

Time in Autobiographical Fiction: A Note on Maitreyi Devi

SADHU CHARAN PRADHAN

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past,
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable....

T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

Historical events must be accurate as far as possible. Past has come back... and welcomes me to its world of beatitude, entering where all my suffering and anguish vanish, and I experience the eternal presence of the past....

Maitreyi Devi, *Close to the Heaven*

In autobiographical fiction linearity of time is a fiction. Narrative is not a concept of the present, but a continuity of the past to the eternity of presence. Maitreyi Devi asserts her views whereas Eliot subjoins his statement. Devi characterizes her view of time in autobiography:

No, I am not talking of another life it is not past life it happened only the other day-only forty-two years ago. I have stepped forty-two years backwards. For us human beings it is a long period, but how small it is in eternity! Time is not anchored anywhere... Time wipes away all that was once precious. It is a destroyer, it shatters and wears out everything old? Does it not also make any thing new? Yes, my body is old, but my mind? The mind that's eager for news of Mercea Euclid now is young. It too is a creation of time... what was old could become new, or that the conception of old and new itself is an illusion. (*IDD*, pp.10-11)

Devi's idea of time is fully modelled upon the Indian classification of time as human (*mānuṣa*) and divine (*divya*) whereas Eliot's subjunctive expression manifests his unwillingness to accept this concept of time wholesomely Devi's dedication of the

book to "Mahakal" (The Great Time that continues unendingly or eternally) suggests the central point of her thesis that the time she deals with in her autobiography is not historical, recording some particular events that happened in different points of the life she lived phenomenally. She further elaborates this point in ruminating her memory of Eliade. Reclining in a large arm chair she was completely immersed in an hallucination while the telephone was going on ringing, and suddenly regained her consciousness as her son awaked her. She writes:

My body certainly remained here in this chair, but I entered *Mahakala*, infinite time, time that had no beginning, no end – to that point where the sun does not shine and stars are not seen. This separation of body and soul, to be present at two different points in time simultaneously, hurts physically (*IDD*, p.40-41)

The time she describes is not actual but fictional, and it is this fictionality of time that elevates it into the status of myth, and it is here that she stands with Mircea Eliade her counterpart. Eliade interpreted his life, as he would interpret all human life as mythological in character. This mythological thrust to human life is the foundation of Eliade's New Humanism.

Although Devi does not share Eliade's humanism, both of them reject bare realism. Existence itself is a spiritual entity, and this cosmic spirituality is to be experienced not in fragments, but in its wholeness, a message that Lord Krishna has preached in the *Bhagvadgītā* (11th Chap.). A common man experiences time in fragments, in its linear form, but a man with a spiritual vision (*divya dr̥ṣṭi*) perceives it as a whole, and this "Whole" is a fiction where all historical sequences are meaningless in losing their individual identity. In this view autobiography is not a personal diary, an account of the events that actually happened in the course of life that the writer lived.

As already quoted earlier, old and new are illusory conceptions, viewed in the light of times' deconstructive power. Time destroys the past, but the past does not grow old as it is recreated anew. Man's consciousness (may it be called mind, soul or spirit) is not a victim of time's linear movement as is the phenomenal world. But again, for a creative man this phenomenal world escapes this linearity of time, as he experiences time's deconstructive power. Devi quotes a poem that she wrote in her young days:

The time that was behind
Comes in front,
her face unveiled, wearing star studded silk,
Who gave her dress and ornaments?
How comes the show of this temporary wealth?
In the touchless flow of time
in its formless motion
Who grows flowers?
Forms take shape every moment
From the ocean of emptiness
and fall on the shoreless shore
Waves break in an illusion of death. (*IDD*, p.11)

All this is applicable to autobiography as a fictional narrative not to autobiography as such. Devi narrates the events not chronologically, but in flashback, depicting time in a reversal order:

1st September 1972. My birthday, my dear friends, Gautami and Parbati – you were the ones so keen to celebrate it, but you never knew that this evening, in the middle of the music, recitations and laughter in the room, I was constantly drifting away. The tide of time was turbulent, it touched me and carried me away not forward, towards the future, but backward – deep into the past.

(The starting paragraph *IDD*.)

Compare the starting paragraph of Mircea Eliade's *Autobiography*, Vol.I.

I was born in Bucharest on March 9, 1907, My brother Nicolaie (“Nicu”) had been born the year before, and my sister cornellia (“Corina”) came four years later. Father was a Moldavian from Tecuei. Born Ieremia, he had changed his name to Eliade....

But in his novel *Bengal Nights* based on his experience during his stay in Calcutta (1928-31), particularly his meeting and relationship with Maitreyi Devi, there is a vague reference to time:

If I hesitate in beginning, it is because I still have not managed to remember the exact date of my first meeting with Maitreyi. I have not found anything in my notes of that year. Her name does not appear until very much later – until after I had left the Sanatorium and was living with Narendra Sen in Bhawanipore. But that was in 1929 and I had already seen Maitreyi, at least ten months earlier. As I begin, I feel somewhat pained that I cannot evoke an image of her at that time or re-live the surprise, uncertainty or confusion that I experienced at our first meetings.

Time is deliberately kept uncertain for fictionalizing the autobiographical facts and events as Eliade's intention is to offer his readers a narrative charged with erotic passion meant for entertainment. Devi raises objections against such fictionalization, if at all the fiction is autobiographical which the novel is apparently so. She charges Mircea for writing that Maitreyi was visiting him at nights:

Why did you not write the truth Mircea? Was not truth enough?

Did you write for financial gain? Yes you did – that is the way of the West- books sell if they deal with lost, not love. I am ready to accept the truth, but why should I accept the burden of a lie?”

Truth in fiction is an issue of grand debate in contemporary theory. But the point that Devi refers to is that autobiographical fiction should not distort the actual, although the functionality of the actual be effected by subverting the historicity of time. Historical truth must be presented not in the linearity of time, but in its transformation as effected by the Grand Time – *Mahakal*. Eliade's narrative obviously misses the philosophical insight that Devi exercises in treating time in autobiographical fiction.

Notes

Maitreyi Devi (1914-1991), daughter of the legendary Indian philosopher Surendranath Dasgupta was an intellectual disciple of Rabindranath Tagore. She studied philosophy, literature, wrote poems in both Bengali and English, was also a lecturer for some time- travelling widely over the globe. A prestigious lady with a happy life.

At the age of sixteen she was introduced to Mireca Eliade, a Romanian young man, then twenty-three years old who came to India for studying Indian philosophy under the supervision of Professor Dasgupta. Their acquaintance grow up to an emotional attachment that was destined to discontinue because of cultural difference, colonial arrogance, and particularly Professor Dasgupta's interference. On going back to Romania Eliade published a novel titled *Maitreyi* (1933) a fictional account of his stay in Calcutta (1928-31) with references to his association with Dasgupta and his daughter. The real events, however, could be traced in Eliade's *Autobiography* Vol.I, with particular reference to Maitreyi, pp.184-186, that clearly indicates Eliade's one-sided love for her. Eliade writes:

I did not realize that, in spite of myself, I was already in love. I say in spite of myself because I thought the whole family was conspiring to cause us to be together as much as possible, and this suspicion put me on the defensive.

But, although I believed I was beginning to know the Indian soul, I was mistaken. There was no such conspiracy. It is probable that Dasgupta had something entirely different in mind namely to introduce me into his family by a kind of “adoption”.

The Romanian novel *Maitreyi* was translated into French titled *Les nuits Bengali*. *Bengal Nights* was published in 1993. In reaction to Eliade's distortion of truth in his fictional representation of the historical events and facts related to his association with her Devi published an autobiographical fiction in Bengali titled *Na Hanyate* in 1974 an English translation of which was published in Calcutta, 1976 (reprinted 1992, its offset by Chicago University Press, 1994.)

References

- Maitreyi Devi (1976/1994). *It Does Not Die*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Mircea Eliade (1993): *Bengal Nights*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- ____ (1981-1990). *Autobiography*, Vol.I, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- David Cave (1993). *Mircea Eliade's Vision for a New Humanism*, New York: Oxford University Press.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
GOVT. COLLEGE, DHENKANAL (ODISHA)