature and man together are manifestations of God’s self-revealing activities on evolution. He perceived that the idea of evolution levelled upwards and not downwards, spiritualized nature, rather than naturalized spirit. He traces the divine activity in the whole evolutionary process from the earliest degrees of humanness upto man and in human experience. His stress lay on the incidents in the development of the soul. It is in order that man may become Man that Douglas wrote this novel. (p. 250)

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## **Embodying Christian Virtues in *White Banners***

During the time Douglas stayed in Washington they had a cook, a fat, coloured nanny whose name was Emily. Emily loved them all dearly and Bessie Douglas became so devoted to her and dependent upon her advice that when they finally moved away she feared for a while that she would never be able to manage her house and children alone. The old black lady had lived all her life in Washington and knew all the intricacies of social deportment. This lady was probably figured in *White Banners*, according to Virginia and Bettina, the authors of *The Shape of Sunday*.

Douglas thought that in many ways *White Banners* is the best job of novel-writing he had done so far, a bit trickier job than the others and requiring more skill in dialogue in as much as his leading character is a woman. In her, Douglas provides so many Christian virtues. Her tolerance, forgiveness and sacrifice for the Ward family, make the story heart-warming. By her simple practices of personal adequacy and private valour, she lives an ordinary life in an extraordinary way, and tries to rehabilitate the Ward house.

## **The Making of *The Robe***

*The Robe* (1942), written in the tradition of *Ben Hur* (1880) has sold over six million copies. The idea for the novel came from a woman in Ohio, who asked Douglas if he had ever heard the legend of the Roman soldier, who won Jesus' robe through a dice game after the crucifixion. "It set me think and I decided to do a little story about it." *The Robe* gained also a wide audience as the first film in Cinemascope. Douglas had sold the screen right in 1942, while still working on the novel, but it took 11 years before the film was ready for public viewing.

Several of Douglas's books have been adapted to screen, *Magnificent Obsession* twice. *Green Light* (1935) was filmed in 1936, starring Errol Flynn.. Douglas once said in an interviews, that "If my novels are entertaining I am glad, but they are not written so much for the purpose of entertainment as of inspiration." After the death of his wife in 1944, Douglas moved from Bel-Air, California, to the wing of a house belonging to his daughter Betty and her husband, on the outskirts Las Vegas, Nevada. Unhappy with the production of *The Robe*, Douglas did not allow this sequel to be made into a motion picture during his lifetime. However, it was filmed in 1959 by Frank Borzage.

## ***The Big Fisherman***

His last novel, *The Big Fisherman* (1948), shared the same New Testament world of Palestine and Rome and focused on Jesus, Peter, and a pair of young lovers, Esther and Voldi. The Roman world of the early Christian Church is carefully drawn. Douglas's main purpose was to present a Christian thesis in the form of a novel and include in the gospel narratives the aspect of human interest. On the other hand, his works were not overly didactic and his Midwestern characters value common sense and practical experience. Douglas died of a heart ailment in Los Angeles,

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on February 13, 1951. His last words were, "I'm happy." Douglas was buried in the Sanctuary of the Good Shepherd at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California.

### A Complete List of Douglas' Works

- THE FATE OF THE LIMITED, 1919
- WANTED: A CONGREGATION, 1920
- WANTED - A CONGREGATION , 1921
- AN AFFAIR OF THE HEART, 1922
- THE MINISTER'S EVERYDAY LIFE, 1924
- THESE SAYINGS OF MINE: AN INTERPRETATION OF THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS, 1926
- THOSE DISTURBING MIRACLES, 1927
- MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION, 1929
- FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES, 1932
- PRECIOUS JEOPARDY: A CHRISTMAN STORY, 1933
- THE COLLEGE STUDENT FACING A MUDDLED WORLD, 1933
- GREEN LIGHT, 1935
- WHITE BANNERS, 1936
- HOME FOR CHRISTMAS, 1937
- DOCTOR HUDSON'S SECRET JOURNAL, 1939
- DISPUTED PASSAGE, 1939
- INVITATION TO LIFE,
- THE ROBE,
- THE BIG FISHERMAN, 1949
- TIME TO REMEMBER, 1951
- THE LIVING FAITH: SELECTED SERMONS, 1955

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