

The Radical Thought and Autobiography in American Literature

Houria Mihoubi University of M'sila

Abstract

Autobiography as a literary genre is an account of a person's life written by him. Obviously an autobiography runs the danger of being highly subjective since it is confined to the author's life, experiences, and world view. In autobiography, the author often finds an opportunity to express his own thought that can be radical. The first purpose of the article is to treat the radical thought through four American autobiographies: Frederick Douglass *The Life of F. Douglass*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Mary Grow Dog's *Lakota Women*, and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. The other objective is to shed light on how these writers tried, by narrating their lives, to convey to the reader of their radical views of society and therefore, sought to foster social reform. Frederick Douglas and Richard Wright wrote to defend and argue for abolitionism, Mary Grow Dog wrote to ask for a better place for the American Indian women in the American society, while Henry David Thoreau defended environmentalism as a philosophy of life.

Key words: Radicalism, autobiography, abolitionism, women, Environmentalism.

الملخص

يهدف المقال إلى تسليط الضوء على العلاقة بين السيرة الذاتية كنتاج أدبي والفكر الراديكالي كسبب للتعبير الاجتماعي وذلك في الأدب الأمريكي. لدراسة هذه العلاقة، رأينا أن يتركز المقال على أربع سير ذاتية لكتاب أمريكيين وهم "السيرة الذاتية لفريدريك دوغلاس" لفريدريك دوغلاس، "الطفل الاسود" لريتشارد رايت، "إمرأة لاکوتا" لماري كرو دوق و"والدن" لهنري ديفد ثورو.

في كل واحدة من السير المذكورة يطرح الكاتب فكرة راديكالية من خلال سرد تجاربه معطيا تبريرات لهذه الفكرة فدوغلاس و رايت دافعا عن حقوق السود في المجتمع الأمريكي ذو الأغلبية البيضاء ماري كرو دوق دافعت عن حقوق المرأة الهندية في المجتمع الأمريكي و ثورو طرح ما يدعى اليوم بالبيئية. نخلص في بحثنا إلى أن السيرة الذاتية يمكن أن تكون مناخا أدبيا مناسباً لطرح الفكر الأيديولوجي.

Introduction

As a literary genre, autobiography is often defined as one's writing of his life story. (Dictionary of the English Language, 2000 p 63) This writing about oneself makes subjectivity a major characteristic feature of every autobiography. In writing an autobiography, the author often redefines himself and recreates his past lived experiences. Concerning the social message of autobiography, it is agreed upon among critics that no autobiography is written for purely aesthetic aim. Every writer must have an apologetic aim behind writing his own life story. He often tries to testify to something, to convey a social message or to defend a social belief or thesis. In other words, the author of the autobiography is always concerned with the sociological interpretation of the events of his life because he often does not see any conflict between self revelation and the social message he wants to convey in his autobiography. Some American writers tended to make their radical ideas known to the public through literature. Being radical often means favouring or effecting fundamental or revolutionary changes in current practices, conditions, or institutions (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2010, p670) so, to what extent was autobiography expressive of the radical conviction or thought of the American men of letters?

1-Autobiography and the revelation of the self

Autobiographical works can take many forms, from the intimate writings made during life that were not necessarily intended for publication (including letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, and reminiscences) to a formal book-length autobiography. Formal autobiographies offer a special kind of biographical truth: a life, reshaped by recollection, with all of recollection's conscious and unconscious omissions and distortions. The novelist Graham Greene said that, for this reason, an autobiography is only "a sort of life" and used the phrase as the title for his own autobiography (1971).

Historically speaking, there are but few examples of autobiographical literature in antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the 2nd century BCE the Chinese classical historian Sima Qian included a brief account of himself in the *Shiji* ("Historical Records"). Generally speaking, autobiography in its modern, Western sense can be considered to have emerged in Europe during the Renaissance, in the 15th century. One of the first examples was written in England by Margery Kempe.

Among the representative examples of biographical literature from the Renaissance to the Age of Enlightenment are: the autobiography of the English historian Lord Herbert of Cherbury, in the early 17th and Colley Cibber's *Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber, Comedian* in the early 18th. The latter period itself produced three works that are especially notable for their very different reflections of the spirit of the times as well as of the personalities of their authors: the urbane autobiography of Edward Gibbon, the great historian; Benjamin Franklin; and the introspection of a revolutionary Swiss-born political and social theorist, the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

1.1- The Characteristics of Autobiography

Autobiographies are generally written in first person, meaning the narrative consists of "I" and "we." An autobiography typically tells the chronological story of the author's life--from birth to the present. Examples of autobiographies are *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* written by Benjamin Franklin and *Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life* by Steve Martin. Even though most autobiographies are self-authored, some may be co-written--"as told to"-by a professional writer. This is especially common in autobiographies of celebrities, sports figures, politicians and anyone else who may not have the writing abilities to write an entire book.

Many famous people often use autobiography to attract public attention, exploit notoriety or express their side of a controversial issue--these types of stories are called ad hoc autobiographies (Lin, Xianghua). Some people use their story as a healing tool, especially if they have been a victim of trauma, and others simply want to piece together their life experiences. When writing an autobiography, the writer should focus on three things: who he is, what he perceives the meaning of his life to be, and his outlook on the future. Autobiographies are generally attached to the author's personality and perception of himself and the world.

1.2- Types of Autobiography

Generally, there are four types of autobiographies: thematic, religious, intellectual, and fictionalized. The first type includes books with such diverse purposes as *The Americanization of Edward Bok* (1920) and Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925, 1927). Religious autobiography claims a number of great works, ranging from *The Confessions* of St. Augustine in the Middle Ages to the autobiographical chapters of Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* and John Henry Cardinal

Newman's *Apologia* in the 19th century. That century and the early 20th saw the creation of several intellectual autobiographies, including the severely analytical *Autobiography* of the philosopher John S. Mill and *Adams*, Henry Adams' biography. Finally, somewhat similar to the novel as biography is the autobiography disguised as, or transformed into, the novel. This type includes such works as Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), James Joyce's 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man' (1916), George Santayana's *The Last Puritan* (1935), and the novels of Thomas Wolfe. Yet in all of these works can be detected elements of all four types.

One hundred years ago, the German scholar George Misch wrote that the term autobiography when it first emerged was conceived differently: it held a documentary value because it presents information about people's daily lives and experiences as it offered amusement and instruction. In fact Misch in his book *A History of Autobiography in Iniquity* emphasized its great didactic value of this literary genre for the readers because according to him, autobiography often exemplifies human success in that Misch seems to support the beliefs of Herder and Goethe who both saw the development of autobiography as part of the great process of the liberation of human personality. In their *Early Modern Autobiography: Theories, Genres, Practices*, Ronald Bedford, Lloyd Davis, and Philippa Kelly - 2006 also considered the many ways in which autobiographical selves emerged, with the aim of understanding the interaction between those individuals' lives and their worlds. Focusing on those conceptions and values of autobiography, many American men of letters sought to transmit their radical ideas through their autobiographies.

2- Autobiography and the Radical Thought in American Literature

The major purpose of this article is to shed light on the contribution of autobiography to the struggle against racism and discrimination in the American society on one hand and to the promotion of some radical thoughts that changed life in the American community on the other. The article sheds light on four autobiographies whose writers are like any other authors who believe that self revelation and the social message are intimately linked to autobiography.

To substantiate this opinion, I have chosen writers from main stream and ethnic American literature. Throughout the article focus shall be on the relationship between their personal revelation and the social message and therefore the radical thought they wanted to convey to the reader. The works selected are Fredrick Douglas' *The Life of F. Douglass*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Mary Grow Dog's *Lakota Women*, and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*.

2.1- Fredrick Douglas' *The Life of F. Douglass*

In writing his life story, Frederick Douglass was concerned more with the social implication of slavery in the American south. The natural result of that was an autobiography that documents the social life of the black community in a specific period of time and in a partial place in the American nation. Frederic Douglass's major aim was certainly to dramatize the life of the Negro in a white dominated society and probably to picture the nightmare of slavery in modern America? He provides a detailed description of life in the slave holder 's plantation and emphasizes more the relationship between himself and his white master" Covey" who is portrayed as cruel and domineering man whose major goal in life is to achieve material success:

"But, alas! This kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon." (.Douglass, 1978 , pp. 77-78).

For this reason, he despises the slaves and exploits them despite their weakness. In Douglas's autobiography, Covey can be considered as an emblematic figure for slavery as a social and economic system in America. To show the Negro dilemma in a white dominated society, Douglas portrays a great deal of his social experiences that can be taken as representatives of the social life of the African American city in general for instance, in an early stage of life: "Hunger has always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside" (ibid).

By narrating this psychological experience, Douglas wants certainly to convey the idea that slavery as a social institution aims at disrupting the ties among the slave family. He did not feel sad for having lost his mother supply because from the very beginning of his life, he did not get the habit of having her with him. So, that is why her life or death is alike to him. Douglas, the child and Douglas be going who has spent his time in the plantation that did not belong to him and whose fruits went to the white slaveholder is without a familial affiliation:

"I knew that I lived in a country in which the aspirations of black people were limited, marked-off. Yet I felt that I had to go somewhere and do something to redeem my being alive." (.Douglass, 1978).

Douglas also speaks with a psychological bitterness about the everlasting absence of his father. For sure, by informing the reader of the gap left by the father, Douglas wants to end slavery as a social system which always sends the father of the slave elsewhere in order to disrupt the slave of family. Probably, Douglas wants here to suggest that one of the major aims of slavery is to create a matriarchal slave family in which the mother plays a major role and assumes all the responsibilities. He is then, showing the social impact of slavery and its far fetched aims at dismantling the ties among the slaves, so that they can not be united and before can not struggle against the white southerners.

2.2- Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

In Richard Wright's painful autobiography '*Black Boy*'; it is obvious to the reader that Wright's life although, less stable and more fragmented than all the African Americans in the South, is representative of the life in the American South and it can be taken as a microcosm of the Negro life in twentieth Century America. In writing his autobiography, Wright redefined two important episodes of his life, his painful childhood and his experience and involvement in the Communist Party as an intellectual adult. Wright was very selective in narrating his past experiences concentrating more on those that can represent the social life in the South, and used irony as a way of critiquing the discriminatory society of America. In an attempt to argue for antislavery ideology, Douglass attacks slavery as an American social institution in his autobiography:

"From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and

spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise." (Wright, 1993, p.75).

He shows how he, as a colored person, is deprived of his right to be considered as respectable American citizen in a society that pretends to apply social justice and protects the freedom and the individual opinion of every citizen: If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master-to do as he is told to do (ibid, p.78). In other words, Wright seems to question the major principles upon which the American society is built such as equality, freedom, justice and the pursuit of happiness. His maternal grandfather is deprived of his mansion by a bureaucratic error despite his brilliant career in the American navy and Dunt's husband is murdered by the whites only because he is proved to be successful in his liquor business. Certainly, Wright did not choose to narrate these experiences just haphazardly, but rather he was quite aware that though those experiences might be personal they can convey a very meaningful social message.

Wright also speaks about his mother and her role in educating him and in giving him the energy to fight the whites and to stand a faint to their humiliation. Here, Wright wants to refer to the role played by the African American woman in protecting the Negro culture. He portrays his mother as well as his grand mother as real guardians of culture and tradition in the family:

My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless

moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. (ibid)

What one can say about *Black Boy* as an autobiography is that it has a continuing value because of its providing engaging ways for us to know how our lives can be shaped by our race, gender, and even our country and how the conflict between desire and hindrance can cause a psychological defeat and then lead to a call for a radical change in society.

2.3- Mary Crow Dog's *Lakota Women*.

Another brilliant autobiography whose writer does not see any conflict between self revelation and social message is that of the Indian author Mary Crow Dog. The autobiography is entitled '*Lakota Women*'. In her narration of her life story, Mary Crow Dog considers herself as the representative of all Indian women.

She identifies herself with the past Indian woman as well as with the present Indian woman. She gives an excessively detailed account of her life in the reservation and sure witting enough managed to portray the oppression and the humiliation suffered by every Indian whether he is a man or a woman. In recreating her history, Mary crow Dog, wanted to redefine the social history of all the Indians, how they lived and how they were treated as well as how they reacted to the modern way of life. She also could show the psychological defeat that all the Indians felt after their subjugation by the whites. To give an example, she compared between the Indian man who used to feed his family the meat of buffalo, and the Indian of her time who was feeding his children span, the cheapest type of food in the American market.

“If you plan to be born, make sure you are born white and male. It is not the big, dramatic things

so much that get us down, but just being Indian, trying to hang on to our way of life, language and values while being surrounded by an alien, more powerful culture. It is being an *iyeska*, a half-blood, being looked down upon by whites and full-bloods alike.." (Crow Dog. 1990 p 4,5).

This citation is important because it sums up most of the conflicts that Mary Crow Dog faces in the book. She goes through many incredible hardships; such as being raped at fifteen, giving birth during a war, being arrested for being American Indian, growing up in poverty, and so many more. She has to deal with being separated from her family and her culture to end up in a boarding school where she is punished for holding hands with boys and abused by priests. On top of all that, Mary has problems fitting in with her own culture, since she is only half American Indian. Even if she was full Lakota, she would not have been taught the full richness of her background since both her mother and her grandmother were converted to Catholicism by the boarding school.

Mary has to try to accept all of these issues and rise above them in order to work against them— not only for herself, but for her people as a whole, and the friends that she sees fall before her. Her sister Barbara is sterilized against her will and later murdered by a drunken boyfriend. Her death is never investigated. Her best friend, Annie, is pursued by the law, and when found dead in the wilderness, she has her hands cut off for identification instead of simply having her finger prints taken. Then, the law rules Annie's death accidental due to exposure, but when her body is later exhumed by lawyers hired by the Lakotas, it is found that she had a bullet in her brain—she was murdered, and the law blatantly ignored it.

Mary has to deal with all of these hardships because of the reasons stated in the quote — her gender, her race and her “inferior”

culture. This quote is extremely powerful and touching. With a lot of emotion it illustrates everything that we have been studying up to this point—the cost of privilege on unprivileged groups:

For somebody to say that the only way to succeed in our society is to be born white and male is a heartbreaking statement, and one that we, as future teachers, need to work toward proving wrong. This quite points to the social injustices that we will be battling on a daily basis in order to empower our students and help them develop a positive sense of self”. (ibid, P. 44)

Mary Crow also shows how it is difficult for the Indian to assimilate the white picture by describing her experience with the Christian religion and her education in a white institution when she could not accept the culture easily . She by the end decided to go back to her original Indian culture. Mary Crow Dog’s autobiography can be considered as one of the social documents about the Indian’s development from hunters into ordinary American citizen.

“I asked him, ‘What do you expect of me?’ He said, ‘You are the medicine man’s wife. You are the water, you are the corn. You are the growing generation that you carry in your womb. I have a role and so do you. At the next Sun Dance you will stand there with the pipe representing Ptesan Win, the White Buffalo woman,” (ibid, 246).

These words spoken by Leonard to his wife, Mary Crow Dog, near the end of the book emphasized the new and important role that Mary took when she married Leonard Crow Dog. She was no longer the

wild girl at the beginning of the book, but a mature woman who ran a household, and played an important part in the progression of American Indian social rights. It also pointed out how important birth was to American Indian culture. Native Americans did not believe in birth control, because their people were so few already, resulting from forced sterilization and people abandoning the culture in hopes of “White” success. Hence, any pregnancy was considered important and valued, no matter the circumstances. For example, Mary’s first pregnancy was out of wedlock, but it was highly celebrated.

This passage also emphasizes the important steps that American Indian culture had taken through the course of the book. At the beginning of the novel, American Indians were a fractionated group that was plagued by racism, poverty, and a disconnection from their culture. Those issues had not been entirely resolved by the end of the novel, but the American Indians as people had come closer together, established themselves as a unified group, and had revived many of their old ceremonies and cultures. The fact that Leonard says, “At the next Sun Dance,” showed that American Indians had a future now, and it was one that has revived their old traditions.

Crow Dog in her autobiography sought to focus on the roles of the Indian wife as a caretaker of the home. Mary was so unfamiliar with this role that she had to ask her husband what was expected from her. While such a role may seem constricting based on some current feminist ideals, it was highly valued. Leonard actually shows Mary how important she is to the future of the Indian people and to him, making this a touching sentiment.

2.4- Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*

In 1854, Henry David Thoreau published *Walden*, a book about living simple life in a natural setting. During the same time period, Ralph Waldo Emerson began writing about nature. One major theme of Thoreau's work is getting back to nature, focusing less on what we have and what we can buy, and returning to our roots:

Relying on self, getting in touch with nature, listening to one's one voice rather than the clamor of the crowd, living a simpler life are all good things for any time and place. Certainly in our high-tech, materialistic, this is a voice of reason and caution and individuality. I think the whole idea of just going away somewhere and leaving behind all the "trappings" of civilization is appealing today. . (Thoreau, 1950, p.5)

Thoreau's autobiography '*Walden*', in which he narrates his experience in Walden Pond far from the modern American society, gives the reader a detailed account of Thoreau's day's experiences. Despite its personal characteristics, *Walden* can be taken as work of art that has a meaningful social message. It is a document that provides the reader with a view about America in a specific place and a particular period of time, New England, in which people were trying to search a goal a head in nature. It also makes the abstract ideas of transcendentalism as a philosophical movement concrete and clear to the reader because Thoreau's major aim from his experience in *Walden* was to practice all the theories that he read in books. So his ideas are pretty timeless in *Walden*, and they offer lessons and directions:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to

teach, and not when I came to die to discover, that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary (Ibid).

It is a pretty popular theme in modern times too, given our current economic troubles, and how the environment has become a more frequent topic of discussion and education. One major theme of Thoreau's work is getting back to nature, focusing less on what we have and what we can buy, and returning to our roots (Krutch 1950). For this reason, Thoreau is regularly associated with the radical environmental movement that defends nature.

Conclusion

Autobiography is a glimpse at one's life and as a literary genre it is often characterized by being subjective since it depends on the author's perception of himself and the world around him. After studying the works of the four American writers, it might be appropriate to say that all of them did not restrict themselves to the esthetic aspect of autobiography but through narrating their personal self revelations, they succeeded to a great extent to convey to the reader with some of their radical views since they often do not see any conflict between the two. Frederick Douglas' *The Life of F. Douglas's*, and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, attack slavery and clearly transmit abolitionist views; Mary Grow Dog's *Lakota Women* questions the place of the Indians in the modern American society, and Thoreau's *Walden* directly transmits the transcendentalist ideology. Therefore, it is obvious that autobiography has often been a very appropriate literary genre to convey the author's radical thought in American literature. Autobiography then was part of

the great process of the liberation of human personality in the American society.

Works Cited

- Bedford, Ronald, et. al .*Early Modern Autobiography: Theories, Genres, Practices 2006*
- *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* .London ,2010.
- Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition copyright ©2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Updated in 2009.
- Douglas, Fredrik. *the Life of F. Douglass*, 1978.
- Crow D, Mary.*Lakota Woman*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990.
- Goodwin, James. "Thoreau and John Brown: Transcendental Politics," *ESQ* 25 (1979): 156.
- Lin, Xianghua. *A Dictionary of Western Literary Critical Terms*. Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.
- Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., "Note on the Text," pp 407-8 in Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, the Library of America, 1993.
- Misch ,George .*A History of Autobiography In Iniquity* 1987
- Schlesinger ,Arthur M.. *The American as Reformer* ,Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950) 33.
- Thoreau, H. David.*Walden and Other Writings by Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joseph Wood Krutch (New Yo Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The American as Reformer* ,Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950. 33.: Bantam Books, 1986 342.
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* ,The Library of America, 1993.